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Reconsidering the “Golden Age” Narrative
for the American Musical in the New Millennium

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Musicology

by

Arreanna Christina Rostosky

2017

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2017

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reconsidering the “Golden Age” Narrative
for the American Musical in the New Millennium

by

Arreanna Christina Rostosky

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Raymond L. Knapp, Chair

This dissertation proposes that we consider Broadway’s history and genre development to be periodic rather than a singular trajectory of growth and inevitable decline. Situating the structural, musical, and aesthetic changes on Broadway within a periodic model, we begin to see phases of aesthetic cohesion and fragmentation emerge within a recurring pattern taking place every fifteen to twenty years. In reframing the evolution of Broadway as a model of continued regeneration, rather than a model of inevitable decay, we can see how various stylistic and structural elements from previous generations of musicals rematerialize in contemporary shows. More importantly, by removing the “Golden Age” as a fixed point of comparison in our analysis, we can come to understand the significance of shows often overlooked in more traditional analyses.

Each chapter of this dissertation after the introductory chapter supports this view by offering a case study of a significant trend found on twenty-first century Broadway between 2000-2015 and situating that trend within the proposed periodic model. Chapter Two offers a close analysis of the scenographic practices in the output of the Disney Theatrical Group after 2000. I consider how the use of advanced stage technology in their musicals developed, and differs, from the pure technological spectacle of the megamusical. Chapter Three looks at the intersection between popular culture, camp, and the Broadway musical. The chapter traces the shift in camp sensibilities in self-reflexive musicals specifically developed to appeal to mainstream audiences, from being grounded in theater-related humor to being primarily popular culture-based. Chapters Four and Five explore productions from the post-millennium that more directly complicate the traditional “Golden Age” narrative. In Chapter Four, I provide a scenographic and socio-historical comparison of the concept musical with its post-millennium counterpart that I call the “neo-conceptual musical.” And, in Chapter Five, I compare how differently the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the work of Stephen Sondheim are approached and revived in recent years, and offer a reflection on how issues of nostalgia, “Golden Age” preferentialism, and politics of taste play out in the business of reviving (and revising) musicals in the post-millennium.

The dissertation of Arreanna Christina Rostosky is approved.

Robert W. Fink

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Stacy Wolf

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University of California, Los Angeles

2017

To my parents,
Andrew and Diane Rostosky,
who encouraged me to be curious always
and to go “to infinity and beyond”

And to my late aunt,
Christine Tully, M.D.,
who, in our late-night conversations,
inspired and shared with me her insatiable appetite for learning

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Chapter One, Introduction:

“I’m alive!”: Nostalgia, taste, and the death(s) of Broadway

*I am more than memory –
I am what might be, I am mystery.*¹

According to some musical theater historians and critics, the “Golden Age” of Broadway is dead. Depending on whose work one reads, the “Golden Age” died sometime between the introduction of amplification on stage and the moment hippies burned their draft cards in *Hair* (1968). Books with such colorful titles as *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* and *Happiest Corpse I’ve Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-five Years of the Broadway Musical* pepper the scholastic landscape of musical theater narratives, bemoaning the horrid state Broadway perpetually finds itself in.² Even more pointedly, some critics and scholars specifically mourn the death of the so-called “Golden Age,” most commonly defined as the immediate postwar years, 1943-1964.³

Despite all claims to the contrary, Broadway is very much alive. In recent years, musical theater has enjoyed an uptick in popularity with the success of television shows like *Glee* (2009-2015) and *Smash* (2012-2013); live television broadcasts of musicals produced by NBC (*The*

¹ Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey, *Next to Normal* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010), 41.

² Ethan Mordden, *Happiest Corpse I’ve Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-five Years of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Barry Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause, 2004). See also Mark Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the American Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

³ These dates reflect the most common delineation found in musical theater histories. Gerald Bordman, on the other hand, considers the “Golden Age” to coincide with the prominence of Tin Pan Alley composers on Broadway beginning in 1924 and to end with George Gershwin’s death in 1937. Gerald Bordman and Richard Norton, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Sound of Music [2013], *Peter Pan* [2014], *The Wiz* [2015], *Hairspray* [2016]) and Fox (*Grease* [2016], *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [2016]); major Hollywood releases of film musicals, with many adapted from the stage (*Moulin Rouge!* [2000], *Chicago* [2002], *Hairspray* [2007], *Les Misérables* [2012], *Into the Woods* [2014], among others); and the enormous mainstream popularity of musicals such as *The Book of Mormon* (2011) and *Hamilton* (2015). If anything, increased visibility of the Broadway musical in popular culture points not to a decline but to a resurgence of the genre, and yet many leading critics and scholars are hard-pressed to discuss developments on Broadway much after the 1970s in any positive light.

A large part of the problem this discrepancy points to stems from the fact that many Broadway histories—Mark Grant’s most strenuously—present the genre through a model of growth, flowering, and (inevitable) decay. Because the “Golden Age” and its musicals are treated as the pinnacle of artistic achievement on Broadway (the “integrated book musical”), the creative contributions of later generations are measured against the past, or rather, the imagined past, and inevitably come up short. If we accept the integrated musical to be the ideal aesthetic and structural form of musical theater, then anything that subverts or otherwise alters that established formula will automatically be “lesser.” This perspective quickly becomes a pedagogical and analytical straightjacket, as it fails to account for the effects of changing socio-political context, popular culture, aesthetic shifts, and technology.⁴ In order to have productive conversations

⁴ I find Franco Moretti’s discussion of the issues of reductive tendencies in literary history useful in thinking about the issue of “Golden Age” privileging. “Both synchronically and diachronically, in other words, the novel is *the system of its genres*: the whole diagram, not one privileged part of it. Some genres are morphologically more significant, of course, or more popular, or both – and we must account for this: but not by pretending that they are the only ones that exist. And instead, all great theories of the novel have precisely reduced the novel to one basic form only [...]; and if the reduction has given them their elegance and power, it has also erased nine tenths of literary history. Too much.” Emphasis Moretti’s. Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 30.

about post-“Golden Age” musical theater, we need to abandon the very notion of a “Golden Age.” We need a different model with which to frame the evolution of the Broadway musical.

This dissertation proposes that we consider Broadway’s history and genre development to be periodic rather than a singular trajectory of growth and inevitable decline. Situating the structural, musical, and aesthetic changes on Broadway within a periodic model, we begin to see phases of aesthetic cohesion and fragmentation emerge within a recurring pattern taking place every fifteen to twenty years.⁵ This model allows for a more constructive discussion of what new generations of musicals have to offer, rather than what they fail to replicate. Looking at trends on Broadway as byproducts of periodic transitions also provides a useful opportunity to consider how external factors such as socio-political and cultural changes interact with and manifest themselves in musical productions of a given era.

My work takes partial inspiration from the work of Bruce Kirle, who offers a succinct criticism of “Golden Age” ideologies in his landmark book, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*.⁶ Kirle’s larger argument is based in the idea of musical theater as an open text that cannot be fixed, despite efforts to “set” certain elements of a show’s design or performance style (e.g., replica productions of *The Phantom of the Opera* [1988]), because shifts in the socio-political atmosphere affecting audiences will cause even the

⁵ Derek Miller also posits that Broadway undergoes trend shifts that move “sinusoidally.” His article, “Average Broadway,” offers a quantitative analysis of changes on Broadway (for musicals and straight plays) related to the number of revivals per season, cast size, percentage of female performers, and production staff credits. Miller, “Average Broadway,” *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 534.

Franco Moretti’s work is another example of quantitative analysis as applied to the humanities, specifically literature. For him, cycles “constitute *temporary structures within the historical flow*.” Emphasis Moretti’s. Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 14.

⁶ Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

same production to resonate differently with each new audience. Instead, Kirle advocates for a socio-political consideration in musical theater scholarship, an approach he feels will deliver a more holistic analysis of the American musical culturally and artistically. Kirle also dissents from the kind of linear historiography that presents Rodgers and Hammerstein's work (particularly Hammerstein's) as the peak of theatrical innovation: "Whereas Hammerstein's contribution to the form is unquestionable, musicals are characteristically eclectic. Rather than reinvent the wheel, Hammerstein himself combined influences of realism, romanticism, and melodrama...Part of the fluidity and vitality of the form involves borrowing from everything." Even more plainly stated, Kirle continues, "It is simplistic to argue that the form is the linear outgrowth of one mind, even if that mind belonged to as fertile a figure as Oscar Hammerstein."⁷

In the remaining portion of this chapter I will contextualize the conflict surrounding the valuation of "Golden Age" and post-"Golden Age" eras that has derailed critical discussions about Broadway and the state of the art. Until recently, little has been done in scholarship to trouble the notion of the linear narrative of the history of the American musical and the automatic preference given to the "Golden Age." Contemporary work by such scholars as John Clum, Bruce Kirle, Raymond Knapp, Andrea Most, Jessica Sternfeld, Stacy Wolf, and Elizabeth Wollman has done much to address gaps in musical theater scholarship, particularly with regard to race, sexuality, and gender politics, as well as previously overlooked subgenres of musical theater, including the rock musical and the megamusical.⁸ As many of these scholars note in their

⁷ Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 76.

⁸ Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 1999); Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*; Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004);

own work, cultural nostalgia and the politics of taste are the driving force behind the ossifying dichotomy of the “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age.” In light of this important work, let us explore the underlying issues that contributed to the development of the “Golden Age” rhetoric so that we may begin to dismantle it.

“You’ve got to be carefully taught”⁹... about the “Golden Age”

A good starting question might be, what makes the Golden Age *golden*? The consensus is that this era introduces the integrated book musical, a structural model referring to the controlled interaction of book, songs, and dance in a show. Scholars and critics who argue that the American musical was at its peak during the “Golden Age” often point to its integrated nature – the dialogue, book, songs, dance, scenery, orchestration, costumes, etc., all serving a central vision – as evidence of superiority. The model took particular hold in part because of the success of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s shows, which tended to follow this roughly defined procedure. Geoffrey Block offers a laundry list of structural elements that make a show integrated, drawing on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s own writings and musicals to do so. An integrated show contains “1) songs [that] advance the plot; 2) songs [that] flow directly from the dialogue; 3) songs [that] express the characters who sing them; 4) dances [that] advance the plot and enhance the dramatic meaning of the songs that precede them; and, 5) [an] orchestra [that], through accompaniment

Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical – from Hair to Hedwig* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Wollman, *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Joshua Logan, *Rodgers and Hammerstein’s South Pacific* (New York: Williamson Music, Inc., 1956), 77.

and underscoring, parallels, complements, or advances the action.”¹⁰ The final product comes across as if it was created and produced by one person, instead of multiple individuals. As Richard Rodgers states, “No single element overshadows any other.”¹¹

Rodgers and Hammerstein believed that “there was a definitive version of their work that had to be reproduced, not reenvisioned,”¹² and for many years, Rodgers & Hammerstein: An Imagem Company¹³ was widely known for its consistent monitoring of all new productions of any Rodgers and Hammerstein show to make sure they remained “true” to the creators’ original intent.¹⁴ The degree of artistic control exerted by the creators even well after the shows initially closed on Broadway contributed to an ethos that mythologized and preserved “Golden Age” musicals through duplicate productions (i.e., recreations of the original production featuring replica sets, blocking, and bringing in original cast members when possible), cast recordings, and filmed adaptations of stage musicals.¹⁵ The systematic conservation of “Golden Age” musicals

¹⁰ He provides quotations from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s writings as well as examples from their musicals following each point as support. Block, “Integration,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 97-110), 98-99.

¹¹ Rodgers, *Musical Stages: an autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 227. Scott McMillin defines the integrated musical as one where “all elements – plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting – should blend together into a unity, a seamless whole.” McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1.

¹² Kirle, 9.

¹³ The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization was purchased by the Imagem Publishing Group in 2009 and subsequently rebranded to reflect the new parent organization. <http://www.rnh.com/news/918/Imagem-Music-Group-Buys-R-H>, May 22, 2009.

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of the complex issues surrounding reinterpretations of canonized musical theater works, see Jessica Hillman, “Tradition or Travesty?: Radical Reinterpretations of the Musical Theatre Canon,” *Theatre Topics* 20, no. 1 (March 2010): 1-10.

¹⁵ Kirle, 9.

ultimately became the basis for the cultural and intellectual preference given to productions of the era, particularly once the “Golden Age” faded away.

What came after the 1960s were shows that no longer employed linear plots. *Hair* and *Company* (1970) both contained dramatic material that was thematically related rather than organized as a typical narrative, leading critics to call these shows “concept musicals.”¹⁶ Dan Cartmell defines the concept musical as having a script that is “generally interpreted or focused in production around some aspect that unifies all its elements.”¹⁷ The rise of the auteur-director – Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, Harold Prince, Michael Bennett – came during this period, in which directors and choreographer-directors asserted more control over the concept and its execution.¹⁸ Set and lighting designs were now developed with the conceptual premise of a given show in mind and designers drew on the postmodern and avant-garde to create distance between the audience and the production, a Brechtian aesthetic that was in stark contrast to the American realist style.

The success of these and other similarly developed shows, such as *A Chorus Line* (1975), proved that a musical could be effective even without a traditional book in the style of Rodgers and Hammerstein, though the book musical remained a popular format.¹⁹ On the heels of the

¹⁶ Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Allegro* (1947) and Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner’s *Love Life* (1948) are often cited as earlier models of the concept musical. See Ethan Mordden, *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 152.

¹⁷ Dan J. Cartmell, “Stephen Sondheim and the concept musical” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983), 94.

¹⁸ Kirle, 109.

¹⁹ As Martin Gottfried writes, “It would be naïve to expect the Broadway musical theater to promptly capitalize on such a breakthrough [as the concept musical...]. For musicals must justify themselves financially if they are to set practical precedents.” Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1980), 37.

concept show came other experimental forms, such as rock and jukebox musicals (*Hair* is thus both a rock and a concept musical), where the music for a show could come prefabricated in the form of a concept album, an artists' greatest hits list, or be newly composed in a rock style. Soon, by the 1980s and 1990s, creators used the whole panoply of techniques and structural styles developed in previous decades for their shows, as with the technology-heavy and spectacular megamusicals.²⁰ As critics became increasingly unhappy about the perceived quality (and subject matter) of musicals after the 1960s, nostalgia for the good old days entered the discourse in the specific form of the term "Golden Age." While labeling the era was helpful in a pedagogical and historical sense, if only to provide a common point of stylistic reference, the "Golden Age" label brought with it the politics of the middlebrow and the inherently conservative notion that if something comes after the "golden" era, it must obviously be "lesser."

In their consideration of what happened "After the 'Golden Age,'" Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman take issue with the very idea: "it implies that any musical to have opened in recent decades is by nature of its chronology somehow less artistically important or culturally resonant than those that opened in the past. Such judgments often extend to audiences, whose collective taste is seen to have declined precipitously since 1960."²¹ As scholars whose work involves musicals that are distinctly post-"Golden Age" (megamusicals, rock musicals, 1970s adult musicals, television musicals, among others), Sternfeld and Wollman are well aware of the drubbing their subjects of study receive on a regular basis. Their assessment of the problems with the "Golden Age" narrative in scholarship takes issue not only with the implied artistic failure of

²⁰ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*.

²¹ Sternfeld and Wollman, "After the 'Golden Age,'" (*The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, 111-124), 111.

later musicals, but also with how the established narrative tends to ignore the socio-historical contexts in which later musicals were produced. The problematic histories also present “Golden Age” productions as the culmination of decades of technical and dramaturgical innovation. The breakdown of the integrated form, then, becomes a deterioration of the “once great” genre.

Socio-political context of the “Golden Age” and the rise of nostalgia

The approximate end of the “Golden Age” corresponds to what popular historical discourses tend to consider the first major social upheaval in the post-World War II era. The counterculture movement of the 1960s, bringing sexual liberation, fights over recreational drug use, and peace protests pushing for the end of the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War, among other things, was viewed as a sort of fracture in society, where traditional models of family, deportment, and patriotism were brought into question. By the mid-1970s, a period that left Americans jaded after the messy withdrawal from Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, and a severe economic downturn, nostalgia as a cultural form of engagement led Americans to turn inward – Tom Wolfe’s label for the 1970s, the “Me” decade, stuck – and harmonize along with Archie Bunker as he sang mistily that “those were the days.”

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym theorizes on how nostalgia works in social, cultural, and generational spheres. She writes, “Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s. Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future.”²² For the Broadway musical, nostalgia primarily manifests itself in the form of revivals, the restaging of a musical after the original production has closed. The practice of reviving shows is long-standing, but Broadway

²² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiv.

saw a substantial increase in the number of revivals produced in the 1970s, so much so that the sheer number of revived productions inspired the creation of the Tony Awards category for “Best Revival of a Play or Musical” in 1977.²³ John Bush Jones, in his social history of the Broadway musical, notes that forty-four revivals were produced between 1979 and 2000 alone. He found that the time between a show closing and it being revived became shorter and shorter, a fact he views as symptomatic of American audiences’ obsession with seeing their favorite shows one more time. Jones also argues that the seemingly eternal runs of such megahits as *Phantom* (twenty nine years and counting!) feeds contemporary audiences’ desire (and need) to “retreat into the *same* past again, and again, and again.”²⁴ Americans fell into a rabbit hole of musical nostalgia and never escaped.

Absent consideration of the turbulent socio-political undercurrents in the United States following the relative political stability of the 1940s-1960s, the more frequent appearance of revivals in the post-“Golden Age” can make it seem as if Broadway simply ran out of ideas sometime in the 1970s, again privileging a narrative of Broadway’s maturation and eventual decay. When we revisit our conception of Broadway’s trend toward revivals in the context of the highly fragmented decade, Boym’s characterization of nostalgia “as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals” is a useful framework.²⁵ Rather than view the inclination toward reviving productions as industry-wide creative exhaustion, we might well see it as part of a wider social phenomenon.

²³ Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 309.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 311, emphasis Jones’s.

²⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.

The strong desire audiences had to experience the same show over and over again was also fed by the development of the original cast album recording. *Oklahoma!* (1943), recorded for Decca, is usually considered the first successful cast recording in entertainment history, owing no small part of its popularity to consumers outside a coterie of theater fans.²⁶ Cast recordings would remain major bestsellers in popular music through the 1950s and 1960s until other kinds of popular music won the attention of younger listeners (and colonized the rich financial territory of the long-playing album), but the genre continues as a steady fixture in musical theater consumption.²⁷

The way nostalgia underpins Broadway culture is important when considering whether the concept of the “Golden Age” functions as a successful narrative history. On its own, the construct of a “Golden Age” with subsequent inferior ages tends to fall flat when considered in the context of Broadway musical theater. If the idea is that there exists a “Golden Age” of musical theater representing the highest level of artistic achievement and unity in the genre that later musicals attempted (but failed) to replicate, the narrative fails to account for the rather drastic shifts in musical and structural styles that took place in the 1970s. The sudden nostalgia-drive of the 1980s could account for a reaction against the stylistic changes that happened in the

²⁶ George Reddick points out that several other albums were produced before *Oklahoma!*, but for various reasons they were not as popular. See his chapter, “The Evolution of the Original Cast Album,” (*The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, 179-183).

²⁷ Advances in recording technology and the relatively cheap cost of producing records today (particularly with mp3 distribution options) allows shows that had very limited runs the opportunity to release an original cast recording. Less popular shows in the era of LP recordings would still release records, but more forethought was usually given as to whether consumers would be interested. The trend in announcing cast recordings has shifted from “There is the potential for a cast recording but a decision has yet to be made,” to “There will be a cast recording. Release date TBD.” Even the recent big-budget flop, *Dr. Zhivago* (2015), which achieved barely 26 previews and 23 regular performances, had a cast recording released later in the summer of 2015.

1970s, but it does not entirely account for the eventual success of megahits that would run for several years.

Part of what is missing from the “Golden Age” narrative is the social context of the periods following the 1970s. Substantial political and social shifts altered the social environment; additionally, economic problems meant that more expensive productions might require longer runs to make back initial investments. While I do not feel that a linear narrative is the best model for explaining the “Golden Age and What Comes After,” I think a more careful socio-historical contextualization of the eras in which post-“Golden Age” shows were produced offers a more complete picture of why certain shows were developed in a specific way.

Politics of taste and the middlebrow

Another large problem that the term “Golden Age” presents is the imposition of implied value judgments on all shows that come after the appointed golden era, a judgment that then trickles down to the fans. This issue recalls discussions of the middlebrow historically and in relation to musical theater specifically. David Savran, considering high-, middle-, and lowbrow debates and their place in theater scholarship, writes, “...[T]heater has consistently evinced those characteristics that have historically been branded as middlebrow: the promiscuous mixture of commerce and art, entertainment and politics, the banal and the auratic, profane and sacred, spectacular and personal, erotic and intellectual.”²⁸ The ideological problem facing scholars in the “brow” debate was that *no one* wanted to defend the quintessential representative of American middlebrow culture: the musical.

²⁸ Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 15.

It is important that scholars such as Savran are finally acknowledging the substantial problem in Anglophone theater scholarship that subordinates musical theater to other theatrical forms. That said, there are fewer scholars who trouble the discussions involving politics of taste and pleasure *within* the field of musical theater scholarship. The common unspoken categorization of the American musical situates the “Golden Age” as, within a generally middle range, high art culture; pre-“Golden Age” stage spectaculars, musicals comedies, and vaudeville as low but vernacular culture; and post-“Golden Age” musicals, especially megamusicals, as the recrudescence of the despised middle-middle. This hierarchy establishes acceptable areas of scholarly attention (“Golden Age” if you like Art; pre-“Golden Age” if you want to study vernacular culture) and of scholarly derision (post-“Golden Age,” neither fish nor fowl). Until recently, to successfully challenge the latter position, one had to approach the topic with critical defenses up, either displaying open disdain for cultural decadence or making the aesthetic disclaimer of being a “scholar-fan”²⁹ with a personal, often nostalgic, investment in the material.³⁰

²⁹ Holley Replogle offers this reflection in the introduction of her dissertation: “Indeed, to a large extent this dissertation provides a chance for me to reclaim the musicals that I ‘should’ hate but that I love anyway, as ‘guilty pleasures’ that I refuse to feel guilty about. I approach these topics as a scholar, a performer, and as a fan.” Replogle, “Crossover and Spectacle in the American Operetta and the Megamusical” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2009), 18.

³⁰ The dichotomy imposed on the perceived inherent value of “Golden” and post-“Golden Age” musicals is still engrained in scholarly conversations about the state of the field of musical theater scholarship and the anxiety in studying what is meant to be entertainment. In “Toward a Historiography of the Popular,” Savran acknowledges that, despite his call for foregrounding musical theater studies, even he is not immune to the “snobbism” in academia that maintains a “persistent and volatile [...] prejudice against popular forms” when working on his own projects. In *Theatre Survey*, no. 2 (November 2004): 217.

Stacy Wolf, in her response piece to Savran, notes that when she assigned the article to her students, they focused on the negativity directed toward musical theater rather than on Savran’s rehabilitation of the field. She posits that her students “have grown up being thoroughly postmodern, moving easily among media in a culture that privileges what John Seabrook calls

Theater critics are just as responsible for imposing a cultural hierarchy, holding “Golden Age” shows and politically-engaged productions above other theatrical ventures, imposing what Savran calls an upper-middlebrow aesthetic on shows they review. In discussing Ben Brantley, the current head theater critic for *The New York Times*, Savran notes that while critics do not wield the same power they once did, they still bear a sense of responsibility to uphold standards of cultural acceptability. “For Brantley, as for so many arbiters of what now pretends to [be] upper-middlebrow taste,” Savran writes, “a ‘serious’ theater is imagined as a site of authenticity and immediacy. It is opposed to the ‘synthetic and homogenized’ products of mass culture...”³¹ Megamusicals sit squarely in that last category: they are heavily commercialized, are presented as commodities, and use popular cultural objects as their subject matter to draw in the public (perhaps akin to *Reader’s Digest* and similar items historically considered middlebrow). The cultural aspiration of the sung-through megamusical likely aggravates scholars and critics alike. Any show that speaks to the middlebrow aesthetic of musical theater audiences tends to be doubly damned not only for being a popular form of theater, but also for appealing to the most middlebrow of sensibilities within a historically middlebrow genre.

As with any discussion of canon formation, the issue of value (or lack thereof) in the “Golden Age” narrative and its permutations is clearly fraught. It is obvious that there are traditionalists who will forever mourn the end of the “Golden Age.” And certainly there is something to be gained from using the term as a descriptor for a specific era characterized by a dominant structural style. However, the loaded term “Golden” automatically sets up subsequent

the ‘nobrow’: the mind-bogglingly active shifting of cultural categories of value and worth, both commercially and intellectually.” Wolf, “In Defense of Pleasure: Musical Theatre History in the Liberal Arts [A Manifesto],” *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 1 (March 2007): 52.

³¹ Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 47.

shows for critical failure. While the progress narrative might have worked, in the past, to legitimize musical theater discourse in the realms of musicology and theater scholarship, it is time to consider a wider lens that presents the history of musical theater production as it more likely is—fluid and ever-changing.

“Bit by bit, putting it together”³²: restructuring the “Golden Age” narrative

To that end, the following four chapters of this dissertation function as case studies of some of the different trends found on twenty-first century Broadway between 2000-2015 and situates them within the proposed periodic model set forth at the start of this chapter. As we will see, the first fifteen years of the new millennium represent a period of aesthetic fragmentation following the relative stability afforded by the dominant megamusical aesthetic of the 1980s and 1990s. A wide variety of productions have appeared on Broadway in the post-millennium, ranging from Disney’s large-scale stage adaptations of their filmed properties, nostalgic mega shows, self-reflexive musicals, postmodern and avant-garde productions, and revival/revisals.

To approach each subgenre with the same analytical toolkit would be a futile exercise. In reframing the evolution of Broadway as a model of continued regeneration, rather than a model of inevitable decay, we can see how various stylistic and structural elements from previous generations of musicals rematerialize in contemporary shows. More importantly, by removing the “Golden Age” as a fixed point of comparison in our analysis, we can come to understand the significance of shows often overlooked in more traditional analyses.

³² Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Sunday in the Park with George* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1991), 147.

Chapter Two offers a close analysis of the scenographic practices in the output of the Disney Theatrical Group after 2000.³³ I consider how the use of advanced stage technology in their musicals developed, and differs, from the pure technological spectacle of the megamusical. Unlike the 1980s megashows, where the demonstration of technological acuity was designed to be overwhelming and noticeable, Disney's use of stage machinery and automation in their storytelling is notably subtle. Although technology features prominently in every one of Disney's stage shows, it is used to evoke the cinematic fluidity of their films without distracting from the story.

Chapter Three looks at the intersection between popular culture, camp, and the Broadway musical. Most of the shows I discuss here were created and produced by individuals who regularly draw on camp in their own popular film and television work (Mel Brooks, Eric Idle of Monty Python, Matt Stone and Trey Parker of *South Park*), meaning their own fans already have a sense of how campy humor functions. The chapter traces the shift in camp sensibilities in self-reflexive musicals specifically developed to appeal to mainstream audiences, from being grounded in theater-related humor to being primarily popular culture-based.

Chapters Four and Five explore productions from the post-millennium that more directly complicate the traditional "Golden Age" narrative. In Chapter Four, I provide a scenographic and socio-historical comparison of the concept musical with its post-millennium counterpart that I call the "neo-conceptual musical." I assess the similarities and differences between the two subgenres with regard to each form's use of plot, scenography, and the use of ensemble, as examples of how the Broadway musical builds upon and reconfigures itself over time. And

³³ I exclude *Elton John and Tim Rice's Aida* (2000) from this chapter because it does not have a filmed counterpart.

finally, in Chapter Five, I compare how differently the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the work of Stephen Sondheim are approached and revived in recent years, and offer a reflection on how issues of nostalgia, “Golden Age” preferentialism, and politics of taste play out in the business of reviving (and revising) musicals in the post-millennium.

Chapter Two

Prelude: Automation, the disappearance of the blackout, and organic spectacle

In a sense, the dawn of the megamusical in the 1980s anticipated Disney's future on Broadway. As multi-sensory spectaculars, megamusicals offer a fusion of epic plotlines, sung-through scores, and, most importantly, technologically elaborate stage mechanics accomplished with the help of computer automation.¹ The massive rotating barricade from *Les Misérables* (1987), the chandelier drop at the end of Act I of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988), and the helicopter evacuation in *Miss Saigon* (1991) serve as archetypal examples of visually stunning moments made possible through advanced stage technology.² Using automation for the basic manipulation of set pieces was not new in the 1980s, but the use of computers to synchronize winch and fly systems so as to manipulate multiple set pieces concurrently made the process more reliable, repeatable, and safer than previously possible.

One of the byproducts of automation was the disappearance of the blackout from musical theater productions. Blackouts serve a variety of purposes in theater, from the practical to the structural. Blackouts allow actors to leave or enter the stage for a new scene "invisibly." They also, like the proscenium curtain, allow set pieces to be switched out for the next scene, and help signal (and encourage) applause from the audience. In the megamusical, automation was used to make seamless transitions between scenes with virtually no blackouts or curtains; tracks built into the floor allowed for complex scenery changes at the push of a button, often accomplished

¹ Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1-4.

² "Automation," accessed February 28, 2015, <http://www.prg.com/our-products/prg-products/automation/> (page removed). *Phantom's* automation, for example, was made possible in part through the Production Resource Group's (PRG) then-new Stage Command motion control system; PRG remains a key player in developing new automation products and console designs.

without a stagehand in sight (e.g., *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Mary Poppins* [2004], *Spamalot* [2005]). State-of-the-art network technology now makes it possible to have smaller set pieces even move about the stage without a track at all, as with *Aladdin* (2014).³ Conversely, another solution to accomplish set changes without any blackouts is to have the cast (or costumed stagehands) move set pieces manually in full view of the audience (e.g., *Mamma Mia!* [2001], *Once* [2012], *The Bridges of Madison County* [2014]). For most Broadway shows, however, set changes are accomplished through a mix of automated and manual cues.

What makes automation particularly important in terms of stage design for post-millennial productions is the fact that seamless stage design can read as a more “cinematic” viewing experience for audiences. In an article for the American Theatre Wing’s website, automation engineer Gareth Conner discusses how he came into stage automation from his career as a traditionally trained stagehand moving sets by hand and manning fly systems. At the end of the article, he remarks that automation is now used in regional and high school theater as much as it is used on Broadway; even more importantly, he notes, “[C]reative design teams are embracing motion to engage an audience saturated in cinematic effects in other forms of entertainment.”⁴ It is clear that the language of motion and self-moving sets defines an important aspect of musical theater of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-centuries. I am especially interested in how stage design in the age of automation, in conjunction with lighting and sound, makes use of the scenographic ability to mimic the movie-going experience onstage, a crucial

³ See Sally Neiman’s piece on the technology in *Aladdin*, “The hidden tech behind Broadway’s *Aladdin*,” CNET, May 11, 2016, <https://www.cnet.com/news/the-hidden-tech-behind-broadways-aladdin/>.

⁴ Conner, “Scenic Automation: Let’s Move Stuff,” American Theatre Wing, April 24, 2014, <http://americantheatrewing.org/how-it-works/scenic-automation-lets-move-stuff-pt1/>.

advantage for stage productions adapted from films in the post-millennium.

Over time, however, there has been a shift in how automation is employed in stage productions. Although post-millennial musicals are greatly influenced by the technological and aesthetic innovations of early megamusicals,⁵ the use of spectacle in contemporary shows is more organic, as elaborate stage sequences and effects are used less for “shock and awe” than to move the story forward. This “organic spectacle” may be found in shows like *Mary Poppins* and *Aladdin*, where magic and supernatural powers are relevant to the dramatic narrative, but are not the ultimate focus. Thus, in *Mary Poppins*, the title character does not find herself airborne until the end of Act I. Likewise in *Aladdin*, although we meet the Genie at the start of the show, his true magical skills remain under wraps until his late Act I showstopper, “Friend Like Me.”⁶ What Disney Theatrical Group’s (DTG) productions on Broadway accomplished in the post-millennium was to create a technologically sophisticated show model whose technology remains at the service of the action. Their shows demonstrate that exhibiting technological prowess no longer needs to be the endgame for productions. Instead, Disney’s productions favor incorporating technology unobtrusively, an approach that also happens to be (not so) coincidentally a guiding principle for Disney’s theme parks.

⁵ Sternfeld writes, “[T]he shows being written today reflect the unprecedented successes of the megamusical.” Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 352.

⁶ Compare this to the opening of *The Phantom of the Opera*, for example.

“I’m practically perfect in every way!”⁷: Disney’s (attempted) Broadway takeover

The start of the new millennium saw an abundance of Disney musicals produced for Broadway. In the 1990s, DTG produced their first two shows: *Beauty and the Beast* (1994) and *The Lion King* (1997). The rousing critical and artistic success of *The Lion King* fueled the addition of seven shows to Disney’s Broadway catalogue (*Elton John and Tim Rice’s Aida*, 2000; *Mary Poppins*, 2006; *Tarzan*, 2006; *The Little Mermaid*, 2008; *Newsies*, 2011; *Aladdin*, 2014; *Frozen*, anticipated Spring 2018), all of which, with the exception of *Aida*, were adapted from one of Disney’s live-action or animated feature films.

Despite its commercial (and critical) success, most especially with *The Lion King*, Disney’s relationship with the theatrical community and critics was fraught before it really ever began. When Michael Eisner signed a deal with the city and state of New York to renovate and lease the New Amsterdam Theater, the Broadway theater community bristled at Disney’s impending presence. Although the goal for the “revitalization” of Times Square was to rid the area of the “grittier” establishments and clientele deemed unfriendly to tourists and families (the strip clubs and porn shops that had dotted the area since the 1970s and 1980s), the theater community dreaded Broadway’s “Disneyfication.”⁸ Critics, scholars, and producers feared that tourist-oriented shows would dominate Times Square marquees and Broadway would no longer be a place for groundbreaking theater that pushed political and cultural boundaries; indeed, the arrival of commercialized megamusicals in the 1980s initiated similar discussions years earlier.⁹

⁷ Julian Fellowes, *Mary Poppins: The Broadway Musical* (New York: Music Theatre International, 2012), 1-3-15.

⁸ See Steve Nelson, “Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square,” *The Drama Review* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 71-85.

⁹ See Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*.

The relationship between business and show business, of course, goes back much earlier, which Steve Nelson pointed out after the deal with Disney was finalized: “Many who fear the seemingly indiscriminate sledgehammer of Disney’s money forget the opulent production values of the classic 1920s revues and the lavish spectacles favored by later Broadway impresarios such as Billy Rose, Mike Todd, and David Merrick.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Disney Theatricals could do little to assuage naysayers except to show them, with *Beauty and the Beast*, that they were a serious production company.

Disney’s subsequent stage offerings demonstrated a period of creative experimentation and development for the company that met with mixed commercial success. Most critics, however, relished Disney’s misfires and only grudgingly acknowledged when something worked well in a given show. And the fact that none of Disney’s shows, save *Aida*, were based on original material echoed growing fears within the Broadway community that nothing on the Great White Way was original anymore. Such critical tunnel vision meant that the work DTG and its creative teams were doing to push the creative envelope became lost in critical and scholarly discussions of what the shows supposedly failed to contribute to Broadway in the post-millennium.

Even assuming that some criticism is rightly deserved, the technical innovation cultivated by Disney over the past fifteen years has had a substantial impact on Broadway’s creative climate. Scenographically, Disney’s shows are bold trendsetters in the ways lighting and set design, sound design, automation, and projection mapping can be combined to bring a story to life onstage. The design challenges DTG’s creative teams faced in translating animation and the cinematic experience to the stage necessitated such scenographic advances, which have in turn

¹⁰ Nelson, “Broadway and the Beast,” 72.

permanently altered the theatergoing experience by blurring the line between live theater and cinema. Scenographic analysis of Disney's post-millennial shows in this chapter will demonstrate the creative relevance and impact of the company's Broadway productions on musical theater in the post-millennium.

“Once upon a time...”: Disney begins on Broadway

Critical response to Disney's debut on Broadway is perhaps best expressed by Edwin Wilson's curt summary of *Beauty and the Beast*: “A teacup that sings, a carpet that turns somersaults, a candelabrum that dances a soft shoe, a wooden cabinet that sings opera, knives and forks that perform the can-can. You guessed it: Walt Disney has come to Broadway.”¹¹ An overwhelming sense of reluctance permeates reviews of the show, which for most critics was a bit too flashy yet also a bit too traditional. The production's director, Robert Jess Roth, was plucked straight from Disney's theme park entertainment division, where literal translations of the films for park guests are common.¹² The show's book was expanded slightly from the screenplay and the score was augmented with new songs, but otherwise the production was fairly cut-and-dried in set and costume design. Critical reviews of the show applauded the score and the cast, but were less impressed by the human-sized tableware and crockery.¹³

¹¹ Edwin Wilson, “A Bit of Disneyland Comes to Broadway,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 1994, A18.

¹² The *Beauty and the Beast* stage show at Walt Disney World includes actors in costumes that are literal representations of Lumière, Cogsworth, Mrs. Potts, and Chip, rather than the more stylized costumes of the Broadway production, meaning the usually tiny teacup, Chip, stands close to five feet tall.

¹³ See Jeremy Gerard, “Disney's Beauty and the Beast,” *Variety*, April 25, 1994, 37; David Richards, “Disney Does Broadway, Dancing Spoons and All,” *The New York Times*, April 19,

Although *Beauty and the Beast* was a commercial success for Disney Theatricals and ran for thirteen years, *The Lion King* was Disney's legitimizing artistic success. Julie Taymor, the director and main designer for the production, offered a reinterpretation of the popular Disney film that relied on the power of puppetry and imagination to bring the film to life. As with *Beauty and the Beast*, the creative team had to decide how to bring non-human, animated characters to life in a convincing way. Whereas *Beauty and the Beast* used elaborate, stylized costuming that kept close to the film's "look," Taymor went a completely different direction with *The Lion King*. Instead of dressing the performers in theme park-style bodysuits, Taymor instead opted for a more stylized approach where performers, clad in African-inspired clothing, manipulated hand-carved masks and puppets suggestive of the film's characters. The result was an artistic (and commercial) triumph for Disney Theatricals. Even Ben Brantley, lead theater critic for *The New York Times* and resolutely anti-Disney, admitted that,

The Lion King remains an important work in a way that *Beauty and the Beast* simply is not. Ms. Taymor has introduced a whole new vocabulary of images to the Broadway blockbuster, and you're unlikely to forget such sights as the face of Simba's father forming itself into an astral mask among the stars...[I]t offers a refreshing and more sophisticated alternative to the standard panoply of special effects that dominate most tourist-oriented shows today. Seen purely as a visual tapestry, there is simply nothing else like it.¹⁴

1994; Laurie Winer, "It Sounds Like a *Beauty*: Cast and Music Live Up to Disney Magic, but Sets and Special Effects Fall Short," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1995.

¹⁴ Ben Brantley, "Cub Comes of Age: A Twice-Told Cosmic Tale," *The New York Times*, November 14, 1997.

“Anything can happen if you let it”¹⁵: *Mary Poppins* comes to Broadway

After *Aida*,¹⁶ *Mary Poppins* was the next show developed by Disney Theatricals, first for the London stage in 2004 followed by its transatlantic transfer to Broadway in 2006.

The stage version of *Mary Poppins* was the result of many years of negotiations between Disney Theatricals, Cameron Mackintosh, and *Mary Poppins* author P.L. Travers. Bringing the “practically perfect” nanny to the silver screen in 1964 was a complex and trying process, particularly for Travers, who felt mistreated and bullied into signing over the rights to her stories; despite her involvement in developing the screenplay, she was ultimately unhappy with the film and felt that it bore little resemblance to her books. Accounts of the adaptation process are numerous, including the recent Disney film, *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013), and often paint Disney in a more favorable light. Travers, however, was quite vocal in her dismay at the finished product.¹⁷ Mackintosh, meanwhile, spent many years seeking the stage rights to *Mary Poppins*, which a trusting, if reluctant, Travers finally granted him in 1993 with the understanding that Mackintosh would work with the Disney Company to use some of the musical material from the film, as he “felt it would be impossible to create a satisfying *Mary Poppins* on stage, without [the] songs.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Fellowes, *Mary Poppins*, II-10-41.

¹⁶ Although *Aida* technically falls within the post-millennial frame of my dissertation, I will not include it, as it does not have a Disney film counterpart. For a detailed discussion of *Aida*, see chapter nine of Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario’s dissertation, “Interpreting the Magic from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Little Mermaid*” (Ph.D. diss., Monash University, 2003).

¹⁷ The discontent between Disney and Travers is no secret. At Travers’ request, the script editing sessions in which she worked with Richard and Robert Sherman and Don DiGradi were recorded; excerpts of the sessions are included on the two-disc special edition soundtrack released for the film’s 40th anniversary. Sherman Brothers, *Walt Disney’s Mary Poppins 2-Disc Special Edition Soundtrack*, Walt Disney Records 5008612027 DG02, 2004, compact discs.

¹⁸ Cameron Mackintosh, foreword to *Mary Poppins: Anything Can Happen* by Brian Sibley and Michael Lassell (New York: Disney Editions, 2007), 9.

Several years after receiving the rights, Mackintosh started a dialogue with Disney Theatricals' Thomas Schumacher to determine how to bring the beloved nanny to the musical stage. Both Mackintosh and Schumacher agreed that a fusion of the book's stories and the film's songs would offer audiences a satisfying blend of new and familiar.

Julian Fellowes was asked to write the musical's book, weaving characters and scenarios from the original Mary Poppins books into the film's plot. Much like the film, the stage production frames Mr. Banks's redemption with the help of his family as its main conflict. The Banks family still resides at Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane, and suffers from a chronic nanny shortage. George Banks is the inattentive, workaholic patriarch married to Winifred, a former actress lacking in self-confidence (she is no longer a closeted suffragette as in the film); their two children, Jane and Michael, pride themselves on torturing each new nanny who is unsuitable to their tastes (infant twins John and Barbara Banks remain absent from the stage production). Mrs. Brill and Robertson Ay, the household staff, are more visible in the stage version than the film. Bert remains the omnipresent jack-of-all-trades as created for the film and he features prominently in a number of scenes as both narrator and participant. And then there is Mary, the practically perfect nanny, whose child-rearing skills are as amusing as they are questionable. Although the stage version of Mary still fails to match Travers' characterization in the books,¹⁹ this Mary has more bite and sarcasm than Disney's film interpretation.

¹⁹ Mary Poppins is quite nasty to the children in the books from her dismissive "sniffs" and "harumphs" to her barbed insults and gaslighting technique. At the end of each adventure with the children, Mary sternly denies that anything out of the ordinary happened and that the children should be ashamed of being so ridiculous/rotten, as in the end of "The Evening Out" in *Mary Poppins Comes Back*. P.L. Travers, "The Evening Out," in *Mary Poppins and Mary Poppins Comes Back* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1937), 265-290.

A note on gaslighting: to gaslight someone is to "manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity." The term comes from the 1944 film, *Gaslight*, where a wife, Paula, learns of her husband's suspicious activities because of the fluctuating

Because the show's dramatic drive pertains to the Banks family, foregrounding Mary's magic could easily overshadow the musical's message. The creative team chose to incorporate smaller moments of magic to naturalize her abilities within the narrative reality of the show (as in "Practically Perfect" and "A Spoonful of Sugar") rather than drawing explicit attention to them. Even Mary's initial entrance, which shows her flying in to Cherry Tree Lane in the film, and to a lesser extent in the book ("...the wind seemed to catch her up into the air and fling her at the house"²⁰), involves no practical flying. Instead, her arrival is represented by a bright blue silhouette traveling rapidly across a dark stage at the end of the opening number, at which point the lights come up to reveal Mary Poppins standing onstage, her umbrella held aloft.²¹

The musical is a useful example of how spectacle in the post-millennium shifted from being treated as the main marketing draw for audiences to being integrated into the dramatic fabric of a show. Rather than relying on elaborate stage machinery to painstakingly recreate each magical situation, the creative team for *Mary Poppins* instead drew on a mixture of practical stage effects and dance sequences. Given that both the book and film play with narrative time (i.e., time stands still when the children are on a journey) and dance can figuratively (and literally) stop the flow of time in a show, the spectacular dance sequences in "Jolly Holiday,"

gaslight levels in their house. When she notices the lighting levels changing and questions it, Gregory convinces her that it is all in her mind, leading her to question her sanity. "gaslight, v.," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2017, accessed April 7, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/255554>.

²⁰ Travers, *Mary Poppins and Mary Poppins Comes Back*, 6.

²¹ The Musical Theatre International production handbook for *Mary Poppins* even warns: "Be sure not to overuse flying tricks or reveal them too early in the show. Keep the audience enchanted without letting the special effects lose their magic." Debra Cardona, Megan McClain, and Jeremy Stroller, *Mary Poppins Production Handbook* (n.p.: Music Theatre International, n.d.), 50.

“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” and “Step in Time” were well-suited for the task. These dance numbers, in conjunction with the practical effects in “Practically Perfect” and “A Spoonful of Sugar,” combine to create a seemingly effortlessly magical world full onstage.

“Practically Perfect” is the first time the children (and the audience) get to know Mary. The number takes place in Jane and Michael’s nursery just after Mary is hired as their new nanny. She unpacks her belongings matter-of-factly from her otherwise empty carpetbag set on the floor, extracting a coat rack and a houseplant, much to the children’s bewilderment, before retrieving a measuring tape. She moves to measure Michael, who is found to be “a noisy, mischievous, troublesome little boy,” followed by Jane, who is “thoughtless, short-tempered, and untidy.”²² Before the children can argue about their measurements, Mary interrupts, singing “By the time the wind has blown / the weather vane around / I’ll show you, if I can, / No matter what the circumstance / for one thing I’m renowned, / my character is spit spot, spic and span!”²³ Jane wonders how Mary measures up, to which Mary sings that she is “practically perfect in every way,” which then leads into the song proper.

As Mary expounds upon her many enviable qualities, she continuously pulls more items from her bag, including a mirror, a table lamp, bedding, and a tea service for one, all of which she places around the room while Jane and Michael watch in astonishment. To make the bag’s magical qualities even more impressive to the audience, the bag is set upon a table with highly visible legs, making a traditional trapdoor lift trick impossible, adding some mystery to the magic. One of the more spectacular moments of the number occurs when Mary summons a bed out of thin air as she and Jane unfold a blanket; the effect is simple, using a quick acting lift to

²² Fellowes, *Mary Poppins*, I-3-14.

²³ *Ibid.*

raise the bed-like platform up under the blanket to give the illusion that a bed magically appeared, but the appearance of a “bed” where the ground was flat a few seconds prior is striking.²⁴ As if to prove to the audience that the bed is indeed real, Mary nonchalantly takes a seat and invites the children to join her, which they do warily.

Throughout the number, Mary becomes increasingly “hands-off.” She begins the number by physically moving her belongings herself, but by the end she is turning on lights with the flick of her wrist from across the room and directing the children with a wave of her hand. Jane and Michael clean up the remainder of the room, manually straightening pictures and moving the dollhouse to its proper place (notably two items that are “magically” tidied in the film but are done so by hand here) all while Mary preens about the stage. The children’s more active participation in the cleaning process points to their budding internal change while in Mary’s care.

Mary’s removed approach to child rearing is even more evident in the number “A Spoonful of Sugar,” which occurs later in Act I. Mrs. Banks is hosting a tea party, at Mr. Banks’ request, in an effort to expand her social circle; the preparations leave Mrs. Brill, the cook, feeling overworked and frenzied. Robertson Ay, the ever-clumsy and semi-incompetent gardener/valet, offers his assistance to Mrs. Brill, which she reluctantly accepts. She tasks him to procure a hot bowl of water for her icing tools, asking him to place the tools and bowl out by the cake for her to make the icing upon her return. Jane and Michael enter the kitchen toward the end of this exchange and watch as Robertson Ay moves aimlessly about searching for a bowl after Mrs. Brill’s departure. Impatient, Jane begins to make icing on her own, exclaiming, “If Mrs.

²⁴ For the US tour and the Australian production, the effect was changed to accommodate a smaller set and theaters with different technical capabilities. Instead of using a trap lift for the effect, the bed unfolds itself from under a chest of drawers at Mary’s bidding.

Brill can do it, it can't be that hard."²⁵ Robertson Ay and Michael attempt to stop Jane multiple times, but Jane stubbornly persists and makes snide remarks about Robertson Ay and Mrs. Brill's incompetence. Robertson Ay finally concedes to help her, but as he fetches some water from the sink, he burns his hand, which sends him flailing around the room, destroying almost everything in his path, from the kitchen table that collapses under his weight to the china cabinet where he collapses unconscious.

Before Jane and Michael can even process what just happened, Mrs. Banks sweeps into the kitchen to speak with Mrs. Brill, stopping short upon noticing the chaotic state of the room. Before Winifred can do more than assess the situation, Mary Poppins enters the kitchen ("as if on cue"²⁶) to attend to the mess and the children. As Mary ushers Mrs. Banks out of the room, Winifred exclaims to the children, "You deserve some very nasty medicine! Just you wait 'til bedtime!" to which Mary replies, "Oh, I don't think we should wait 'til then, ma'am."²⁷ At this, Mary brandishes a medicine bottle and spoon to administer the tonic to Jane and Michael, who both resist ingesting the medicine until they discover it is actually sweet and delicious.

Their delight is short-lived, however, when they realize Mary is putting them to work. Jane whines: "Must we? Can't Robertson Ay do it when he wakes up? He is a servant." Mary retorts, "With that attitude, you'll get through a lot of staff before you're very old. Besides..." At this point, underscoring for "A Spoonful of Sugar" plays as Mary continues, "In every job that must be done, / There is an element of fun," after which the song proper begins as Mary sings,

²⁵ Fellowes, *Mary Poppins*, I-6-35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I-6-37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

“You find the fun and snap! The job’s a game.”²⁸ On her “snap!” the lighting abruptly shifts to the purple-blue wash seen earlier during “Practically Perfect.”

Much like “Practically Perfect,” “A Spoonful of Sugar” is as much about Mary’s magical qualities as it is about the children learning to become responsible and productive members of the household. At the top of the first chorus, Mary hands brooms to Jane and Michael, who regard the brooms with contempt and fail to sweep much of anything, even after Mary briefly demonstrates how brooms are *supposed* to work. As Mary moves onto the verse (“The honeybees that fetch the nectar...”), she retrieves the medicine bottle once again to administer another dose of medicine to Jane and Michael; the medicine immediately perks up the children and they join in singing with Mary while sweeping happily about the stage, while Mary seems to direct their movements from upstage. Her hand gestures correspond directly to the children’s choreographed sweeping, which suggests that even if the children are willing participants, they still require direction, which Mary offers magically from afar.

During the instrumental portion of the number, Mary moves to each destroyed section of the kitchen and restores everything to working order with the snap of her finger. With each “snap,” white, spinning gobos²⁹ draw attention to each area as the set pieces for the sink, collapsed kitchen table, and broken china cabinet pull themselves together, all while Jane and Michael (and the audience) watch in awe. After the kitchen restores itself, Mary revives Robertson Ay with a dose of medicine just before Mrs. Banks returns; although Winifred remains equal parts dubious of and amazed by the kitchen’s (and the children’s) transformation,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gobos provide patterned lighting, due to a stencil or template placed in front of the lighting source.

she nonetheless joins in on the final chorus and dances about the room with the children and Robertson Ay. Mary remains removed from the celebration (apart from summoning a fully iced cake out of nothingness),³⁰ instead choosing to make herself a cup of tea and watch amusedly from the periphery. Upon the song's conclusion, Mrs. Banks and the staff compose themselves as Mary ushers the children upstairs, the vibrant purple wash fading as she does.

For “Practically Perfect” and “A Spoonful of Sugar,” subtle stage machinery and lighting denote Mary's magical qualities as they appear within the realm of “reality”; on the opposite side of the spectrum, “Jolly Holiday,” “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” and “Step in Time” use excessively bright colors, costumes, sets, and extended dance sequences to clearly distinguish the moments when Mary is in her true element in the realm of fantasy in the show. “Jolly Holiday” and “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious” correspond to one of Mary's outings with the children, episodes in the books where the whimsical occurs and imagination and reality as perceived by the Banks children mix together freely. For the stage production, the transition between the “real world” and the magical one is marked by a sudden set change, brightly colored costumes and lighting, and extended dance sequences.

“Jolly Holiday” draws inspiration from both the book and the film version of *Mary Poppins*. In the book, Mary and Bert enjoy a private trip into one of his chalk drawings on Mary's day off, spending the day at tea and taking in the wonders of Bert's illustrated world;³¹ the film version builds on the written outing by bringing the children along and turning the

³⁰ The effect of the self-baking cake is achieved with a spring-loaded fabric cake shell. Design tips for regional productions of the show suggest using a collapsible top hat as the base element of the prop. Cardona, McClain, and Stroller, *Mary Poppins Production Handbook*, 57.

³¹ Mary's outing is detailed in “The Day Out.” Travers, *Mary Poppins and Mary Poppins Comes Back*, 12-19.

excursion into a song and dance number (“Jolly Holiday”), which concludes with a carousel horse race (“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”). The film interpretation is famous for its fusion of live actors with animated characters, a visual feat not easily replicated onstage; in place of using animation, the creative team engineered a quick set transformation and costume changes for Bert and Mary that turn the dull, gray park into a Technicolor wonderland.³² Mary has brought Jane and Michael to the park, an outing both Jane and Michael find dull (“boring, just like other nannies / thinking parks are good for us!”).³³ As the two children plot their escape, they become acutely aware that Mary has disappeared and someone is watching them. The being in question happens to be Neleus, a statue brought to life by Mary’s presence. He speaks briefly with the children and explains that they just have to look and see what a “wonderland” the park is. At this, the dull gray drops suddenly fly out to reveal a completely transformed park inhabited by a wide variety of characters, all of whom are dressed in vivid hues; Mary herself reappears dressed in fuchsia while Bert sports a royal purple suit. The children join Mary and Bert as they enjoy the now bustling park – Queen Victoria even steps away from her monument to spend time with Mary and the children.

The set transition is impressive, but the dance sequences are truly remarkable. In *Mary Poppins*, the choreography is not grounded in a specific style or tradition, rather the choreography is informed by the gestures and movements of a given character. For example, Neleus and his fellow statues use arm and leg movements that are stiffer and more angular, as if they cannot quite leave the range of motion of their previously sculpted selves. Mary’s dance

³² Designer Bob Crowley describes the set change as “an old-fashioned English pantomime transformation scene.” Quoted in David Barbour, “Mary Poppins’ Jolly New York Holiday,” *Lighting & Sound America*, February 2007, 59.

³³ Fellowes, *Mary Poppins*, I-4-21.

language, on the other hand, oscillates between exuberant, flowing turns and periods of measured walking about the stage as she makes sure her hat and hair are still in place, a nod to her (mildly) mercurial temperament. Bert's dancing reflects his role as the show's jack-of-all-trades, with his chameleon-like ability to adapt to whatever dance language is in use for a give number. His main style of choice is tap dancing, however, which one might expect from a street performer.³⁴

As mentioned earlier, structurally and dramatically, "Jolly Holiday" is a traditional dance number that temporarily interrupts the plot in order to deliver several minutes of pure visual spectacle, which is reminiscent of the dance spectacles of earlier eras and the occasional "Golden Age" show. This is even more true for "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," where the entire number consists of little more than the cast physically spelling out the letters of the entire word in a stylized way, first slowly, then in a two-part canon, and finally at breakneck speeds. Anticipating the number's show stopping quality, the creative team included a brief reprise of the song with the entire word on a drop curtain at the front of the stage as Bert leads the audience and some of the cast in a pseudo-sing-a-long.³⁵

The shifting combination of technical effects and dance-oriented spectacle throughout *Mary Poppins* exemplifies the Disney show model at the start of the new millennium, where technology is no longer the main marketing draw but one of the supporting players. Because magic is expressed in both subtle and obvious ways throughout *Mary Poppins*, the show's scenographic design is essential to provide the fluidity and nuance in execution required for the story, whether it be a self-cleaning kitchen or dancing statues in the park. The unobtrusiveness of

³⁴ The choice of tap dancing for Bert is also a nod to the dancing capability of Gavin Lee, who originated the role of Bert on the West End and on Broadway.

³⁵ The reprise is partly for practical reasons, as a major set change after "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" necessitates the main curtain coming down.

the technology is what allows both the human and fantastical elements of the story to come to the forefront, creating a theatrical space for the audience where the mundane world melts away and reveals a vibrant fantasy where anything can happen.

“Two worlds, one family...”³⁶: *Tarzan* and the cinematic on Broadway

Just a few months prior to the Broadway opening of *Mary Poppins*, another new Disney musical, *Tarzan*, arrived on Broadway, opening at the Richard Rodgers on May 10, 2006. The musical’s design and musical material was based on the 1999 Disney animated feature film, which was originally inspired by the novel, *Tarzan of the Apes*, written by Edgar Rice Burroughs and published in 1912. The story had already spawned several popular film and television series spanning several decades and the animated series, *George of the Jungle* (1967). Bob Crowley headed the production as the director and costume and set designer for *Tarzan*, having previously worked with Disney as a set and costume designer on *Aida* and *Mary Poppins*; playwright David Henry Hwang supplied the musical’s book; Phil Collins, who wrote the music for the animated film, composed additional musical material for the stage version; and lighting designer Natasha Katz was brought on to enliven the abstract jungle set.

Tarzan holds the distinction of being the shortest-running production in the Disney Theatrical catalogue and it would be an understatement to say that critics felt a bit of *Schadenfreude* at the company’s perceived failure – the critics absolutely reveled in what many considered to be Disney’s first major theatrical misstep.³⁷ Many critics found the show’s design

³⁶ Phil Collins and David Henry Hwang, *Tarzan: The Stage Musical* (New York: Music Theatre International, n.d.), 1.

³⁷ Critics got quite creative with their titles: Clive Barnes, “Bungle in the Jungle,” *New York Post*, May 11, 2006; Howard Kissel, “*Tarzan*: Me, Critic; You Lame!” *New York Daily News*,

to be flat, the book flawed, and the music lackluster. Only Katz's creative use of lighting seemed to escape critical disdain. Certainly the film material proved difficult to adapt in terms of gravity limitations – part of the appeal of the animated film is Tarzan's ability to "surf" the tops of the trees in a superhuman fashion, and as much as the cast defies gravity with the help of fly wires, the stage Tarzan has no chance of surfing with the same fluidity as his animated counterpart.³⁸

Additionally, the source film is not a traditional musical in the sense of having the characters visibly sing during their scenes (the exception being "Trashin' the Camp" when Tarzan's friends trash the Porter's lodgings while singing gibberish). Instead, the songs are part of an introspective soundtrack sung by an omniscient narrator (Phil Collins) performed while we watch the characters engage non-verbally. Relegating the songs to (originally) non-singing characters in the stage adaptation was not a substantial change dramatically, but the shift did fundamentally alter the essence of the film's narrative relationship between the songs and the characters, perhaps an off-putting shift for fans of the film. Regardless of why the show failed to enthrall audiences, however, the show was clearly not connecting with Broadway audiences and the show closed on July 8, 2007 after 486 performances. Although *Tarzan* did not become the king of New York's urban jungle, the show was later reworked and enjoyed lengthy runs in the Netherlands and Germany.³⁹

May 11, 2006; Peter Marks, "Fumble in the Jungle: Disney's Tame *Tarzan*," *Washington Post*, May 11, 2006.

³⁸ On the difference between the film and the stage production, Ben Brantley writes, "As several members of the movie's creative team observed in commentary that comes with the DVD version, it required animation to create the physically protean Tarzan of Burroughs's imagination. A live actor, it was suggested, could never begin to capture the ape-man's animal artistry. Which goes to prove, employees of Disney, that you should be very careful what you say when a camera is running, even when the camera comes from the head office."

Even if *Tarzan* flopped as a show, reviewers who panned the musical still applauded the opening sequence for pushing the boundaries between the cinematic and Broadway musicals. In the first few minutes of the show, we witness the shipwreck of the *Fuwalda*, carrying Lord and Lady Greystoke and their newborn child. Waves lash at the ship, lightning flashes, wood creaks and breaks, and the family is thrown overboard as the ship breaks up. Suddenly we are watching the Greystokes underwater as they struggle to swim upward to the surface. Blackout. As the lights come up, we see a familiar scene before us, watching the action unfold below: bodies washed up on an idyllic beach, waves lapping lightly at the shore's edge as the sun shines brightly from overhead. We watch as the husband and wife help each other stand up, tend to their son, and slowly make their way to the jungle before them.

The scene described above might seem perfectly average for a Hollywood blockbuster, but achieving this series of unfortunate events onstage in *Tarzan* required some unique stagecraft solutions. The pre-show setup includes two layered drops (a UV-painted scrim augmented with projections and a silk piece with the printed image of a ship), a single rope swinging downstage left, and the atmospheric noises of seagulls, clanging bells, gentle sloshing waves, and creaking wood.

³⁹ International replica productions of *Tarzan* were produced by Stage Entertainment in partnership with Disney. The production ran in the Netherlands (Scheveningen, 2007-2009) and in Germany (Hamburg, 2008-2013; Stuttgart, 2013-2016; and Oberhausen, announced 2016). "Stage Entertainment – Productions – Tarzan," Stage Entertainment, accessed October 4, 2016, www.stage-entertainment.com/productions/myZJKRE8JQzP9/.



Figure 2.1: Detail of scrim of *Tarzan*. Photo by Deen van Meer.⁴⁰

The scrim contains a painted nineteenth-century map of the African continent and dated diary entries detailing the ship's voyage slowly appear on the scrim's lower stage right corner; a miniature projection of the ship moves closer and closer toward land with each entry. The silk piece layered behind the map projection depicts the image of a storm-tossed ship, the image bobbing and shifting as hidden tech crew slowly manipulate the sheet while overhead water gobos add texture and movement to the ship image.

During the pre-show, subtle drumming emerges from the pit and slowly builds in intensity as the ship makes its journey. The pounding gives way to fierce cracks of thunder and flashes of lightning that signal the start of the show. The map of Africa fades to reveal the Greystoke family sheltered in the hold of the ship while multi-colored flashes illuminate the ship's outline as it pitches in the waves. As the family is tossed from the ship, they are suspended

⁴⁰ *Disney's Tarzan* (Hamburg: Stage Theater Neue Flora Produktionsgesellschaft, 2012), souvenir program.

above the stage by fly wires and they struggle to “swim,” floating behind the silk piece that ripples and heaves like the waves they are caught in. The water gobos continue to light the silk drop from overhead as the Greystokes finally find a rope to help them to safety (see fig. 2.2); the sound design while they are underwater is manipulated to imitate the real life distortion of sound when heard in water, an extra detail that contributes to the sense that we are watching a film, not a musical.



Figure 2.2: The Greystokes suspended while “swimming.”⁴¹

Once the family reaches the top of the proscenium, a short blackout allows the scrim to fly out while the black silk piece drops to the stage. The lights come up to reveal a bird’s-eye-view of the beach scene, the Greystokes lying unconscious on the backdrop. The drop is simple, with only a small blue portion in the upper stage left corner painted to look like the shoreline, a thin flap shifting like waves on the sand. Additionally, the brightness of the sandy color of the drop is jarring to look at immediately after a blackout, as if the audience is supposed to share in the Greystoke’s disorientation of washing up on the deserted shore.

⁴¹ Screenshot from German production promotional video. Disney Mediathek, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://video.disney.de/sehen/tarzan-das-musical-4f142957f39070b6aedba04a>.

It is important to note that a bird's-eye perspective is common in cinematography, but it is entirely *uncommon* in theater, mainly because of technical practicality. The creative team achieved the effect by having the actors suspended by wires and lying flat against the upstage drop. The actors then “stand up,” their feet against the beach-like backdrop as they gaze “up” at the sun (see fig. 2.3). In reality, they are perpendicular to the backdrop and we see the top of the actors' heads as if viewing them from overhead. When they look at the “sun,” they are actually looking directly at the audience. And as the couple makes their way to the jungle located at the base of the backdrop/the stage floor, they walk down along the backdrop before finally stepping onto the stage floor.

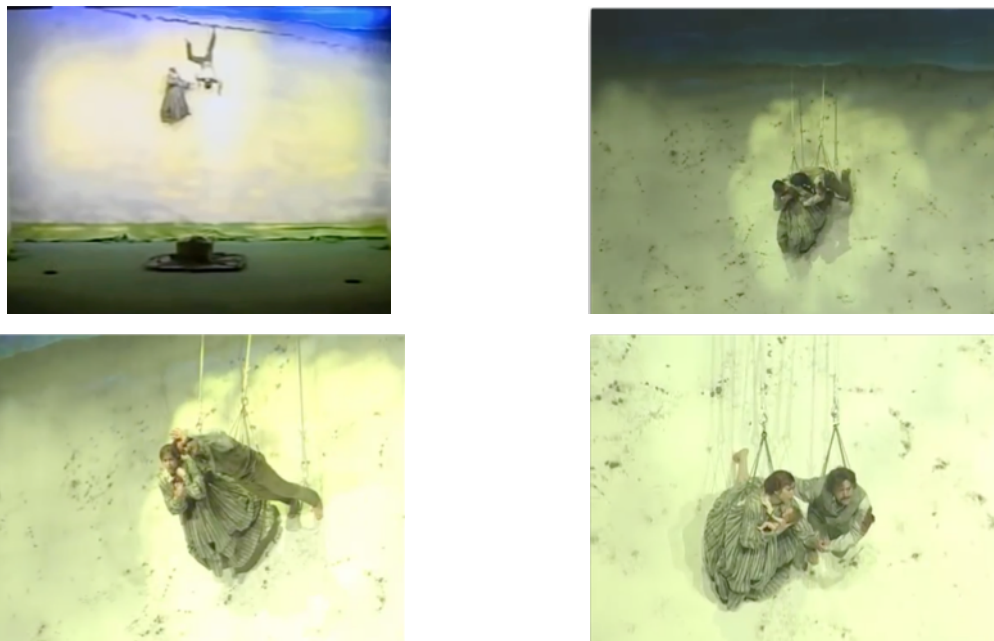


Figure 2.3: *Above left*, The Greystokes washed upon shore; *above right*, coming to; *below left*, staring into the “sun”; *below right*, walking to the jungle.⁴²

⁴² Screenshots from Broadway production promotional video. “Sneak Peek of *Tarzan* on Broadway,” Disney on Broadway YouTube channel, accessed October 10, 2016, <https://youtu.be/A-MMT2DfC8Q>.



Figure 2.4: Detail of harness device for opening sequence. Photo by Joan Marcus.⁴³

The impact of the opening sequence was striking enough that even the most cynical reviewers admitted to being in awe. Jeremy McCarter writes:

Just try it, hipster. Try to sit through the first two minutes of *Tarzan*, Disney's latest big-budget Broadway musical, and act blasé. When you take your seat and a storm-tossed ship seems to float holographically before you, pretend you're not intrigued by how the Imagineers did it. When a blast of lightning kills the lights, and the kids in the audience scream, deny that you yelped, too. Because when video projections, rumbling sound, and bodies twisting twenty feet off the ground combine to form a startling image of shipwrecked survivors trying to claw their way to the beach, no matter how cool you like to act, you are going to be amazed. Briefly.⁴⁴

Such overwhelming praise for the opening moments of the show speaks to the impact of the show's design ambitions and the influence of the cinema on its design. More importantly, the praise for the shipwreck scene points to the increasing technical capability of musical theater to simulate effects onstage that were previously only possible on a Hollywood sound stage.

⁴³ Michael Lassell, *Tarzan: The Broadway Adventure* (New York: Disney Editions, 2007), 10-11.

⁴⁴ McCarter, "Phil Collins Can't Swing," *New York Magazine*, May 22, 2006.

“I’ll tell you a tale...”⁴⁵: Lighting and the cinematic in *The Little Mermaid*

If *Tarzan* was a flop for Disney Theatricals, then *The Little Mermaid* was a certifiable disaster. The stage musical of the 1989 animated film opened less than a year after *Tarzan* closed and the production replaced the long-running *Beauty and the Beast* at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. Although reviews for *The Little Mermaid* were slightly less scathing than those seen after *Tarzan*’s debut, many reviewers wondered if Disney was losing its touch.⁴⁶ The show had its defenders (Richard Zoglin of *TIME Magazine* and Terry Teachout for *The Wall Street Journal*, to name a few), but otherwise the show was poorly received. Ben Brantley pulls no punches with his review, which begins, “Loved the shoes. Loathed the show.” Toward the end of his brusque review he remarks,

Sadly, following the demise of the joyless green blob that was *Tarzan*, *The Little Mermaid* suggests that on Broadway, the Disney magic touch has gone numb. The show’s creators appear to have been hoping for a cross between the company’s two biggest Broadway hits: *Beauty and the Beast*, which was a fair facsimile of the original movie, and *The Lion King*, which the director Julie Taymor turned into an ingenious, multicultural arts-and-crafts fair.⁴⁷

Brantley’s observation of *The Little Mermaid*’s “identity crisis,” situated in an artistic space between two very significant, and very different, Disney productions, speaks to the obstacles Disney’s creative teams had to negotiate in the post-millennial theater world. Certainly,

⁴⁵ “Fathoms Below,” Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, and Glenn Slater, *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, Walt Disney Records D000103302, 2008, compact disc. Liner notes.

⁴⁶ As with *Tarzan*’s reviews, critics got creative with their titles for their reviews: Joe Dziemianowicz, “New *Little Mermaid* musical is beached on Great Wet Way,” *New York Daily News*, January 11, 2008; Chris Jones, “Troubled *Little Mermaid* can’t find its sea legs on Broadway,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 11, 2008; John Moore, “*Mermaid* fish-fried, not Boggess,” *Denver Post*, January 11, 2008.

⁴⁷ Brantley, “Fish Out of Water in the Deep Blue Sea,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2008.

as the reviews indicate, *The Little Mermaid* had some missteps: the expanded score is eclectic to the point of distraction; the costume design vacillates between the whimsical and the cartoonish; and some of the film's most iconic moments ("Under the Sea," for one) are realized in fairly underwhelming ways. Lost in the critics' debate on the artistic merit (or lack thereof) of "merblades" (custom-made by Heelys) was how the show navigated the transition between two very different worlds – the ocean and land – throughout the show, which was achieved through multi-purpose set pieces and location-specific lighting plots. Additionally, the vibrant quality of the lighting for *The Little Mermaid* points to a shift in the ways in which saturating the stage with colorful, fantastical lighting became an essential part of the "look" of post-millennial shows.

When Thomas Schumacher originally pursued material to develop for Broadway in the early 1990s, *The Little Mermaid* was one of the shows under consideration; the logistical issue of staging a film that takes place primarily underwater, however, kept the show on the backburner. The perceived physical limitations of the show left the project undeveloped until an exchange Schumacher had with opera director Francesca Zambello, who had recently directed the abbreviated stage version of *Aladdin* for the Disney California Adventure theme park in 2004. He recalls, concerning her artistic vision for the production, "Fundamentally, Francesca's big idea was to play the play. And when I said, 'How are you going to make them swim?' she said, 'I'm not. They're going to walk out onstage and tell the story.' And that really was a big idea. I think we had all been working too hard on it to solve it."⁴⁸

Simplicity and transparency of design became the primary goal of the show's development, which in many ways is what reached the Broadway stage by 2008. With Zambello

⁴⁸ Lassell, *Disney's The Little Mermaid: A Broadway Musical – From the Deep Blue Sea to the Great White Way* (New York: Disney Editions, 2009), 37.

at the helm, set designer George Tsypin was brought on board along with lighting designer Natasha Katz, who at this point was a Disney Theatricals regular; composer Alan Menken, lyricist Glen Slater, and playwright Doug Wright rounded out the production's main creative team. Tsypin's concept for the production evolved in part due to his interest in working with transparent materials, an approach that seemed to complement the watery world they hoped to create onstage. Additionally, Tsypin designed a set that could be used both for underwater and land sequences; the lighting for each scene would help differentiate between the worlds, with yellow and orange tones for land and blue tones for the sea.⁴⁹ He selected a particularly iridescent material, 3M's Radiant Light Film, to trim and adorn much of the set, achieving greater visual depth from an otherwise simple set (see fig. 2.5).⁵⁰

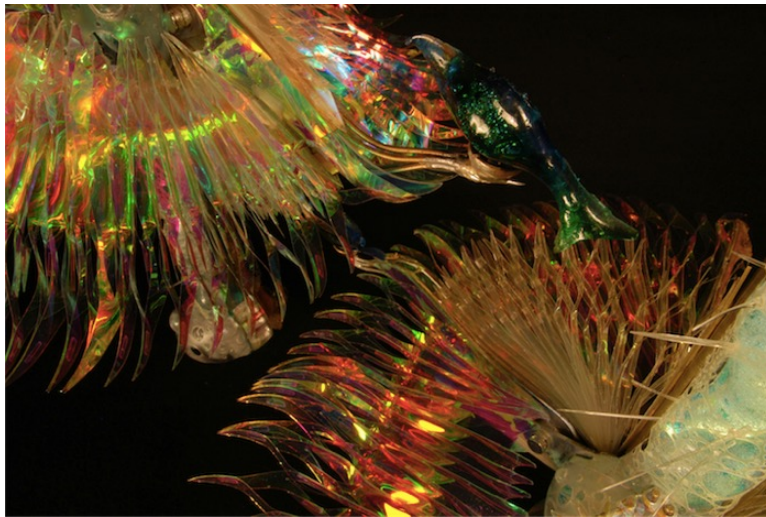


Figure 2.5: 3M Radiant Light Film as used in a set model by Tsypin.⁵¹

While the Radiant Light Film offered a visual brilliance to the set, Katz was faced with the issue of lighting a set that was reflective in unpredictable ways. Remarking on the unusual

⁴⁹ Lassell, *Disney's The Little Mermaid*, 106.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵¹ George Tsypin, "[Set model for *The Little Mermaid*]," George Tsypin Opera Factory, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://georgetsy-pin.com/musicals/musicals/lm.html>.

quality of the film Katz noted, “I had to completely readapt, as if I’d never seen color before. Because nothing took light the way I expected it to.” The technical demands of such a simple, yet complex, design concept required two separate lighting plots, one for the actors and one for the set.⁵² The combined effect of Katz’s lighting and Tsypin’s prismatic set resulted in an intensely vibrant show with a degree of color saturation far greater than shows previously produced by Disney. In addition to the show’s use of intense coloration to distinguish between different realms (and characters), Tsypin’s modular set made fluid scene transitions and cinematic effects possible.⁵³

The production eschews the severe lighting approach of the megamusical and instead offers a range of hues that would not be out of place in an animated feature.⁵⁴ As mentioned above, Katz’s lighting design saturates the stage with tones that correlate to the show’s different locales and characters; throughout the show, colors associated with a character often serve as visual dramatic cues for the audience. Katz attributes the sense of vibrancy of the show’s lighting design to the “many planes of scenery [in the show], which became planes of color,” which were then intensified through the application of complementary colors in each scene.⁵⁵

⁵² Lassell, *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, 124-125.

⁵³ The multipurpose set also solved the issue of tight backstage space at the Lunt-Fontanne, where space is at a premium. *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁴ Arnold Aronson describes what I consider to be a lighting trademark of the mega-musical aesthetic as “high-contrast lighting and selected visibility...[where] smoke or mist is often employed so that very long, narrow, diagonal shafts of backlight may be seen, [or what] lighting designer Richard Nelson described as shafts of light ‘blazing against darkness.’” Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 35.

⁵⁵ Lassell, *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, 125.

The intensity of the show’s lighting and its very specific correlation to characters and locations suggests that lighting design after the millennium was becoming an integral part of the narrative in musical theater rather than just being a practical necessity. Although this concept of lighting as a narrative tool is not used in every post-millennial musical, the design of *The Little Mermaid* serves as a clear example of how lighting actively participates in the dramatic narrative, specifically in how it visually represents the inner longings of the main characters. An early example of how the lighting design functions dramatically occurs in the opening number, “Fathom’s Below.” After the overture, the curtain flies out to reveal a ship at sea, the brilliant golden-yellow and orange sky meeting the rich blue water below the ship. The vessel is a stylized two-dimensional piece, the carved rays of a sun extending from the ship’s wheel.



Figure 2.6: “Fathom’s Below.” Photo by Joan Marcus.

The crew goes about their tasks as they sing a sea shanty with the helmsman “about the king of the sea.” While the crew sings, we meet Prince Eric and his guardian, Grimsby, who have rather different opinions about the sea. Eric’s excitement is uncontainable as he exclaims: “Isn’t this

perfection, Grimsby? Out on the open sea, surrounded by nothing but water?” A rather green-faced Grimsby replies weakly, “Oh, yes, it’s simply...delightful...” The number continues and Eric offers his own verse to the song (“The salt on your skin / And the wind in your hair...”) before the helmsman and crew take over again. As the helmsman sings “The king of the ocean gets angry / An’ when he gets angry, beware! / I’m tellin’ ya, lad, when King Triton is mad / How the waves’ll buck, rock to and fro! / [with crew] Hold on, good luck, as down you go!,”⁵⁶ Eric hears Ariel’s singing voice off in the distance; the yellow-orange sky immediately becomes a brilliant shade of purple, a hue revealed to relate directly to Ariel later in the show. The sky remains a deep purple for the remainder of the number, a visual manifestation of Eric’s infatuation with the disembodied voice heard on the horizon. This simple effect of using color to signify a character or location is more than an aesthetic choice, it becomes part of the production’s narrative language.

Despite some of the more technically complex moments in the show, a number of the scenes in *The Little Mermaid* are staged very simply, allowing small lighting changes to register with the audience in more profound ways than would be possible during busier numbers. “Part Of Your World” serves as Ariel’s “I Want” number⁵⁷ in Act I and takes place in her grotto where she stores all of the human artifacts she has collected in her scavenging. As the youngest (and favorite) daughter of King Triton, Ariel struggles with establishing her independence at the tender age of sixteen, a feat that is complicated by her overwhelming fascination with all things human, an interest expressly forbidden by her father. In the film, Ariel’s friend, Flounder, and

⁵⁶ “Fathoms Below,” *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, compact disc. Liner notes.

⁵⁷ In musical theater, a character’s “I Want” number serves as a statement of their deepest desires and motivations.

Sebastian, the court composer coerced by Triton to spy on Ariel, watch as she dreams about what life on land must be like (“[where fathers] don’t reprimand their daughters”), wishing she could be “part of [that] world.” She grows increasingly urgent in listing all of the experiences she wants to have (“What’s a fire? And why does it – / What’s the word? / Burn”), and as she does, she swims closer and closer to the top of the grotto, and the ocean’s surface, before enquiring, “When’s it my turn? / Wouldn’t I love, / love to explore that shore up above?” On “above,” however, it becomes painfully clear that she cannot reach the ocean’s surface through the small opening of the grotto; the restrictive grotto becomes a physical representation of how trapped she feels in her life, and particularly by her body.⁵⁸ Unable to “free” herself, she slowly sinks to the sea floor (“Out of the sea / Wish I could be / Part of that world”), doleful while staring longingly at the sun’s rays filtering in through the water.⁵⁹



Figure 2.7: Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989).

Onstage, Tsypin’s design does not attempt to recreate the vault-like grotto as in the movie and is instead quite minimal. The lighting throughout the number cues the moments when Ariel feels trapped and hopeless about her situation. The dramatic structure of the number remains

⁵⁸ Some have recently argued that the story of the Little Mermaid can be viewed through the lens of transgender criticism as a story of performing transgender identity. See Leland G. Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity in *The Little Mermaid*: From Andersen to Disney,” *Communication Studies* 65, no. 1 (Jan-March 2014): 112-127.

⁵⁹ “Part of Your World,” *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, compact disc. Liner notes.

identical to the film, although neither Flounder nor Sebastian watch Ariel's private musings this time around. The number is simply staged, despite extensive "swimming" choreography used to give the illusion of underwater movement. Blue tones saturate the stage while Ariel and her grotto area are lit with soft pink tones that intimate her hopefulness of reaching land someday (the color also anticipates the pink dress she will wear in Act II). The lighting remains relatively static throughout the number; however, an important lighting shift takes place during the phrase "explore that shore up above," the same moment where Ariel is unable to escape the grotto in the film. The pink lighting on Ariel fades to a pure white light (perhaps like the sunlight as it is filtered by the ocean's surface?) before the spotlight takes on a bluish hue with the phrase "out of the sea," emphasizing the reality that she remains very much under the sea, despite her dreaming and exploring. Her moment of dejection, however, is relatively fleeting, and as she concludes the number, pink tones once again light Ariel on "world," making it clear that she remains hopeful despite her current situation. The effect of the lighting sequence is subtle, but points to how lighting design can be used to express both the obvious and the finer points of musical theater narrative.

Much like the stage versions of *Tarzan* and *Mary Poppins*, *The Little Mermaid* has its share of overtly cinematic moments. On a practical level, the storytelling is mostly seamless visually, with very few blackouts interrupting the onstage action; Tsypin's dual-use set means that the audience watches many scene transitions occur right before their eyes. Two sequences in the show stand out as particularly memorable in terms of their stagecraft, however: Prince Eric's shipwreck (and his rescue by Ariel) and Ariel's initial transformation from mermaid to human at the end of Act I. Both moments are accomplished using similar technology, so I will focus briefly on the latter effect.

Ariel's physical transformation from mermaid to human takes place after she signs a contract with her aunt (and resident sea witch), Ursula ("Poor Unfortunate Souls"). The contract provides her (Ariel) with a human body so she can meet Prince Eric and have him fall in love with her before he marries someone else. The cost? Her voice. Ariel is in Ursula's lair throughout this exchange and the lighting is murky and dark, with some additional lighting provided by green gobos and a circular upstage center unit (modeled after Ursula's viewing portal from the film). After Ariel transfers her voice to Ursula for "safe keeping," the circular unit begins to glow with the same pink tones associated with Ariel's hopeful state. She takes her place within the unit, at which point a circular scrim encloses the unit. The unit's back lighting fades, hiding Ariel from view and creating a silhouette effect. Ursula, Flotsam, and Jetsam remain downstage, still illuminated by green lighting as the dark upstage scrim flies out, revealing vibrant purple lighting the upstage backdrop. The circular unit remains in darkness as Ariel emerges, "swimming" and flailing in a desperate attempt to swim to the water's surface, her tail slowly falling away from her as she makes her way to the surface. Ursula and the eels make their way offstage as they watch her struggle. No spotlight or front lighting is used to illuminate Ariel and she remains silhouetted against the backdrop.⁶⁰

As she finally sheds her tail and continues to swim upward, the purple lighting suddenly transforms into the orange and yellow tones associated with land. A thin scrim then comes down as Ariel reaches the top of the proscenium, simulating her reaching the water's surface. The lights come down into a short blackout, which allows the sun-like chandelier piece to move into

⁶⁰ The effect of the silhouette is not only visually striking but also practical. A body double is used for the "flying" Ariel who is flailing around on fly wires; the main Ariel actress remains earth-bound (via trap doors) and does a quick change to remove her tail before taking her place for the final reveal prior to the Act I curtain.

place before the lights come up to reveal the shoreline. The sun piece glitters slightly in the daylight lighting scheme of the sky, which consists of shades of blue that fade to yellow near the horizon. Suddenly Ariel bursts forth from the water, unsteady on her feet, but standing nonetheless. And almost as soon as she stands, the curtain comes down to end Act I.

It takes a moment to process everything that we just witnessed. The transformation of sea into land and Ariel from mermaid to human is staggering not only for its swiftness but because staging such an effect even ten years earlier would have required considerable effort to pull off consistently. While the Beast's human-to-beast and beast-to-human transformation at the start and end of *Beauty and the Beast* incorporates similar stage effects for the actual costume change, the crew was not also executing a technologically complicated set change in full view of the audience concurrent with the Beast's transformation. With *The Little Mermaid*, we not only have a full set change, but also a costume change, a lighting change for two different lighting plots, and a quick actress switch all accomplished without a single blackout.

As with *Tarzan*, scenography in *The Little Mermaid* represented a continuation of the technological advancements offered in Disney's stage musicals, particularly in making lighting and automation increasingly unobtrusive to the live theatrical experience. The style developed for *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid* – that of the vibrant light and set design combined with continuous narrative flow (i.e., no blackouts) – set an increasingly high standard for scenography in big budget stage shows in the post-millennium (*Spamalot*, *Shrek* [2008], *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* [2011], among others). Although Disney's next show, *Newsies*, departed from its predecessors in several ways, we would see the vibrancy of design elements return with *Aladdin* in just a few short years.

“Watch what happens”⁶¹: *Newsies* arrives on Broadway

Uniquely among Disney’s Broadway offerings, *Newsies* was a show that was mobilized in part by its strong fan base of twenty- and thirty-somethings (and subsequent younger generations). The stage musical was adapted from the ill-fated 1992 Disney motion picture of the same name, which presents a musicalized dramatization of the news boys strike in New York City in 1899 when the “newsies” rebelled against price hikes at the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*; Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst finally gave in to the news boys’ demands after roughly two weeks, a victory which had enormous ramifications for child labor laws at newspaper agencies at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶²

The film was a flop. A *huge* flop. *Newsies* failed to impress movie critics and had such poor box-office returns that Disney pulled the film from theaters after a few weeks. The film’s box-office failure was made worse by virtue of the fact that Disney’s animation department was in the midst of a rejuvenation thanks to the incredible success of *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*. And so, as the story goes, *Newsies* was moved quickly to home video and syndication on Disney’s new cable channel, The Disney Channel. In tracing the film’s eventual rise to cult fame, many of those involved with *Newsies* observed that its survival owed much to movie rentals and the early days of The Disney Channel, where limited programming

⁶¹ “Watch What Happens,” Alan Menken and Jack Feldman, *Newsies: The Musical*, Ghostlight Records, 2012, compact disc. Liner notes.

⁶² See David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work & At Play* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985).

meant continuous play for *Newsies*.⁶³ Slowly, the film gained traction with pre-teens and teenagers, and a cult classic was born.

The immense popularity of *Newsies* among the younger generation is in part what encouraged DTG to develop a stage adaptation of the film. In the “making of” book, the show’s creative team noted the consistent demand for a stage adaptation of *Newsies* from community and school theaters. The team assembled to adapt the film for the stage included: Harvey Fierstein, who wrote the show’s book; Alan Menken and Jack Feldman, who wrote additional musical material and revised their earlier material from the film; Tobin Ost, who designed the set; Sven Otel, who designed the projections used in the show; Jeff Croiter, lighting designer; and Jeff Calhoun, who directed the production. *Newsies* originally premiered at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey as an out-of-town tryout and opened September 25, 2011. Relatively positive critical and audience reception led DTG to move the show to Broadway, where it opened as a limited-run production on March 15, 2012; soon after the production opened, the run was extended indefinitely (it closed August 24, 2014).

After the box-office duds that were *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*, critics seemed to welcome *Newsies* to Broadway with open arms. Perhaps “with open arms” might be an exaggeration—it was a Disney production, after all—but critical reception of the production ranged from lukewarm to cautiously optimistic, though even favorable reviews could not avoid taking a jab at Disney: “Stop the presses! Disney has produced a winning, high-energy musical for family audiences that doesn’t include a single flying witch, talking animal, or dancing teacup.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Bob Tzudiker, “The Rapid Evolution of History into Musical,” in *Newsies: Stories of the Unlikely Broadway Hit*, ed. Ken Cerniglia (New York: Disney Editions, 2013), 29.

⁶⁴ Thom Geier, “Newsies,” *Entertainment Weekly*, March 29, 2012.

Many reviewers remarked on the generational divide in the audience, audiences which were often populated with nostalgic “Fansies” (clad in newsboy caps, according to some observers) who tended to stop the show with extended cheers and applause for their favorite numbers.⁶⁵ Some critics had mixed feelings about the show’s high-octane choreography and extended dance sequences, which have since become iconic to the show, as immortalized by the show’s marketing materials.

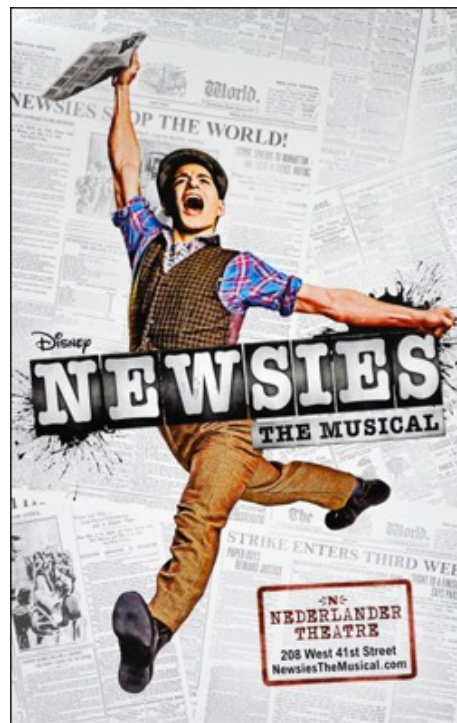


Figure 2.8: *Newsies* window card.

Ben Brantley, after commenting that the actors “look a wee bit old to qualify as bona fide [street] urchins,” goes on to say, “But that doesn’t stop [the cast] from burning energy like toddlers on a

⁶⁵ Describing the audience’s enthusiastic (and nostalgia-driven) response to the show, Chris Jones sourly remarks, “The crowd, the mostly young crowd, is certainly not reacting to an especially artful or innovative move-to-stage adaptation.” Jones, “Audience subscribes to *Newsies* charms,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 29, 2012.

sugar high at a birthday party... There are back flips, cartwheels, somersaults and kick lines galore, not to mention enough pirouettes to fill a whole season of *Swan Lake*.”⁶⁶

Even if critics did not whole-heartedly adore *Newsies*, it was clear that the final product presented nightly at the Nederlander Theatre was successful in ways that *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid* were not. Adapting *Newsies* for the stage provided fewer logistical problems than some of Disney’s other Broadway shows, the most obvious being the relative “ease” of translating a live-action film to the stage when compared to adapting animated properties. Much of the film’s script remained intact, although Jack’s backstory and motivation was expanded (he is a promising visual artist in the stage version) and the script was reworked by Fierstein to include a more prominent female lead (and Jack’s eventual love interest), Katherine Plumber (later revealed to be Pulitzer’s daughter), a burgeoning journalist eager to land her first big story (she replaces the male journalist, Bryan Denton, from the movie). The show’s score boasts several rousing anthems from the original film (“Carrying The Banner,” “The World Will Know,” “Seize The Day,” “King of New York,” and “Once And For All”) and includes a few additional numbers written by Menken and Feldman to accommodate the revised script: “That’s Rich” (for nightclub owner and performer Medda Larkin), “The Bottom Line” (Pulitzer’s mustache-twirling number about price hikes for the newsies), “Watch What Happens” (Katherine’s “writer’s block”/“I Am” number),⁶⁷ and “Something To Believe In” (Jack and Katherine’s love duet in Act II).

⁶⁶ Brantley, “Urchins With Punctuation,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2012.

⁶⁷ Like an “I Want” number, a character’s “I Am” number is typically one of the first musical numbers a lead character sings in a musical. It often outlines the character’s personality, their beliefs, and/or how they view themselves in the world.

Newsies is heavily populated with musical numbers designed to unite and inspire the disenfranchised youths in times of need. The inspirational quality of the historically based story and the show's music extends into the world of younger generations at the turn of the twenty-first century; as described by Stephanie Mendoza in the *Newsies* Broadway book: "*Newsies* is remarkable because it is a story about underdogs. It's a story about people, young adults, who find themselves in a world that doesn't believe they matter. Everybody in the audience has had a moment when they feel like they don't matter. The newsies remind us that we, as individual people, can make a difference. It is a story about us."⁶⁸

At its core, *Newsies* is very much a book show whose traditional roots are emphasized by the show's use of extended dance sequences. Similar to the ways in which dance is employed in *Mary Poppins*, dance in *Newsies* is about the spectacle of human physical ability. The choreography used in *Newsies* emphasizes the open physicality of dance, rather than the finessed skill embodied by classical ballet. Aggressive stomping, clenched fists, and acrobatic leaps characterize the dance style of *Newsies*, a choreographic language that could be read as being more relatable to audience members untrained in dance than more balletic steps might be. The show's emphasis on approachable, "street-smart" choreography combined with vocal writing focused on unison singing reinforces the show's message of perseverance in the face of uncertainty and the importance of community.

The show's message may speak to a broad audience base and come in a traditional book musical package, but the generational resonance the film had with children growing up in the 1990s remains inextricable from the fabric of *Newsies*, which makes the more "grown-up" look of the show all the more appropriate. Unlike earlier DTG offerings, *Newsies* is in an aesthetic

⁶⁸ Quoted in Cerniglia, *Newsies*, 48.

world of its own, with its lighting and set design substantially removed from the Technicolor-infused worlds inhabited by Belle, Simba, Tarzan, and Ariel. Instead of using vibrant colors and elaborate sets, *Newsies* employs a minimalist set and muted lighting design to capture the gritty reality of the newboys' lives. The set is structurally inspired by the architecture of New York City fire escapes and the metal work is incorporated into almost every element of the set; the result is a set that is as expansive as it is menacing.

Tobin Ost's set design for *Newsies* is relatively simple, with a few central structural elements that are reconfigured throughout the show. The main portion of the set features three large towers, each of which stands twenty-four feet tall with three fully-functional levels accessible by stairs that run between each story. The towers move independently with the help of automation and track in a variety of directions onstage throughout the show; additionally, they can be configured to move together as one unit or as individual pieces. Lights integrated into the steel structure of each tower allows for subtle uplighting when needed. While the show's lighting design is not entirely devoid of color, pale washes dominate the visual aesthetic; vibrant reds, blues, and purples are reserved for moments of particular emotional turbulence ("Santa Fe") or romance ("Something To Believe In").

Smaller mobile set elements also incorporate the towers' triangular truss pattern into their structures, including units that serve as the gates to *The World* distribution dock and seating for Medda Larkin's nightclub. Auxiliary props and set pieces, such as wood chairs and tables, are moved on and off the stage by cast members and are the only set materials that suggest any sort of realism. The juxtaposition of the steelwork design of the set with the wooden prop elements creates the sense that the newsies never quite escape (or want to escape) the harsh reality of their

life on the streets; Pulitzer's cushy office is the only location in the show with a set design that is almost entirely devoid of the trusswork, instead favoring ornate wood and velvet furniture.⁶⁹

Another way in which *Newsies* inhabits a new type of visual dramatic space from earlier Disney shows is the way in which projection mapping is incorporated into the set design. Projection mapping is not an entirely new form of stage technology, as its usage extends back to the 1960s, but advances in the technology required for mapping, in addition to the desire for lower production costs via more economical set designs, led to the proliferation of projection mapping and projection designers on Broadway in the new millennium. The mapping used in *Newsies* was not the first time a Disney Broadway show used projections as part of its visual design; *Tarzan*'s set and lighting designs were actually supplemented with subtle projections throughout the show, most noticeably for the teaching montage, "Strangers Like Me," where the projected images "originate" from an onstage projector. While each production uses projections and projection mapping, they are employed for very different effects. In *Tarzan*, projections were meant to complement Katz's lighting design. With *Newsies*, the projections take on a much more active function in the show, not only becoming a dynamic backdrop transforming with each scene change, but also participating directly in what is happening in front of them (e.g., as Katharine works on her article, her drafts appear on the screen behind her while she types; when the newsies print and distribute their "Newsies Banner," it appears in full on the towers [see fig. 2.9]).

⁶⁹ The background image of Pulitzer's office windows is projected onto two of the large towers, but the lighting design deemphasizes the trusswork by keeping it in shadow. The lights instead draw focus to the luxurious wood and velvet furniture of the office, creating an interesting contrast between Pulitzer's world and that of the newsies.



Figure 2.9: Towers with Newsies Banner projection. Photo by Deen van Meer.

The projections are projected onto square scrim that can be raised or lowered on every level of the mobile towers; the scrim are independent of one another, allowing any tower, or portion of a tower, to function as a backdrop as needed. Having individually controlled scrim provides a modularity to a set that otherwise lacks some significant flexibility, as the three towers do not (and cannot) move offstage at any point during the show. The towers are instead continuously reconfigured in order accommodate the scrim space needed for each scene change. If we consider each scrim to be a square on a grid, the projection for Pulitzer's office, for example, requires a 2x2 grid, whereas the side of *The World* distribution dock uses a vertical 1x3 grid.



Figure 2.10: Pulitzer's office.



Figure 2.11: *The World* distribution dock.⁷⁰

Six thinner rectangular panels situated along the wings supplement the projections on the tower units at various points throughout the show, with three panels hanging on either side of the stage to help mask the upper levels of the legs⁷¹ in addition to providing filler projections of generic newspaper print that complete the overall look of a given scene.

The scrims that double as a screen for the audience are particularly effective in the number “Watch What Happens,” where Katherine Plummer struggles to write her report on the newsies strike. The staging is simple, featuring Katherine center stage seated at her desk in front of a typewriter with one of the towers situated directly upstage of her, its scrims lowered. Throughout the number, she makes several attempts to talk through the writing points that have her stuck; the result is a stream-of-consciousness number cleverly packaged in verse-chorus form. As she works through awkward syntax (and her perceived inadequacy as a reporter), Katherine continually moves, pacing between her desk and the surrounding area of her work space. A follow-spot illuminates her against an otherwise dark background, her onstage isolation suggestive of the mental (and sometimes physical) isolation experienced by many writers as they tackle important projects.

⁷⁰ Sven Ortel, “Newsies!,” Sven Ortel Video & Production Designer, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://www.svenortel.com/index.php?mode=projects&id=22>.

⁷¹ “Legs” are the curtains which help block the wings from the audience’s sight.

What is compelling about the number is the way in which the projection design takes on an active role in this number in “accompanying” Katherine’s writing process. Each time she sits down to write something at the typewriter, the words she types appear on the scrim as well, allowing the audience to watch the writing process happen onstage in “real time.” While the number’s staging and projection and lighting designs are relatively simple, the scene’s dramatic success speaks to Disney’s continual development of how they treat the cinematic onstage.

Postlude: Disney and Sound Design in the Post-Millennium

Although much of the way Disney Theatrical’s shows evoke the cinematic is through the visual realm, they often also involve new advances in sound design, as well. Following a brief history of sound design on Broadway, I will look at the sound design in *Aladdin* to consider how sophisticated sound technology has enhanced, aurally, the experience of the cinematic in Broadway houses.

Amplification on Broadway during and after the “Golden Age”

Sound amplification (also termed “reinforcement”⁷²) has been in use on Broadway in some form since at least the 1940s. Early approaches to amplification involved mic’ing the stage

⁷² Amplification is called “reinforcement” by some designers and journalists in contemporary newspaper articles. See “Amplification Comes to Legit,” *The Billboard*, May 20, 1944, 24-25, and Robert J. Landry, “Call It ‘Reinforcement of Voice,’” *Daily Variety*, December 28, 1960, 49. Current technical textbooks also describe amplification as sound reinforcement, which define it as “[t]he electronic amplification of actors or musical instruments onstage. Typically used to do the following: (1) Help the audience hear the actors. (2) Blend and balance the vocals and the musical instruments in a musical theatre production. (3) Add an effect or change the quality of a voice.” R. Craig Wolf and Dick Block, *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*, 10th edition (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2013), 570.

space via foot mics⁷³ to capture any sound produced onstage, but, as with most early technologies, the initial process yielded mixed results in terms of desirable volume levels and sound balance.⁷⁴ Foot mics required performers to ensure they directed their voices toward the microphones, a technical requirement that restricted blocking and choreography. By the 1960s and 1970s, performers on Broadway either used wired mics (as in *Hair* [1968] and *Jesus Christ Superstar* [1971]) or primitive wireless body mics (*Funny Girl* [1964]). The growing prevalence of rock musicals and orchestras with electronic instruments in the 1970s and later decades, combined with the need for (noisy!) electronic stage and light automation,⁷⁵ meant that amplification had had to become an integral tool for production teams on Broadway.

Mic'ing performers brought about two fundamental changes to the "sound" of Broadway, the full effects of which are heard today. The first major change amplification brought to Broadway was an expansion of the kinds of voices that could now be (literally) heard on a Broadway stage for the first time. Prior to the rise of amplification on Broadway, most performers were of necessity either beltors (e.g., Ethel Merman and Mary Martin) or classically trained (e.g., Julie Andrews), in order for their voices to carry over the orchestra and project to the back of the house. Amplification, however, meant that a variety of voice types, from crooners

⁷³ Regarding the volume level in *Let Freedom Sing* (1942) the reviewer remarked, "[The amplification system used was so loud everybody seemed to shout for the first half hour or so." "Plays on Broadway – Let Freedom Sing," *Daily Variety*, October 7, 1942, 82.

⁷⁴ Landry, "Call It 'Reinforcement of Voice.'"

⁷⁵ Noisy lighting rigs featuring color scrollers (a mechanism that allows for quick color changes by scrolling to a different colored gel) and other automated lighting units create a basic decibel level that sound designers have to compensate for with amplification. As sound designer T. Richard Fitzgerald put it, "If you didn't turn up the volume, it would sound like a subway was running inside the theater." Quoted in Lawrence O'Toole, "Music Theater is Discovering a New Voice," *The New York Times*, January 22, 1995.

to rock n' rollers, could easily be heard over even the noisiest of orchestras. As a result, new musical styles and vocal performances became possible on Broadway.

The second major change amplification generated on Broadway was the fundamental alteration of how live sound is experienced in the theater. In a house with non-amplified performers, sound emanates specifically from the performers onstage, meaning the audience's experience of the sound differs depending on where they are seated. The directionality of the natural sound coming from onstage has implications for blocking, since facing the audience is an imperative. For opera singers, for example, blocking typically involves facing downstage and "cheating out" to the audience (i.e., they stand in a manner unnatural for a given situation) in order to project clearly to the back of the house; if soloists were to face upstage or move promiscuously about the stage, their sound/volume would change unpredictably.

The directionality of a performer's sound, however, is all but erased when using amplification. When everyone is mic'd, the audience's experience of the sound coming from the performers is not dependent upon the performer's physical location onstage. The actors could be offstage, facing upstage, moving around the stage, in the back of the house, or really anywhere in range of the radio transmitters, and still be heard as loud and clear as if they were standing downstage center facing the audience. So, while the use of amplification is necessary to make certain genres of music and performance styles possible in Broadway houses, it also erases the very element that characterizes unamplified performance.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ For an argument against amplification, see Harold C. Schonberg's lament and dissection of the fully-electrified 1980-1981 Broadway season, "The Surrender of Broadway to Amplified Sound," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1981, D1. For an argument in favor of amplification, see John Sibley, "Hooray for Amplification: An Opinionated Diatribe on Augmentation as Advancement to the Art of Musical Theatre," *Entertainment Design – The Art and Technology of Show Business* 37, no. 8 (September 2003): 28.

The continued evolution and advancement of sound technology used in theaters has made it increasingly possible for sound designers to create more “realistic” soundscapes that better replicate the experience of unamplified sound in Broadway houses. As mentioned above, a basic sound system might have the ability to amplify the actors’ voices and the instruments, but it will not adjust levels in real time to create the illusion of a non-amplified space. In order to achieve the faux-natural sound that travels as an actor moves about the stage, sound designers rely on the Haas Effect to inform how they place speakers and adjust signal delays to the speakers in the house.⁷⁷ Increasingly fast computer processing speeds are in part what have made more nuanced sound design possible, not to mention the financial resources of a creative team to purchase and install such a sound system.

“A whole new (audio) world”: Sound design in Aladdin

Among the post-millennial Disney shows on Broadway, *Aladdin* is the show that benefited most from contemporary advances in sound design not only as a technical tool but as a creative field as well. In part this benefit comes from timing. As the computing power of mixing boards increases (while the cost of the boards continues to decrease), more complicated sound designs are increasingly more feasible. This, of course, does not mean that the cost for sound systems with all the bells and whistles is chump change. Indeed, *Aladdin*’s sound designer Ken Travis admits that Disney dedicated a fair amount of their budget to the sound system, in part because of the dramatic and technical flexibility desired for the show.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Wolf and Block, *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*, 570.

⁷⁸ Alan Hardiman, “A Whole New Audio World: Sound Design for Disney’s *Aladdin*,” *Lighting & Sound America*, August 2014, 66.

The sound system installed in the New Amsterdam Theatre allowed for Travis to create a multi-level sound design where almost every single seat in the house has the same aural experience as all the other seats. Not only does this design scheme require a more extensive speaker system with redundant speakers situated higher and higher in the house to accommodate both the mezzanine and balcony sections (compared to sets of stacks situated along the proscenium only), but the computing power to process and relay the signal to each of the different speaker sections in perfect synchronization. Yet another layer afforded the already sprawling sound system is the real time tracking of each of the performers using radar tags which allows the PoE (Power over Ethernet) sensors of the TiMax Tracker system to track the actors in a three-dimensional space (see fig. 2.12).⁷⁹

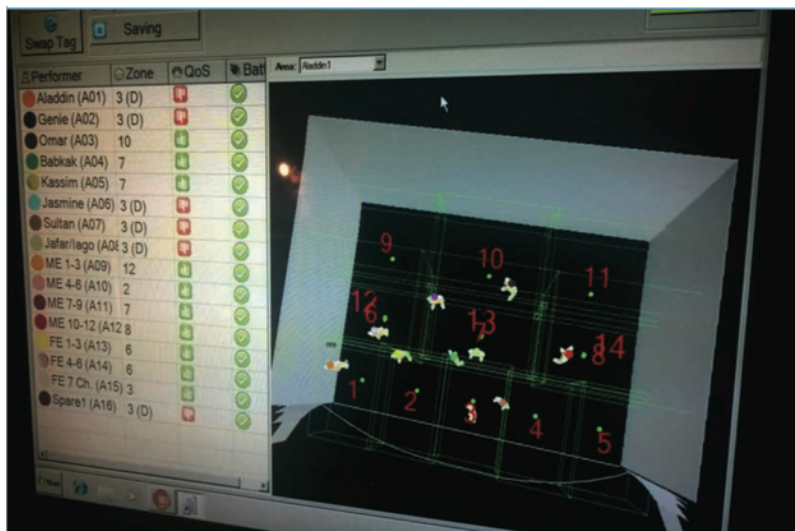


Figure 2.12: View of stage zones with *Aladdin* cast members.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Hardiman, 68. Back in 1995 sound designer Tony Meola imagined that “[o]ne day we’ll be able to tell a computer to make a voice a certain number of decibels. It will revolutionize sound and take it out of the operator’s hands. Mikes will get even smaller.” The TiMax Tracker system accomplishes just that and more. Meola quoted in O’Toole, “Music Theater is Discovering a New Voice.”

⁸⁰ Hardiman, 70.

This tracking technology is the key information the sound board needs to constantly adjust the decibel levels and sound panning of the actor's voices throughout the sound system. The ability to have such granular manipulation of the performers' voices is astounding, although I wonder if its subtlety often goes unnoticed by audiences already so attuned to the aesthetic of perfectly mixed films and music albums.⁸¹

An interesting consequence of these more elaborate sound systems is that more and more amplification technology is dedicated to providing the illusion of a non-amplified performance within a cinematic soundscape. The shift in attitude of the function of amplification, from a technical tool to an aesthetic tool, is even present in technical textbooks where amplification is described as "reinforcement." More interesting is the desire to conceal performers' microphones as much as possible, often wiring wigs and hats. In *Aladdin*, for example, the Genie's mic is hidden in his goatee piece, as the character is bald in the show and any head-mounted mic would leave a visible wire (see fig. 2.13 below for a comparison of less concealed wiring with that of the Genie).



Figure 2.13: Left, example of visible forehead mic (Instagram of Rebel Wilson in *Guys and Dolls* [2016]); right, example of hidden mic (James Monroe Iglehart as the Genie in *Aladdin*. Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.)

⁸¹ Thus, as Wolf and Block observe, "[T]heater audiences have become so used to amplification that they have come to expect it in all but the most intimate venues." (570).

Travis explains that most of the cast has microphones embedded in costume pieces to accommodate quick costume changes.⁸² Going to such incredible lengths to disguise the use of radio mics maintains the illusion of a non-amplified performance, supporting the notion that sound design is increasingly about providing naturalized amplification. Such control over the sound system has generated a substantial shift in the aural aesthetic of Broadway in the post-millennium. Just as the introduction of rock music and amplification to Broadway in the 1970s was a watershed moment that permanently altered the soundscape of musical theater, so, too, have new developments in sound design shifted the aural experience even more.

...

The impact of technology on Broadway cannot be overstated. Changes in stage machinery, lighting mechanism, rigging, and sound design, to name a few, markedly effect the kinds of shows that can be produced onstage. A steady stream of new technologies in turn provide creative teams with a greater range of tools to draw upon in bringing stories to life onstage.

Certainly, Disney uses technology to great effect in translating their filmed properties to the stage; the scope of their stage musicals demonstrates the range of scenographic possibilities afforded by recent technological developments.⁸³ Although radio and film's influence on live

⁸² Michael S. Eddy, "Magic Carpet Ride: Disney's *Aladdin* Takes Off on Broadway," *Live Design*, May 2014, 17.

⁸³ That the Disney company views technology as an integral part of their creative process is made clear in the following company statement: "At Disney, we're storytellers. We make the impossible, possible. We do this through utilizing and developing cutting-edge technology and pushing the envelope to bring stories to life[.]" "Job overview description," Disney Careers, accessed February 19, 2016 (page removed).

theatergoing has a long history,⁸⁴ Disney's oeuvre represents the newest generation of cinematic musical theater, particularly with regard to the integration of dramatic action with technology to present the story rather than relying solely on technology to sell tickets. While many discussions about the value of Disney Theatrical's stage productions focus on their commercial impact, a scenographic analysis of their creative output reveals the impact the company's technological developments have had on the physical and dramatic construction of Broadway shows – both large and small – in the new millennium.

⁸⁴ See Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development and Transformation of Scenography*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Ross Brown, *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Millie Taylor, "Experiencing Live Musical Theatre Performance: *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*," in *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), chap. 7.

Chapter Three:

“Where did we go right?”¹: The reemergence of mainstream camp on Broadway

While Disney was busy enchanting families with swimming mermaids and flying magic carpets, a new subgenre of book musical was forming in the post-millennium. These musicals, which include, among others, *The Producers* (2001), *Spamalot* (2005), *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006), and *The Book of Mormon* (2011), drew on both cult camp classics and popular culture for their content and presented the finished product in a flashy, campy, book musical package. Most of the productions were blockbuster hits, and theater pundits, much to their chagrin, noted the uptick in star-studded casts and Hollywood-based creative teams. The impact of these shows on Broadway went far beyond commercial success – they were also responsible for bringing camp back to Broadway’s mainstream audience.

In this chapter I will look at how mainstream camp resurfaced in post-millennium musicals, offering close readings of *The Producers*, *Spamalot*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, and *The Book of Mormon*. Tracing the use of camp in each production will provide useful information regarding how creative teams approached the development process, how they viewed/anticipated their intended audience(s), and, most important, how mainstream camp has transformed in the last fifteen years.²

¹ Mel Brooks and Tom Meehan, *The Producers: The Book, Lyrics, and Story behind the Biggest Hit in Broadway History!* (Roundtable Press: New York, 2001), 193.

² Raymond Knapp also describes this type of camp as “straight camp,” which refers to “the early years of mainstreamed camp following [Susan] Sontag’s ‘Notes [on Camp]’...” Knapp, “The Straight Bookends to Camp’s Gay Golden Age: From Gilbert and Sullivan to Roger Vadim and Mel Brooks” (*Music and Camp*. Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis, editors. Wesleyan University Press, expected 2017). I wish to thank Raymond Knapp for allowing me to quote his essay in advance of publication.

“Keep it happy, keep it snappy, keep it gay!”³: Camp enters the mainstream

The trend of creating overtly campy musicals signaled a significant shift in how mainstream audiences were exposed to camp, effectively outing it for those unfamiliar with how camp worked. Historically, camp as a sensibility and mode of cultural engagement was long associated with the gay community; it was a means for homosexual men to safely express themselves and communicate with each other in a social and political environment that was dangerous if they were to be more openly gay.⁴ The significance of camp as a mode of communication was its created sense of duality (sometimes intentional, sometimes not), where an object could be read in multiple ways and still make sense, consequently providing a level of protection for the gay community as the straight community would not get hidden points of reference. As Raymond Knapp discusses in his work on the years that framed camp’s “Golden Age,” elements of camp have long appeared in theatrical productions to various degrees, extending back most recognizably to the late nineteenth century operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan and extending to mainstreamed camp in the 1960s, when the line between spoof and camp became increasingly blurred.⁵ In his work, Knapp draws a careful distinction between how high camp differs from spoof, a category often conflated with camp on the whole. While for both high camp and spoof there exists a certain degree of mockery, he explains that an essential

³ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 128.

⁴ Susan Sontag sets forth the notion of camp as a sensibility in her landmark publication “Notes on Camp” (1964). For additional discussions of camp, see Richard Dyer’s chapter “It’s being so camp as keeps us going,” in *The Culture of Queers* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 49-62, and Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁵ Knapp mentions *Lost in Space*, *Batman*, and *Laugh-In* among others in an extended discussion and analysis of the mainstreaming of camp in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly as found in the work of Roger Vadim and Mel Brooks.

element needed for high camp to work is a level of sincerity, which in turn provides the opportunity for a more multidimensional camping of performance that speaks to a wider range of audience members: “Spoof, like the overtly heterosexual plotting of musicals, tends to face in only one direction, whereas high camp—as any coded language must—tracks several perspectives at once.”⁶

Campy readings of musicals break down a bit with early megamusicals, where camp was not intentionally cultivated by creative teams. As Jessica Sternfeld outlines in the introduction to her book, *The Megamusical*, the epic scope and content of megamusicals predicates a certain degree of gravitas in a show’s production design and performance.⁷ The consequence of performing such sprawling tales is the need for a degree of emotional veracity; otherwise the shows would fail dramatically. For example, the actor playing Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* needs to believe something is at stake, or to project such a belief convincingly; otherwise the character’s story, and the actor’s accompanying sensationalized performance, become unbelievable, even laughable, for the spectator. Likewise, the audience must in turn make a genuine emotional investment in the performance, or many elements of the staging will seem farcical. When the core of the show is a performed sincerity, both in performance and in audience expectation, a show will usually lack moments of intentional camp,⁸ thus preventing

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁸ Frank Wildhorn and Nan Knighton’s pseudo-megamusical, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1997), is an exception to this observation that megamusicals lack intentional camp. The show is a musicalization of the Baroness Orczy’s 1905 novel of the same name and takes place during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. It tells the story of an English aristocrat, Percival Blakeney, and his league of the Scarlet Pimpernel, a group that endeavors to rescue French aristocrats from certain death by guillotine. In order to protect their own identities and those of their families, Percy and his men adopt foppish mannerism and clothing to dispel suspicion of

megamusicals from truly entering the realm of high camp. Certainly this combination, in general terms, might occasion a camp reception; the megamusical's commitment to melodrama, combining intentionality (regarding over-the-top presentational styles) and utmost sincerity, brings them close to Knapp's description of high camp. But high camp reception also entails affection for its aesthetic object, and camp-receptive audiences, on the whole, have tended not to feel the degree of affection toward megamusicals that high camp reception demands.

What changed between the dawn of the megamusical and the post-millennium? Several things, of course; but one of them was a growing cultural movement to re-mainstream camp, which was in full swing by the turn of the twenty-first century. The trappings of spoof were melting away with such self-aware shows as *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present), setting the stage for later television shows such as *South Park* (1997-present), where self-reflexivity and camp became intrinsic aesthetic and dramatic elements of the show's design. With camp as the primary mode of humor established in late twentieth century popular culture, the second wave of mainstream camp experienced a similar reemergence on Broadway in the post-millennium, where creative teams increasingly opened up camp to a larger audience base by directly acknowledging and exposing a show's use of camp. Drawing the audience's attention to a show's campiness allows them to become accustomed to how camp functions, effectively producing a mainstream camp accessible to everyone.

being sympathetic to the French aristocracy by appearing inane and incapable of much more than operating a snuff box. Such characterization requires the show to draw on camp as a dramatic tool, but such moments are very carefully contained within the scenes where Percy (and his followers) must act the fool ("The Creation Of Man," "They Seek Him Here") and nowhere else. The league's "non-effeminized" characterization, however, very much emphasizes their roles as epic (read: heterosexual) heroes ("Into The Fire"). See also Knapp's discussion of the show in *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 190.

Mainstream camp, then, appears on Broadway in primarily two ways: 1) self-reflexive shows and 2) shows that are exaggerated stylistically to signal that they are being “campy.” Shows such as *Urinetown* (2001), *The Musical of Musicals (the Musical!)* (West End, 2006), and *[title of show]* (Broadway, 2008), belong to the first category. These shows poke affectionate fun at musical theater conventions, a tactic that brings uninitiated audience members “in” on the jokes by spelling out why what the show is doing is supposed to be funny, thus making the shows’ camp “visible” to the audience. For example, in *Urinetown*’s first major song, “Too Much Exposition,” we hear the characters openly discuss how having too much exposition so early in the show might ruin the story for the audience. Likewise the opening number of *[title of show]*, a musical about writing a musical, is appropriately titled “Untitled Opening Number,” throughout which the cast narrates what they want their opening number to do and sound like (“A, D, D, D, D, F-sharp, A / Will be the first notes of our show”), doing exactly what they’re narrating (“So we’ll put in a syncopation / And we’ll add a quarter note / And we’ll softly start the coda from a tiny point / And then we’ll get a little louder to further emphasize the point / And then we’ll cross downstage toward you / And now we yell in fortissimo!”). The meta frame of these shows provides the perfect opportunity for the shows’ creators to incorporate obvious campy humor easily.

Belonging to the second category of campy musicals are shows like *Little Shop of Horrors* (Off-Broadway, 1982), *Mamma Mia!* (2001), *Hairspray* (2002), and *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006). Unlike the self-reflexive shows, the success of the second grouping of musicals depends in part on the cultural knowledge base of the given audience in attendance. *Hairspray*, for example, adapts the John Waters’ 1988 cult film classic of the same name set in the infectiously bubble-gum pop world of the 1960s, and explores issues of segregation and

belonging in a world rigidly defined by an American bandstand aesthetic of perfection. The music and lyrics pay campy homage to popular music styles of the 1960s, including choreographed girl group numbers (“Cooties”) and teen idol hits complete with risqué double entendres (“It Takes Two”). Additionally, the role of Edna Turnblad, the mother of protagonist, Tracy, is played in drag, a reference to the original film where Edna is played by the drag performer Divine. How Edna is played onstage allows for a camp reading of the character, as audiences can choose to read Edna as either biologically female or a man in drag.⁹

Most post-millennial shows drawing on mainstream camp, however, fall somewhere on the spectrum between being heavily self-referential and relying on an audience’s cultural knowledge and background for its humor. The combination of different elements from the two campy extremes yields a type of show that uses mainstream camp as its primary comedic device but also infuses the story and design with references certain audience groups would recognize. As a result of this broadening of appeal, in the years following the start of the new millennium, mainstream camp shifts to become less theater-centric and more situated in popular culture.

“The Fuhrer is causing a furor!”: Broadway’s first smash-hit of the 21st century

*It ain't no myst'ry
If it's politics or hist'ry
The thing you gotta know is
Ev'rything is show biz.*

- Roger De Bris, as Adolph Hitler¹⁰

⁹ Drag performers are themselves part of the camp sensibility. Some critics took issue with John Travolta’s portrayal of Edna in the 2007 film and his feminized performance style, arguing that his interpretation removed the campy humor from the role. See David Denby, “Hairspray,” *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2007, 20.

¹⁰ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 184, 178.

By most accounts, *The Producers* should not have succeeded, given the musical's basis in Mel Brooks' 1967 film of the same name. The film involves the mismatched partnership of Max Bialystock, a washed-up Broadway producer,¹¹ and Leo Bloom, a socially anxious accountant, who together develop a scam to profit from a Broadway flop. They find "the worst play ever written,"¹² *Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden*, penned by ex-Nazi Franz Liebkind; they then employ an inept director, Roger De Bris; and finally they hire a drug-dazed actor aptly named L.S.D. (Lorenzo St. DuBois) to play Hitler. Their scheme fails spectacularly when, on opening night, the audience finds L.S.D.'s confused portrayal of Hitler hysterical and the show is dubbed a "satiric masterpiece,"¹³ rather than a flop, landing Max and Leo in prison for fraud. The film was met with mixed reviews when it originally premiered and, despite winning an Academy Award for Best Screenplay, it never found an audience outside its cult fan base.¹⁴

At the suggestion of mogul David Geffen, Brooks set about adapting the film for the stage with the assistance of Thomas Meehan. The stage version of *The Producers* follows the general plot arc of the film version with expanded roles for the film's more minor characters (Ulla, Roger De Bris, Carmen Ghia, especially) and the removal of L.S.D.'s character (De Bris instead steps in at the last moment to play Hitler). Brooks and Meehan wrote all new songs for

¹¹ Some of Bialystock's more notable flops include *Bialy Hoos of '42*, *Funny Boy: A Musical of Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *The Breaking Wind*. Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, inner cover images.

¹² *Ibid.*, 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴ J. Hoberman, "When The Nazis Became Nudniks," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2001.

the show with the exception of “Springtime for Hitler,” which was expanded from the film’s original version.

And so, the Broadway show about two producers mounting a production starring Hitler opened with moderate to rave reviews – most reviewers found the show to be humorous but hardly tasteless – and the show immediately became the must-see hit on Broadway.¹⁵ A day after opening on April 19, 2001, the production broke box office records for selling more than \$3 million dollars’ worth of tickets in one day.¹⁶ The show continued to set records, not only as the first show to sell tickets for \$100 but also as the first show to sell a block of tickets at a substantially higher cost (of \$480 per seat) as an attempt to discourage ticket scalpers.¹⁷ The overwhelming commercial success of the production, even in the months immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, suggested to many that *The Producers*’ darker escapist humor packed into a traditional book show was just what the new millennium needed.

The show became the model for how mainstream camp could work in post-millennial musicals and it capitalized on self-reflexive theatrical humor specifically. Jessica Sternfeld describes the show as a “backstage...mock megamusical,” where it makes “fun of the megamusical’s most controversial and recognizable elements while relying heavily on those same elements...What makes *The Producers* especially important in that regard is that, were we not all so familiar with the conventions of the megamusical, many of the jokes would not be so

¹⁵ Ben Brantley, “A Scam That’ll Knock ‘Em Dead,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2001; Charles Isherwood, “The Producers,” *Variety*, April 19, 2001; Michael Phillips, “Spring(time) Forward,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2001.

¹⁶ Robin Pogrebin, “Ticket Sales for *Producers* Set a Broadway Record,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2001.

¹⁷ Patricia O’Haire and Robert Dominguez, “\$480 Seats Music to Producer’s Ears,” *New York Daily News*, October 27, 2001.

funny.”¹⁸ And it is this awareness of theatrical conventions that takes the sequence “Springtime for Hitler/Heil Myself” from being completely offensive to a satirical field day of musical theater references.¹⁹

In the original film, we watch a horrified audience watching “Springtime for Hitler” as Max and Leo look on gleefully; in the stage production, however, *we* are the ones watching the number. The change in perspective is small, but it makes all the difference. Watching the film audience’s dismayed reactions aligns us with Max and Leo’s perspective and brings us in on the joke, creating the potential for camp readings of the number. Because we can focus our attention toward (and laughter at) the film’s appalled audience, there is potential, however slight, for audiences to willfully ignore the aesthetically complex “Springtime” and direct their energy only toward the filmed audience. When we become the audience watching the number in the theater, however, the dynamic changes. Without anything else to direct our attention towards, we must confront the production number, its content, and any resulting complicated emotional response, directly.

As there is no onscreen audience to mitigate the reception of “Springtime,” the heavy use of theatrical conventions and tropes throughout the number tempers the otherwise offensive premise of the number. “Springtime” is the opening number of the show within the show and it packs quite a punch. Within a few minutes we see everything from a group of German peasants seeking the next great ruler of the nation to a *Cabaret*-inspired Hitler Youth crooning about Germany’s global domination. Throughout the main number women bedecked in Busby

¹⁸ Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 339.

¹⁹ The line “Heil myself” was taken from Mel Brooks’ 1983 film, *To Be or Not to Be*, a remake of Ernst Lubitsch’s 1942 film of the same name, where the line originates.

Berkeley and Ziegfeld *Follies*-inspired costumes parade about the stage, each woman wearing stylized representations of various German symbols, including pretzels, bratwurst, Viking-horned opera divas, and the *Reichsadler* (the Nazi Imperial Eagle). At the Hitler Youth's instruction ("Come on Germans, go into your dance!"²⁰), an ensemble of uniformed storm troopers launches into an elaborate tap sequence. Theatrical references to early musical theater in this sequence are rife, but the number really picks up steam with Hitler's entrance at the end of the tap break. As Ulla breathlessly exclaims, "The Führer is coming, the Führer is coming, the Führer is coming!" a spotlight directs attention to the top of a set of stairs where Roger De Bris, dressed as Hitler, appears via a stage lift, his right arm raised in a *Hitlergruß*.²¹ Compared to the relatively lighthearted campiness in the number just moments before (well, as lighthearted as a stage full of tap dancing storm troopers can be), De Bris' dour face and pose is sobering. The seriousness, however, does not last long: De Bris' rigid stance immediately gives way to an effeminate (and gay-coded) pose with cocked hips, bent knees, arms outstretched with limp wrists, all while he mugs shamelessly at the audience.



Figure 3.1: Hitler's transformation. Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (2005), dir. Susan Stroman.

²⁰ Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

When De Bris launches into “Heil Myself,” Hitler’s big “I Am” number, the entire sequence reads as a love letter to divas of “Golden Age” Broadway and Hollywood, with De Bris’s diva-like characterization of Hitler in particular drawing on the performance styles of Judy Garland (at the Palace) and Ethel Merman (“I’m the German Ethel Merman, / dontcha know!”²²). The number moves between being a peppy dance number, a torch song, and back again, all in the space of a few minutes, and De Bris’s wildly erratic performance is fantastical and entertaining.

The sudden transformation from terrifying dictator to gay diva encapsulates how camp functions in *The Producers*. While the audience as a whole likely understands that De Bris’s Hitler is supposed to be funny because his characterization draws on broad stereotypes generally understood by contemporary audiences, the core of the number’s campy humor thrives on pointed allusions to central figures and performance styles important to the gay and musical theater communities. The tension between more general audience appeal and that to aficionados comes to a head in the final portion of “Springtime,” which begins after Hitler “defeats” various Allied leaders in a tap dance battle. After Hitler’s victories, the drop curtain (made up of the flags of the United States, the USSR, and the United Kingdom) flies out to reveal a line of storm troopers goose-stepping to the beat of the final chorus while a few scantily clad women dance joyously around the formation. An angled mirror in the style of the finale set for *A Chorus Line* (1975) serves as the backdrop. The lighting, which until this point was made up of vibrant pinks and reds and kitsch marquee lights, is stark. Besides the spotlight on Hitler, the only other lighting is a harsh white overhead wash illuminating the storm troopers as they move downstage. Not long after, the line of storm troopers moves to form a swastika center stage and the overhead lighting focuses into a bright circle upon them. The angled mirror allows the audience to better

²² Ibid., 185 and 187.

see the marching formation and, more specifically, what is very obviously a physicalization of the Nazi flag.

While the Busby Berkeley-esque swastika may seem like the highpoint of the number, it is far from it. The final moments of “Springtime” are perhaps best described in the script:

For a big finish, columns on stage swing down to face the audience and fire like cannons; meanwhile, *paratroopers* drop in from above at the very end of the number as a pair of *Afrika Corps Tanks* (actors in papier-mâché constructions, à la *The Lion King*) enter. And, finally, a half-globe of the world comes up from the stage, and *Roger* as Hitler stands on top of it. Meanwhile, *Ulla*, having exited and changed into a tight-fitting silver-lamé Nazi outfit, tap dances about à la Eleanor Powell.²³

By the song’s conclusion, the audience is usually in stitches over the sheer ridiculousness of the spectacle, all of which was very carefully set up in having Roger De Bris step in as Hitler and, unbeknownst to him, doing a terrible job at it. De Bris’s performance and the number’s finale is certainly enough to entertain non-theater fans and expose them to mainstream camp. However, the myriad theatrical references throughout *The Producers*, as exemplified in “Springtime,” makes it clear that the show’s campiness was designed first of all for the avid theater fan.

“The Song That Goes Like This”²⁴: *Spamalot* and the “Straight White Way”

If *The Producers* gave straight audiences a taste of what mainstream camp can be, then *Spamalot*, written by John Du Prez, Eric Idle (of Monty Python), and Neil Innes, was an absolute feast for them. The musical draws most of its dramatic material from the 1975 film, *Monty*

²³ Ibid., 188.

²⁴ Eric Idle and John Du Prez, *Monty Python’s Spamalot* (unpublished director’s script, [2005?]), I-24.

Python and the Holy Grail, a campy sendup of the traditional King Arthur mythology. The film's success as camp stems from Monty Python's dualistic sensibility and self-reflexivity in their humor, which allows the troupe to have its cake of a semi-conventional adventure story and throw it in audiences' faces, too, by camping established dramatic conventions.

When the story was musicalized and brought to Broadway, most of the film's material was preserved, although the story's conclusion was re-written and Sir Galahad's nighttime romp at the Castle Anthrax was excised. The original film, much like *The Producers*, had very little musical material ("Knights of the Round Table"), meaning the majority of the stage production's music was newly composed, with the exception of "Always Look On the Bright Side of Life" from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979). In true Monty Python fashion, the same dualistic sensibility in the troupe's humor, of using convention to camp convention, permeates the musical's book and score. The show thrives on making fun out of musicals in terms of the audience's plot expectations ("You have to find the Grail and end with a wedding!"), how songs work in musicals ("The Song That Goes Like This"), how Broadway as a whole functions ("You Won't Succeed on Broadway if You Don't Have Any Jews"), and the dramatic function of gay coded characters ("His Name is Lancelot").²⁵ One might wonder, then, if all of a show's inner-workings and references are brought to the surface for an entire audience to understand, can such a show still be considered campy? Of course! And *Spamalot* provides the model for shows that preserve the dualistic sensibility of camp while offering those who are presumed to be unfamiliar

²⁵ In his novel, *The World in the Evening*, Charles Isherwood describes what he considers to be the trademark quality of high camp: "High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance." Quoted in Christopher Isherwood, "From *The World in the Evening*," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 51.

with the musical theater genre, specifically young heterosexual men, with a point of access via mainstreamed camp.²⁶

Most critics were mildly amused by *Spamalot*, concluding that the show delivered a fun time without overloading the audience with anything too “heady.” Many reviewers noted that the show appealed to Monty Python fans and musical theater aficionados equally, as Monty Python fans could watch their favorite skits recreated onstage while musical theater fans were given an abundance of musical theater-themed jokes.²⁷ Some critics actually intimated that there were perhaps *too many* jokes made at the expense of the genre. David Rooney for *Variety* wrote, “While the Python pics [films] often stepped outside the narrative to wink at the audience, the show does so more insistently. After both *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and *Spamalot*, which follow the lead of *The Producers* in kicking down the fourth wall with unrelenting frequency, it might be time to call a moratorium on Broadway musicals pastiching themselves with knowing smugness.” Don Shewey found similar parallels to those Rooney did, remarking, “[T]he incessant self-referentialism of *Spamalot* makes it both timely (all the other musicals, like *The Producers* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, are doing it) and redundant. It’s as if the creators

²⁶ Jesse McKinley wrote a feature for *The New York Times* discussing the prevalence of young men in the audience at *Spamalot*. In the article, McKinley suggests that the show’s “nostalgia for adolescent humor” and the Monty Python brand were likely responsible for the uptick in attendance among young men, an audience demographic that is historically absent from most Broadway houses. The insinuation that most of the young men in attendance were likely straight (because young gay men *must* be drawn to the “gay-themed shows” on Broadway that McKinley mentions in passing?) struck a sour note with some readers. See McKinley, “*Spamalot* Discovers the Straight White Way,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2005, and Jordan Schildcrout, “Every Which Way: Letter,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2005.

²⁷ Many critics seemed to take pleasure in listing all of the references they caught, as if proving their critical chops by demonstrating they “got” the jokes. Don Shewey’s list in *The Advocate* is particularly elaborate, if perhaps a bit overreaching with some of the claimed references. See Shewey, “Call it *Spoofalot*,” *The Advocate*, May 10, 2005, 67.

skipped the show and went right to the *Forbidden Broadway* takeoff.”²⁸ Despite the question of whether *Spamalot* is too harsh on musicals, it was clear to all of the reviewers that the show managed to offer something to just about every audience member, even “literal-minded folk,” as Charles McNulty of the *Los Angeles Times* condescendingly suggested.²⁹ While they recognized how the show caters to the mainstream camp aesthetic, the reviewers hint at how the show’s multi-layered quality of humor reaches a larger audience than initially predicted.

Adhering to conventional expectations of the plot

Historically, plots in Broadway musicals revolved around the relationship of the lead (heterosexual) couple. At the risk of oversimplification, in the most basic version of this plot arc a boy and girl meet and fall in love, a conflict threatens to keep the couple apart, the conflict is eventually resolved, and the couple is united by the show’s end, often with an onstage wedding.³⁰ Of course, most plots are more complex than this, the most common addition being some sort of friend figure for either the male or female protagonist. This friend figure, however, is typically

²⁸ Rooney, “A Little Knight Music,” *Variety*, March 21-27, 2005, 22, 35. Shewey, “Call it *Spoofalot*.” *Forbidden Broadway* is a cabaret-revue troupe founded in 1982 that presents short comedic skits and shows incorporating material adapted from shows currently running on Broadway. As the shows typically lampoon various musicals and performers, the troupe’s intended audience is primarily those who are well-versed in current performers, shows, and musical styles and can immediately make the connection between the parody and the source material.

²⁹ McNulty, “Sword and saucery,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 2009.

³⁰ Raymond Knapp calls the expectation of the lead couple’s union the “marriage trope,” wherein the main dramatic conflict of the plot is resolved through the couple’s marriage. The couple stands in for “what the musical...is ‘really’ about” and the marriage becomes a symbol of the dramatic resolution. Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9.

coded as being gay (often as the “ineffective” gay), whose primary role is to serve as the foil that makes it clear which of the leads should end up together.³¹

In *Spamalot*, there is a similar dramatic trajectory to the traditional plotline described above. Despite a fleeting moment in Act I where Sir Galahad is poised to become the main love interest for the Lady of the Lake (they sing the proto-love song, “The Song That Goes Like This”), it is clear by the end of Act II that King Arthur and the Lady of the Lake are the intended lead heterosexual couple. In a slight twist, we also get a second coupling by show’s end, that of Prince Herbert and Sir Lancelot. Accompanying these two marriages are the subsequent marriages of all of the chorus members during the final number so that the show may fulfill the maxim set forth in the script that they must “end with a wedding.”³²

While the show might seem to push the conventional boundaries of Broadway by having a gay couple marry by the end of the show (Lancelot even quips to Herbert: “In a thousand year’s time this will still be controversial!”), if we remove Herbert and Lancelot from the equation, *Spamalot* ultimately fulfills the traditional Broadway plot conventions, albeit the result feels a bit forced. Although King Arthur and the Lady of the Lake end up together, their pairing reads as contrived, given that little dramatic energy is directed toward developing their

³¹ See Knapp’s discussion of the best friend type in his discussion of Cosmo Brown’s character in *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, 76-77.

³² Idle and Du Prez, *Monty Python’s Spamalot*, II-36. Group marriages as a plot device has a long history in musical theater and was common in many of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operettas where the entire cast was paired off and married by the show’s conclusion. In some instances, as with *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878), the couplings make little dramatic sense, though Knapp argues that the nonsensical nature of such pairings are easily reconciled with the “topsy-turvy” nature of the operetta plots. Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, 40.

Ethan Mordden remarks that symmetrical pairings of lead characters in 1920s musicals was still more a matter of convention than true romantic compatibility. Mordden, *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32.

nonsensical relationship as a couple. The only substantial contact they have onstage in Act I occurs in their scattening duet in “The Song That Goes Like This (reprise),” which takes place toward the end of the act. Beyond their brief duet, their primary interaction in Act II occurs late in the act after King Arthur’s lament “I’m All Alone,” at which point the Lady of the Lake declares her love for him. After a pseudo-proposal (transcribed below), the couple parts once more for Arthur to resume his quest. Only after finding the Holy Grail is he able to marry the Lady of the Lake, whose name is conveniently Guinevere, a plot detail that legitimizes their romantic pairing.

Lady of the Lake: Well, you have to finish the show. It is a musical, so you have to find the Grail and end with a wedding.

Arthur: Well, who could I possibly marry?

L: Well let’s see. It’d have to be someone who loved you and cared for you enough to give you a sword, to make you King, to welcome you to Camelot, to help you off on your quest...

(ARTHUR is a little slow off the mark. PATSY whispers in his ear)

A: You?

L: Oh, that’s an idea.

A: But I thought you were a fairy.

L: Oh, no, that’s Lancelot. Oh, you missed that scene. Anyway, Arthur, I am as human as you are.

A: And you would consent to be my bride?

L: Are you asking?

A: Are you saying yes?

L: Oh, Arthur!

*(They embrace. They lean in for a kiss and suddenly turn away to sing “The Song That Goes Like This (reprise)”)*³³

Despite the rather splashy attention *Spamalot* affords the “progressive” Prince Herbert-Sir Lancelot relationship, the show still marginalizes the role of its other gay character: Sir Robin. The show, as in the movie, depicts Sir Robin as the ever-cowardly knight in King Arthur’s band of men. Sir Robin’s chronic gastrointestinal distress in the face of danger

³³ Idle and Du Prez, *Monty Python’s Spamalot*, II-36-37.

combined with his discovered love of musical theater points to his coding as the ineffective gay character. His failure as a traditionally masculine knight is set up from the beginning with the Historian's introduction, announcing Sir Robin as "the Not-quite-so-brave-as-Sir-Lancelot, who slew the vicious Chicken of Bristol and who personally wet himself at the Battle of Badon Hill." It is not until Sir Robin takes the lead with Act II's eleven o'clock number, "You Won't Succeed on Broadway (if You Don't Have any Jews)," that he gains self-confidence; he later declares during the finale that his purpose in life (his "grail") is musical theater, because "You can sing / You can dance / And you won't soil your pants." While the genre of musical theater gave him newfound confidence, the fact remains that Sir Robin, as the coded gay character, must stay unpaired romantically at show's end. As if to further emphasize Sir Robin's gayness, he is instead symbolically "married" to musical theater.

Where camp comes into play with the implementation of conventional dramatic elements, then, is the sense of duality in reading the dramatic text. Certainly on one level, the show provides the opportunity for the relationship between Prince Herbert and Sir Lancelot to reach full fruition onstage with their marriage, which is not seen in the film. Combined with Sir Lancelot's aside to Prince Herbert about the politically controversial nature of gay marriage in the future (which is obviously the present day for the audience), the choice to end the show with the marriage of the straight and gay couples could be read as a more "progressive" statement on the part of the show's creators. On another level, however, one can read *Spamalot* as following the exact trajectory of the genre of which it makes fun. Throughout the show, the dramatic demands of a traditional musical (completing a task, ending with a wedding) are the subject of numerous jokes. In fact, the insistence of several characters that certain elements are necessary in order for the show (*Spamalot*) to be a Broadway show becomes a laughing point. In the Monty

Python universe, however, one cannot simply unite the couple without any fuss – instead, a joke must be made about “this is the way it has to be” in order to legitimize the story’s ending. And the plot of *Spamalot* resolves in such a way that those theatergoers hoping for a traditional Broadway ending do in fact get their happily-ever-after ending after King Arthur and his band of knights successfully find the Holy Grail.³⁴ The jokes may wink at the fact that Broadway shows end in certain ways, but by the end of the show, *Spamalot* fulfills every convention it makes fun of.

Adhering to conventional musical expectations

Spamalot also employs traditional musical conventions for campy effect, which are best realized in the songs, “The Song That Goes Like This” and “You Won’t Succeed on Broadway if You Don’t Have Any Jews.” “The Song That Goes Like This” follows Dennis/Sir Galahad’s conscription into King Arthur’s band of knights and his subsequent transformation from peasant to nobleman. As the song begins, Sir Galahad and the Lady of the Lake stand in a boat reminiscent of the iconic vessel from *The Phantom of the Opera*. As the boat carries them downstage across the foggy “lake,” the Lady of the Lake’s attendants line the stage holding candelabras while a chandelier descends from the ceiling, further emphasizing that this number is in fact making a direct reference to *The Phantom of the Opera* (and, by extension, megamusicals in general). Throughout the song, Sir Galahad and the Lady of the Lake follow blocking that

³⁴ Tales about King Arthur and the realm of Camelot have long been a part of popular culture. Prior to *Spamalot*, King Arthur’s court was the subject of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s 1960 Broadway musical *Camelot*, starring Julie Andrews as Guinevere, Richard Burton as King Arthur, and Robert Goulet as Lancelot.

would be expected from a typical love duet: they embrace, hold hands, and turn to sing to each other in close, “loving” proximity now and again.



Figure 3.2: *Above left*, the Phantom and Christine travel to his lair (photo by Joan Marcus); *above right*, Sir Galahad and the Lady of the Lake journey via boat (photo by Alastair Muir); *bottom*, singing to bring down the chandelier.³⁵

The self-reflexive nature of the lyrics provides the primary comedic material for the song. The lyrics outline how the typical love duet-power ballad functions: “Once, in ev’ry show there

³⁵ *Above left*, Jennifer Hope Wills and Howard McGillin in Broadway production of *The Phantom of the Opera*; *above right*, Christopher Sieber and Hanna Waddingham in London production of *Spamalot*; *bottom*, national tour of *Spamalot*, <http://carolinebowman.net/gallery/spamalot/>.

comes a song like this. / It starts off soft and low, and ends up with a kiss.”³⁶ As the song continues, the lyrics comment on duet staging conventions while the Lady of the Lake sings, “I’ll sing it in your face, / while we both embrace.” The song churns along through key change after key change, the sung lyrics allude to how endless key changes seem to drag the song on ad nauseam (“Now we’re into E. / That’s awfully high for me. / But ev’ryone can see / we should have stayed in D”); later, “I can’t believe there’s more. It’s far too long, I’m sure.”)³⁷

Using lyrics that spell out the perceived aesthetic failures of the Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical model brings uninitiated theatergoers in on the joke about why having love duets in the style are, perhaps, goofy. The lyrics make it acceptable, even encouraged, for the audience to laugh at how overwrought and melodramatic the song form can be. Spoken asides from Sir Galahad and the Lady of the Lake throughout the song signal the characters’ own growing annoyance with having to sustain the emotional artifice required by the never-ending number. Each of these elements contributes to the mainstream, “obvious” camp sensibility running throughout the show.

However, “The Song That Goes Like This” also provides musical theater insiders with a more nuanced camping of the Andrew Lloyd-Webber model. The joke is not that Lloyd-Webber power duets are ridiculous and overwrought; instead, the joke becomes that in order for *Spamalot* to succeed as a traditional Broadway show, the writers still had to provide the audience

³⁶ Eric Idle and John Du Prez, *Monty Python’s Spamalot* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corp., 2005), 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27, 29.

with an overwrought love ballad.³⁸ Idle and Du Prez capitalize on the necessity of including a love song by mocking megamusical song conventions at the same time.

Musically, the number follows a basic 32-bar form of AABA with continued reiterations of the A section accompanied by a subsequent key change through the end of the song. Both the A and B sections are the conventional eight measures long. Many megamusical duets use an expanded version of this form to allow for longer melodic phrases, but Idle and Du Prez's decision to keep the song's main melody to eight measures means that the melody becomes repetitive (read: annoying) that much faster. In addition to the relatively short main melodic phrase (by megamusical standards), once Sir Galahad and the Lady of the Lake have each sung the melody, they begin to alternate singing portions of the melody with increased frequency until they sing only a measure of the melody at a time (see figs. 3.3-3.5).³⁹

³⁸ Knapp suggests that the appearance of “Unworthy of Your Love” in Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman’s *Assassins* (1991) is driven by the same dramatic need to include a love duet number in the show, despite the material’s resistance to a traditional love duet. See Knapp, *National Identity*, 171.

³⁹ The technique of completely stating the melody before developing it is not new, as the “trading off” of the melody between the singers is used frequently in many megamusical love duets, which in turn contributes to the emotional build-up of the songs. Examples include “All I Ask of You” from *Phantom*, “For Good” from *Wicked* (2003), and “Love Montage” from *Les Misérables* (1987).

GALAHAD:

Once, in ev-'ry show there comes a song like this. It starts off soft and low, and ends up with a kiss. Oh, where is the song that goes like this? Where is it? Where? Where?

Figure 3.3: Initial statement of the eight measure melody.

GALAHAD:

Now we can go straight in - to the mid-dle eight, a bridge that is too far for me. I'll

BOTH:

— sing it in your face, while we both em-brace, and then we change the key.

Figure 3.4: Four measure segments of the melody.

GALAHAD:

I'm feel-ing ver - y proud.

LADY:

You're sing-ing far too loud.

GALAHAD:

That's the way that this song goes.

LADY:

You're stand-ing on my toes.

BOTH:

Sing - ing our song that goes like this.

Figure 3.5: Single measure segments of the melody.

The number draws on conventional orchestral accompaniment forms found in megamusicals, beginning with a stripped down accompaniment comprising piano and minimal cello and bass underscoring. As the song continues, light upper strings, winds, and the French horn enter the texture to mirror the increasing emotional drive of the song; the drum kit joins in at the B section, followed by progressively more complex orchestral flourishes as the song moves along. In an additional jab at how the density of the orchestra is used to heighten the emotional intensity of these duets, the orchestration briefly thins out after the second key change with the lyrics “I can’t believe there’s more. / It’s far too long, I’m sure.” The quick shift in the orchestral density not only allows the joke to land about the song taking forever to end, but it also provides a brief respite in the number before charging on to the final verse accompanied by the full orchestra and the new addition of chorus girls “ah”-ing in the background. As a final

gesture toward Andrew Lloyd-Webber and *Phantom*, the final phrase of the song takes Galahad and the Lady of the Lake to end on a B5, a note so high that it “shatters” the chandelier hanging above them, recalling Christine’s show-stopping E6 in “The Phantom of the Opera” and her “singing [that brings] down the chandelier,” with the famous chandelier crash ending Act I of *Phantom*. How conventional expectations are treated in “The Song That Goes Like This,” then, demonstrates some of the ways in which *Spamalot* as a show negotiates the line between mainstream and more subtle camp.

“You Won’t Succeed on Broadway if You Don’t Have Any Jews” presents another moment where *Spamalot* deftly negotiates the line between mainstream and high camp. At this point in the show, the Knights-who-formerly-said-Ni charge King Arthur with the quest to put on a Broadway musical, “But not in the style of an Andrew Lloyd-Webber one!” Unsure of how to proceed, the dejected King Arthur turns to his men for guidance. Sir Robin, however, has little faith in the plan and he feels the task is an impossible one. When pressed as to why he feels so hopeless, Sir Robin launches into a brief primer on theater production and musical theater tropes (animals onstage, scantily clad showgirls, stage combat, to name a few), all of which mean nothing if the knights are unable to find a Jewish person for their production. The phrase “You Won’t Succeed on Broadway if You Don’t Have Any Jews” becomes the number’s main punch line and inspires a bevy of jokes related to Broadway’s historical ties to the Jewish community of artists and business personnel.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ When the show transferred to the West End, the number’s humor playing on the association of Broadway with the Jewish community did not translate for UK audiences. The show’s creators reworked the song to become “You Won’t Succeed in Showbiz if You Don’t Have Any Stars,” titled “Star Song” for the 2010 UK Tour. The number instead makes fun of the overuse of celebrities as a marketing gimmick. The revised lyrics have been adapted and used in regional productions in the United States, including most recently at the Muny in St. Louis in 2013. Judith

The number follows the conventional structure of a patter song. Frequently used for comedic effect, patter songs are jam-packed lyrically, demonstrating the lyricist's writing (and rhyming) prowess as well as showcasing the actor's ability to perform the material "effortlessly." In the song, Sir Robin spends the entire time listing all of the fantastical things the knights could incorporate into a Broadway musical; as he does so, the stage fills with the items and people he mentions. As with "The Song That Goes Like This," the mainstream campy moments in the number garner the biggest laughs and are set up to be understood as humorous by the entire audience, regardless of their frame of reference. Patter songs are notorious for being difficult to catch every word and this number is no exception. Incorporating onstage manifestations of Sir Robin's list not only helps the audience get the jokes, but it also sets up the convention of patter songs as comedic and, to some extent, ridiculous.⁴¹

The song uses two musical styles throughout, one being a melody that lends itself to patter and the other being music that imitates Jewish music traditions. The imitative moments come between verses and grow in complexity with each subsequent repetition. When Sir Robin reaches the middle of the number, he begins a dramatic and showy piano solo that eventually morphs into a spoof of the bottle dance from *Fiddler on the Roof* using replicas of the Grail in place of bottles. The moment is a showstopper, not only in terms of its humorous reference and the physical strength required to complete the choreography, but also because of Sir Robin's

Newmark, "The Munny explains a *Spamalot* lyric change," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* June 20, 2013.

Regarding the historical relationship between American musical theater and the Jewish community, see Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁴¹ A favorite moment of mine in the number occurs when the performers yell "Hey!" and point to a woman carting a bale of hay across the stage.

sudden transformation into a showman. From this point on, the Jewish musical stylization of the accompaniment is fully integrated into the list song material, perhaps a musical indication of Sir Robin's newfound self-confidence. The number then concludes with lyrical references to *Yentl* ("Papa, can you hear me?") leading into a final traditional Broadway kick line while a giant lit Star of David descends overhead. As quickly as it began, the chorus fades away, leaving Sir Robin to conclude to Arthur that "There simply must be, / Arthur, trust me, / Simply must be Jews."⁴²

The show stopping quality of the number clearly plays to the essence of mainstream camp, especially given how hard it works to ensure everyone gets in a few laughs. Certainly the large number of objects, people, and conceits mentioned in the song make for a humorous and spectacular production number for most audience members, regardless of their understanding of the Jewish community's role in New York show business. But the open use of Yiddish terminology and references to musicals explicitly about the Jewish community, particularly the historically important *Fiddler*, make for a number that speaks directly to those in the audience who are familiar with or directly involved in the Jewish community and its connection to Broadway.

Spamalot treads the line between high and mainstream camp through the creative team's conscious use and manipulation of Broadway conventions. Although there are several moments in *Spamalot* that are marked heavily with campy indicators (the Las Vegas-style set for Camelot, for instance), the fact remains that, despite the makeup of the audience, there exists a network of layered references and inside jokes for very different audience groups. Monty Python fans will pick up on less obvious *Holy Grail* references that may not be readily apparent to non-Python

⁴² Idle and Du Prez, 65.

fans (e.g., using John Cleese’s voice for the voice of God), while the dance montage of traveling knights in Act II pays homage to soft-shoe numbers, Bob Fosse-esque struts, and Jerome Robbins’ choreography from *West Side Story* (“America”) that may not be obviously humorous to anyone except musical theatre fans (though the “America” reference does seem to help most audiences “get it”). As critic Juliet Wittman observes, *Spamalot* “lets you eat your entertainment cake and deride it at the same time.”⁴³

“A Monkey on a Pedestal”⁴⁴: High camp as mainstream camp in *The Drowsy Chaperone*

[*The theatre is dark. A voice from the stage addresses the waiting audience*]

Man in Chair: I hate theatre. Well, it’s so disappointing, isn’t it? You know what I do when I’m sitting in a darkened theatre waiting for the curtain to rise? I pray. Dear God, please let it be a good show. And let it be short, oh Lord in heaven, please. Two hours is fine, three hours is too much. And keep the actors out of the audience. God. I didn’t pay a hundred dollars to have the fourth wall come crashing down around my ears. I just want a story, and a few good songs that will take me away. I just want to be entertained. I mean, isn’t that the point? Amen.⁴⁵

And so begins *The Drowsy Chaperone*. The lights eventually come up to reveal a man dressed in baggy, weathered attire and seated in a drab studio apartment. After reflecting longer on the state of the theatrical arts (“Please, Elton John, must we continue this charade?”), the Man in Chair introduces himself to the audience and admits he is “feeling a little blue.” His remedy? Playing his favorite musical recording, that of the fictional 1928 musical,⁴⁶ *The Drowsy*

⁴³ Wittman, “More Than Ham on Wry: If it’s hyper-literate silliness you want, *Spamalot*’s got what you need,” *Westword* (Denver), September 27, 2007.

⁴⁴ Bob Martin and Don McKellar, *The Drowsy Chaperone* (unpublished libretto, February 12, 2006), 51.

⁴⁵ Martin and McKellar, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, 1.

⁴⁶ The choice of year could not have been random. The 1927-1928 season on Broadway saw an uptick in the creative output compared to previous seasons, including shows such as *Funny Face*

Chaperone, with music by Julie Gable and lyrics by Sidney Stein.⁴⁷ As the Man in Chair plays the record, the 1928 *Drowsy Chaperone* springs to life in his living room while he imagines what the show would look like, an exercise he invites the audience to do along with him.

The Drowsy Chaperone got its start as a collection of songs presented as part of a wedding gift to the show's eventual co-creator, Bob Martin, and his wife, Janet Van De Graff. The songs were composed as a tribute to the bygone era of George Gershwin and Cole Porter. Martin and his friends, Don McKellar and Lisa Lambert, who wrote the initial songs, recognized the potential for the project as a musical and, with the addition of Greg Morrison to the creative team, they set about developing additional material and refining the show over multiple out of town tryouts. Although Martin and his co-creators primarily describe the show as a straight-laced homage to 1920s Broadway with no intention of being campy,⁴⁸ press materials and more recent interviews with Martin suggest that the show's campy tone was not an unconscious decision after all. Although *The Drowsy Chaperone* represents a continuation of mainstream camp in post-millennial Broadway shows, it differs substantially from *The Producers* and *Spamalot* in that the musical is planted firmly within the world of musical theater, rather than musicals based on the

(1927) and *Show Boat* (1927). The season was also notable for having several plays and musicals with black cast members (see Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 3rd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 475-476). Perhaps as a nod to such a historically important season, the Man in Chair remarks that *The Drowsy Chaperone* was considered “progressive [with] a black actress playing the Aviatrix, for instance” (Martin and McKellar, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, 30).

⁴⁷ Martin admitted that the names for the fictional composer and lyricist team were a tribute to composer Jule Styne. “Valentine to musical theatre,” accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.after5online.com/STORIES/Drowsy%20ChaperoneQA.htm> (site discontinued).

⁴⁸ A minor debate exists as to whether the creators intended the piece to be campy or not, as reports and interviews with Bob Martin cite him as claiming, “The initial impulse [for the creation of *Drowsy Chaperone*] was a pure love of musicals from the period” (quoted in Robert Hofler, “A Tale of Two Tuners,” *Variety* [Aug 8-14, 2005], 32).

works of Mel Brooks or Monty Python. Even more, the internal *Drowsy Chaperone* is set in a relatively unfamiliar era for most contemporary Broadway patrons, and so the show risks becoming entirely high camp for only the most knowledgeable in the audience. The mechanism of the Man in Chair, however, tempers the show's high camp sensibilities with a mainstreamed camp frame and creates a more equalized space so that diverse audience groups can all follow the show's humor.⁴⁹

Constructed as a show within a show, the 2006 musical follows a day in the life of the Man in Chair, a character who is perhaps best described as "a Mr. Rogers of drama queens."⁵⁰ A social recluse, as suggested by his appearance and neglected apartment, he eschews reality in favor of the escapism musical theater provides. Throughout the show, he interacts directly with the audience, remarking on the stylistic flaws of the show, detailing his favorite plot moments, and providing biographical information on the fictional cast members. He also brings the audience in on jokes at the appropriate times and alerts them to important plot points (or, rather, moments *he* finds interesting). "Don't worry," the Man quips, "[the story] won't be hard to follow: all the characters are two dimensional and the plot is well worn."⁵¹

The plot of the inner musical is trite and contrived: Broadway showgirl and starlet, Janet Van De Graaf, is engaged to oil tycoon, Robert Martin, and plans to give up her stage career for marital bliss. Not wanting to lose his leading lady (and his steady box office income), Janet's

⁴⁹ Ben Brantley describes the show's aesthetic as a "happy exercise in escapism, adorned with just enough postmodern footnotes to make you feel all insiderly. It's sort of like being able to eat your cake and diet too." Brantley, "Nostalgic 'Drowsy Chaperone' Opens on Broadway," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2006.

⁵⁰ John Lahr, "Crisis of Faith," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2006, 82.

⁵¹ Martin and McKellar, 9.

producer, Mr. Feldzieg (a play on producer Florenz Ziegfeld of the Ziegfeld Follies [1907-1931] and *Show Boat*), attempts to break up the happy couple with the help of the flamboyant ladies' man, Adolpho. Various hijinks ensue which threaten the impending marriage between Janet and Robert, but, as the Man in Chair proclaims, "Will it all work out in the end? Of course it will! It's not real! It's a musical. Everything always works out in musicals."⁵² By the musical's end, Janet and Robert wed, as do three other couples formed from the remaining principal characters.

The show's unusual structure created an interesting design problem of how to handle two separate sets for what was effectively two different shows. Set designer David Gallo's solution was to have a set that slowly transformed throughout the show, starting off in the Man in Chair's dank apartment and ending in the glorious world of the idealized 1928 *Drowsy Chaperone*. Early scenes from the imagined 1928 show take place in the physical space of the Man in Chair's apartment with perhaps one or two 1920s-style set pieces incorporated, but by Janet's star turn in Act II, the Man in Chair's set completely disappears and remains so to the end of the show.⁵³ The show's lighting by Ken Billington and Brian Monahan follows a similar pattern of being relatively subdued and naturalized at the start of the musical while slowly becoming more theatrical and vibrant (blues, reds, gobos) as the show transitions fully to the world of the inner musical.

Although the 1928 *Drowsy Chaperone* has two acts, the 2006 *Drowsy Chaperone* does not, coming in at an hour and forty minutes, sans intermission. The continuous structure of the

⁵² Ibid., 41.

⁵³ In an interview with *Live Design*, Gallo remarks: "There's this transference where we start off in the apartment, but as he gets more absorbed by this musical he loves, he is transported to the land of the musical." Mark A. Newman, "Sketchbook: Roaring 20s," *Live Design* 40, no. 1 (January 2006): 64.

meta-show provides little opportunity for character development, as the musical's song list contains introductory numbers for each of the characters and little more. The exception to this trend is the numbers for Janet Van De Graaf, who has her "Act I" introductory song, "Show Off," in addition to a dream sequence/nervous breakdown in "Act II," "Bride's Lament." Unlike some of the other numbers in the show that imitate song types and tropes that may not be as recognizable to non-musical theater fans, "Show Off" and "Bride's Lament" both engage with their material in ways that make the numbers, and their humor, immediately accessible for any number of audience groups. Each number relies on highly exaggerated theatricality taken to such a point of excess, both in staging and in performance, that the songs perfectly embody post-millennial mainstream camp.

"Show Off" expresses Janet's unquenchable desire for the limelight despite her protestations that she will end her stage career to marry Robert. While Janet conducts a press interview about her impending departure from the world of theater, Feldzieg makes increasingly desperate appeals to Janet ("I'll give you anything you want...I'll put your name above mine on the marquee!"). Despite the surprised gasps of the reporters at such an unthinkable offer, she simply replies, "Oh, Victor, if you think this is about vanity, you couldn't be more wrong."⁵⁴

In fact, of course, he couldn't be more *right*. The entire premise of the number is built on the humorous juxtaposition of Janet's words and her actions. Each verse describes various elements (and perks) of Janet's life as a performer that she wants to leave behind, the most important being she doesn't want to show off "no more." At first, she simply claims she doesn't want to "sing tunes no more," "ride moons no more," "play the saucy Swiss Miss no more," or

⁵⁴ Martin and McKellar, 21.

“blow [her] signature (kiss) no more.”⁵⁵ The choreography remains relatively tame throughout the first two lines of the verse until the B section (“Don’t try to control me”) where a not-so-subtle costume change involving an unraveling skirt as she *chainés* across the stage signals the start of increasingly more dramatic stunts and choreography. The number builds to a frenzied climax during the dance break and into the final verses where Janet completes a series of outrageous tricks ranging from plate spinning and snake charming to escaping from a strait jacket and throwing her voice while drinking a glass of water. The *pièce de résistance* of the number is a series of cart wheels that take Janet to downstage center before she goes into full splits, which she quickly follows with another series of cart wheels in place, a standing split as she hops around in a circle, and a set of high kicks, each stunt punctuated with a declaration of “You’ll never see this [again]!” before finishing with the final verse (“I don’t wanna change keys no more”). The number’s comedy stems from the pure spectacle of the number combined with the contrast between Janet’s words and her actions, but the increasingly elaborate staging and acrobatics is what tips the number into camp. The more obvious points of humor in the song, as reflected in the staging and in the continual repetition of “I don’t wanna...,” are elements of mainstream camp that provides opportunities for the uninitiated to laugh alongside theater aficionados. The audience’s position as “insiders” to the song’s humor is due, in part, to the number’s structure as a list song, a genre that has historically been a space for composers to demonstrate their compositional prowess, for performers to demonstrate their virtuosity, and, most importantly, for audiences to be in on the song’s jokes.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David Savran writes, “...[T]he audience members also take great delight in the act of listing, while craving ever flashier and more brilliant rhymes. They are invited to share a private joke and be flattered by the presumption of their sophistication.” Savran, “‘You’ve got that thing’:

Act II of the 1928 *Drowsy Chaperone* begins after Janet has called off her wedding to Robert, whom she (in disguise as a French maid named Mimi) seduced during their Cole Porter-esque love duet, “Accident Waiting to Happen” in Act I.⁵⁷ The Man in Chair describes Janet’s Act II number, the “Bride’s Lament,” as “a haunting lament from a very depressed bride. She sings it standing on her balcony bathed in the pale light of a sympathetic moon, which is ridiculous because it’s the middle of the day.”⁵⁸ The stage is lit accordingly, washed in purple-blue light to signify the moonlit scene, with spots lighting the Man and Janet as they move about the stage.

As the song’s musical introduction begins, he adds, “Now, when you’re listening to this, try to ignore the lyrics. I know it will be difficult, but block them out. They’re not the best, but the tune is beautiful, and it truly communicates the brides state of mind. Just ignore the lyrics.”⁵⁹ With such a directive, of course, the audience cannot help *but* listen to the lyrics as Janet sings lyrics that turn out to be quite ridiculous indeed:

I put a monkey on a pedestal
And tried to make that monkey stay
And he did for a time
But he needed to climb
And with other monkeys play
(spoken) Far away

Cole Porter, Stephen Sondheim, and the Erotics of the List Song,” *Theatre Journal* 64:4 (December 2012), 535.

⁵⁷ “Accident Waiting to Happen” trades on the wordplay found in many of Porter’s songs: “I’m an accident waiting to happen / I’m a mishap about to ensue / I’m the toy on the stair / The three legged chair / The hem that’s been caught by a shoe.” And later, “[Robert]: I’m the rags in the cellar / [Janet]: A broken umbreller / [together]: A branch hanging loose from a tree.” Martin and McKellar, 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

He left his jacket on that pedestal
Beside his tiny rusty cup
And I haven't got the strength to pick them up
Oh monkey, monkey, monkey
You broke my heart in two
But I'll always save that pedestal
For you

Come my little monkey
Come my little monkey, do.⁶⁰

With such absurd lyrics, it is very hard to take Janet's lament seriously and the warning from the Man in Chair merely primes the audience to laugh harder. While Janet sings, however, the Man in Chair becomes increasingly drawn to the performance, mirroring her every gesture and joining in with her during key phrases and exclamations. Despite his protestations, it is clear that the Man in Chair has much emotional energy invested in the number. He even remarks that he "always gets a little misty when [he] thinks of [the monkey's] tiny jacket lying on the pedestal, it's long sleeves dangling on the floor."⁶¹ He then joins in with Janet as she melodramatically exclaims "Oh monkey, monkey, monkey!" before she concludes the second iteration of the verse and sits hopelessly beside the Man on his bench.

At this point, the Man becomes increasingly more involved with the scene, feeding her imaginary prompts ("Who are you?...Do you need anyone?...What about the love of one man?"⁶²) as if to move the story along and reignite Janet's self-confidence. The Man in Chair's

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 52.

⁶² Ibid. This moment recalls *Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings where audience members interact with the film by feeding prompts and lines to the characters onscreen (e.g., when Brad and Janet's car tire goes flat in the middle of a storm, Janet asks, "But where will you (Brad) go in the middle of nowhere?" The audience interjects, "Try the castle!" just before Brad remembers seeing a castle a few miles back, to which the audience sarcastically responds, "Genius!").

apartment begins to fragment and disappear from the stage, revealing a stylized night sky as Janet moves to the center of the stage, the Man in Chair close by her side. Flashes of light (those of the reporters from earlier) startle her, though, and cause her to run upstage while the chorus sings dissonant exclamations of “Monkey! Monkey!” over and over again as the apartment windows rise to reveal ensemble members clad in costumes akin to the typical outfit of an organ grinder’s monkey (complete with a monkey’s tail). Red washes light them overhead as they twirl their overly long sleeves in a menacing fashion, encircling Janet (the Man in Chair joins in with the monkeys). Janet briefly sings a line from “An Accident Waiting to Happen” before launching into a distorted version of “Show Off,” where she proclaims, “I don’t wanna show off no more / I don’t wanna spread mirth no more / Be the greatest on earth no more!” as she half-heartedly dances. The musical quote by Janet of her Act I love duet with Robert strongly suggests that the “monkey” is actually Robert and Janet is haunted by her decision to leave him. Mr. Feldzieg appears, dressed up as a circus ringmaster and wielding a whip, snapping the whip at her feet as she moves. The ensemble moves to her side while she begins to waffle in her decision (“I don’t wanna / I wanna / I don’t wanna / I wanna / I don’t / I do / I don’t / I do!”),⁶³ Feldzieg raising his whip threateningly each time Janet exclaims she doesn’t want to perform. Caught between two facets of the life she loves to lead – Feldzieg, the menacing ringmaster, and her adoring, if overwhelming, fans – the pressure finally pushes her toward a decision to stop performing.⁶⁴

The chorus implores her to stay (“Stay Janet, stay Janet / Stay upon the stage Janet / Millions want to see you shine!”), surrounding her and applauding as they do. Janet reflects,

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The circus setting and the protagonist’s indecisiveness evokes the “Circus Dream” from *Lady in the Dark* (1941).

knowing her “future is secure” if she continues as a performer but realizes that being with Robert is what she really wants. Mr. Feldzieg and Robert both stand upstage of Janet while the chorus suddenly rearranges themselves in a V-formation on stage for the final chorus of the song, the “monkeys” now bearing clash cymbals that they use to punctuate the end of each musical phrase. The ensemble sings a choral iteration of Janet’s song while she apologizes to an imaginary Robert for being unsure of what she wanted. She then makes her way upstage while the ensemble runs offstage in a “monkey-like” fashion, clashing the cymbals during her final line as they go (“I ask (*cymbal clash*) the stars (*clash*) above (*clash*)...”). She is left alone onstage with the Man in Chair, who moves back to her side. While she offers one final question, “Is it the monkey or *my* pedestal I love?,” a trapdoor opens and she descends beneath the stage, striking a final pose that is mirrored by the Man in Chair. He then raises his other arm (see fig. 3.6), as if reveling in the applause from the audience, and the number concludes.



Figure 3.6: The final pose in “Bride’s Lament.” Photo by Peter Coombs.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ John West as the Man in Chair and Elizabeth Pawlowski as Janet in the national tour of *The Drowsy Chaperone*. In Kerry Lengel, “Hilarious *Drowsy Chaperone* is musical-theater daydream,” February 25, 2010, <http://archive.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/ae/articles/20100225drowsyrevu0228.html>.

No other number in *The Drowsy Chaperone* encapsulates mainstream camp in the show as much as “Bride’s Lament.” While the uninitiated in the audience may not recognize the number as a play on the dream ballet/mad scene convention, the choice of lyrics provides an element of the absurd that non-aficionado audiences can laugh at. And yet, despite the scale of the spectacle employed to depict Janet’s internal struggle, there is a striking sense of sincerity to the scene. “Bride’s Lament” is the only moment in the show when a character from the inner musical has a monologue-type solo; every other musical number, even if it is a solo number, is performed in the presence of another character who is listening.⁶⁶ So, although Janet’s dilemma seems so overblown that it almost comes across as fake, in reality she seems to be genuinely struggling with the decision (as much as an *ingénue* can, anyway) and processes it in the only way she knows how: as a showstopper.

The display of sincerity via camp extends beyond Janet to the Man in Chair. Although we spend a lot of time listening to the Man and his encyclopedic knowledge of Broadway musicals, we learn very little about the Man’s life over the course of the show. During the “Bride’s Lament,” however, we get an unguarded glimpse of who the Man in Chair really is, as the number, in all its excess and spectacle, literally draws the Man into the world of the show. Despite his air of “disdain” at the monkey lyrics, his pretense soon drops as his involvement with the scene grows with the repetition of the second verse. The removal of his apartment furniture partway through the scene, his participation in the choreography, and his complete entrancement and connection to Janet (most particularly felt at the conclusion of the number) all signal an

⁶⁶ I exclude the Man in Chair from this classification, as he is unseen by the other characters. As far as the appearance of the rest of the cast in “Bride’s Lament,” they are more akin to dream figures in this context, as she begins and ends the piece alone onstage. Thus, I would consider “Bride’s Lament” to be a monologue and that her (or the Man in Chair’s) infusion of the other characters into the scene is merely reflective of Janet’s psyche.

attachment that runs deeper than a purported general love of musicals. And given his ecstatic reaction at the end of the scene (“Don’t you just love that number?! It has everything! A little Busby Berkeley, a little Jane Goodall...”), in contrast to his initial guarded assessment of the scene, it suggests that the camp qualities of the show are what really give him his voice.

With the Man in Chair as the audience’s guide, *The Drowsy Chaperone* represents the next iteration of mainstream camp musicals that attempt to bridge the gap between theater buffs and the general population; the decision to set the imaginary show in a relatively unknown era of theater history (for many contemporary audiences, that is) certainly levels the playing field a bit. The show’s structure suggests that the creative team went to extreme lengths to make sure that diverse audience groups were brought in on the show’s jokes. Perhaps most important, however, are the ways in which the show engages with the absurd and sincere simultaneously, a hallmark of high camp (“Bride’s Lament” is the embodiment of this tension between the two extremes). Both *The Producers* and *Spamalot* strike such a balance in select moments, but *The Drowsy Chaperone* is the first musical of the post-millennium to incorporate camp in a way that is accessible to a diverse audience over the course of an entire show. And it is the character of the Man in Chair who makes it possible for the entire audience, regardless of their background, to laugh *with* him and his world.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Again I point to Isherwood’s theorization of high camp. Isherwood, “From *The World in the Evening*,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 51.

“This book will change your life!”⁶⁸: *The Book of Mormon* on Broadway

When *The Book of Mormon* opened on Broadway in the spring of 2011, the cast and creative team was cautiously optimistic about the show’s success. Although the cast and crew felt there was something special about the show throughout the workshop and development process, there was still trepidation about whether or not the theater-going public was ready for an irreverent musical about the Mormon faith. This fear stemmed largely from the fact that this was not a musical developed by members of the Mormon Church but rather by *South Park*’s Matt Stone and Trey Parker and *Avenue Q*’s Robert Lopez, a creative team that, to put it politely, does not pull any punches when it comes to infusing social and cultural criticism into their work.⁶⁹

The cast and crew’s fears of any potential violence or unrest toward them at the stage door proved to be unfounded.⁷⁰ Instead, *The Book of Mormon* quickly became *the* event of the season with performances selling out months in advance, lottery drawings attended by upwards of 500 people per performance, and standing room-only lines that began queuing the evening before the next day’s performance. Thanks to dynamic ticket pricing and top ticket prices hovering around \$470 on average, the production recouped its \$11.4 million dollar investment

⁶⁸ Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, *The Book of Mormon* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2011), 4.

⁶⁹ In Season 7 of *South Park*, Stone and Parker produced an episode where a Mormon family moves to the area and shares their faith with Stan Marsh’s family. The episode is aptly titled “All About Mormons” and originally aired November 19, 2003. Scenes about the founding of the Mormon Church use a multiple-verse song featuring a jaunty, folk tune-esque melody to reinforce the story’s main points. A short motif (“Dum, dum, dum, dum, dum”) alternates with each sung line, which we only find out by the end of the episode is actually “Dum[b], dum[b], dum[b], dum[b], dum[b]” after we hear the same musical phrase sung to the word “Smart.”

⁷⁰ Steven Suskin, *The Book of Mormon: The Testament of a Broadway Musical* (New York: Dey Street, 2012), 28.

within nine months. As of this writing, *The Book of Mormon* remains one of the top grossing productions each week, bringing in an average weekly gross of \$1.5 million dollars.⁷¹

It is difficult not to draw parallels between *The Book of Mormon*'s overwhelming critical and commercial success and that of the post-millennium's first smash hit, *The Producers*, especially given each show's campy engagement with complicated subjects. Although the two shows share similar traits – each musical revolves around the relationship between two ostensibly heterosexual men,⁷² with both shows musicalizing taboo subjects – I claim that *The Producers* and *The Book of Mormon* actually exist on opposite ends of the mainstream camp spectrum due to their intended audience groups. Unlike *The Producers*, whose primary audience consists of those familiar with theater and the camp aesthetic as a whole, *The Book of Mormon*'s main audience, in the early stages, much like *Spamalot*'s Monty Python crowds, was likely made up of *South Park* fans rather than avid theatergoers. Since Stone and Parker often incorporate songs and musical theater jokes into their episodes (including an episode about producing a musical, “Broadway Bro Down”⁷³), their fan base is not entirely unfamiliar with musical theater

⁷¹ As of the week ending April 9, 2017, the musical's gross was \$1.2 million dollars. Broadway League, “Research & Statistics – Grosses – Broadway in NYC – The Book of Mormon,” accessed April 11, 2017, <https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/grosses-broadway-nyc/488721/44022/>.

⁷² Elder Cunningham's heterosexual “beard” is the local village girl, Nabalungi, though their relationship is really a non-relationship. Elder Price, meanwhile, does not pair off with anyone by the close of the show. The coupling of Max and Leo in *The Producers* is “legitimized” by Max's bevy of old lady patronesses and Leo's Act II marriage to Ulla. For more on heterosexual beards in “buddy” situations, see Raymond Knapp, “The Straight Bookends to Camp's Gay Golden Age: From Gilbert and Sullivan to Roger Vadim and Mel Brooks” (*Music and Camp*, ed. Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis, Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, expected 2017).

⁷³ *South Park*, “Broadway Bro Down,” 15.11, directed by Trey Parker, written by Trey Parker and Robert Lopez, Comedy Central, October 26, 2011.

conventions, but even a cursory look at *The Book of Mormon*'s music and book will reveal that the show was not written to please Broadway fans first and the *South Park* fans second.

Although a number of in-jokes about musical theater appear throughout the show, there is very little overt self-reflexive theater humor built into *The Book of Mormon*, especially when compared to the humor in *The Producers* or *Spamalot*. Instead, jokes for the musical theater aficionados are subtly incorporated into the musical style, orchestration, choreography, and/or dramatic structure of given numbers.⁷⁴

Number from <i>The Book of Mormon</i>	Number (and show) modeled after
“You and Me”	“The Wizard and I” and “Defying Gravity,” <i>Wicked</i> (2003)
“Two by Two” ⁷⁵	“Up with People”* as performed by the singing group, Up with People
“Hasa Diga Eebowai” ⁷⁶	“Hakuna Matata,” <i>The Lion King</i> (1997)*
“All-American Prophet”	“Ya Got Trouble,” <i>The Music Man</i> (1957)
“Sal Tlay Ka Siti”	“Somewhere That’s Green,” <i>Little Shop of Horrors</i> (1982, Off-Broadway)
“Spooky Mormon Hell Dream” ⁷⁷	Dream ballets from the “Golden Age”

⁷⁴ Parker, on the show’s allusions to Rodgers and Hammerstein shows: “There’s a lot of Rodgers and Hammerstein references in the show, because that’s what it feels like to me. When you’re doing this sort of happy-go-lucky, optimistic Mormon, it just plays right into it because the Rodgers and Hammerstein/Disney/Mormon thing all really go together.” Quoted in Suskin, *Testament of a Broadway Musical*, 24.

⁷⁵ Matt Stone, in “*Book of Mormon* Creators on Their Broadway Smash,” interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, May 9, 2011. See especially the 1991 version of “Up with People,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skK1CKKlc0M>.

⁷⁶ The invented phrase “Hasa Diga Eebowai” translates to “Fuck you, God!” in the show and we hear it sung several times as Elders Price and Cunningham first meet the Ugandan villagers. It is a play on the Swahili saying “Hakuna matata,” or “no worries [for the rest of your days],” as popularized by Disney’s animated film-turned-stage musical, *The Lion King*. As if the connection was not clear enough, Elder Cunningham innocently inquires, “Does [Hasa Diga Eebowai] mean no worries for the rest of our days?” Parker, Lopez, and Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, 18.

⁷⁷ The lead-in music for the sequence, when Elder Price believes he’s arrived in Orlando, evokes the main theme for Disney Park’s night show, *Fantasmic!*, described in the script as “[v]ery happy Disney-style music.” Parker, Lopez, and Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, 60.

Number from <i>The Book of Mormon</i>	Number (and show) modeled after
“I Believe”	“I Have Confidence,” <i>The Sound of Music</i> (1965 film)*
“Joseph Smith American Moses”	“Small House of Uncle Thomas,” <i>The King and I</i> (1951)*
“Tomorrow is a Latter Day”	“You Can’t Stop the Beat,” <i>Hairspray</i> (2002)
* indicates references that were explicitly mentioned by the show’s creators	

Table 3.1: Musical numbers from *The Book of Mormon*

The Book of Mormon’s use of mainstream camp instead relies on humor (sometimes self-reflexive) that derives from knowledge of popular culture and religion, particularly the Mormon faith. Similar to the ways in which early camp used coded language and characters to communicate with its intended audience, *The Book of Mormon*’s amalgamation of popular culture with many elements of the Mormon faith in the show’s plot and songs provides opportunities for varied readings of the show’s material by different audiences. The show’s duality is evident from the very top of the show with the opening prologue dramatization of events at the Hill Cumorah set in 326 A.D. For those unfamiliar with the Mormon faith, myself included, the characters’ style of dress and deportment in the prologue does not necessarily hold any special meaning beyond seeming incredibly campy (Jesus’s light-trimmed robe and His declaration, “I...am Jesus,” set audiences chuckling in every audience I have witnessed). For Mormons, however, the staging and costumes clearly draw directly on the staged spectacles mounted by the community celebrating the Church’s teachings and history. Stone, Parker, and costume designer Ann Roth took a research trip to watch the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York. Of the trip, Parker recalls: “...[W]e went to the pageant, and we’re like, wow, okay. We gotta make our musical better than this one, and they’ve been working on that one a long time. But it was there that we got the idea that we should bookend our musical with the story of

the Mormon and the history of Joseph Smith, and do our own miniature version of the Hill Cumorah pageant, which is how both acts open...⁷⁸

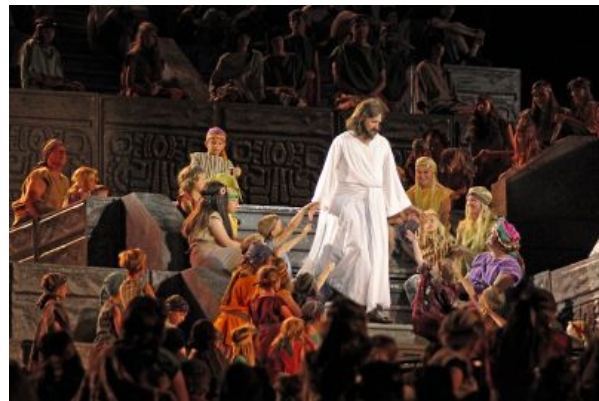


Figure 3.7: Left, the opening tableau of *The Book of Mormon* (photo by Joan Marcus); right, a scene from the Hill Cumorah Pageant.⁷⁹

Another example of the show's campy duality as it pertains to the Mormon faith occurs in Elder Price's power ballad of affirmation, "I Believe." The number takes place in Act II just after Price wakes up from a guilt-induced nightmare where Hitler, Genghis Khan, Jeffery Dahmer, Johnnie Cochran, and even Jesus Himself, appear and are disgusted by Price's flagrant abandoning of his Mission companion ("Spooky Mormon Hell Dream"). Sufficiently disturbed by the dream (and berated by his fellow Elders for his actions), Price is inspired to go out and do "something incredible" to make amends, i.e., he decides he will go and convert the local warlord, General Butt-Fucking Naked. As Price prepares to enter the General's compound, he processes his feelings and reminds himself of the faith that brought him to Uganda in the first place. Throughout the number, Price lists several beliefs as held by Mormons. Each litany verse ends

⁷⁸ Suskin, *Testament of a Broadway Musical*, 48.

⁷⁹ Hill Cumorah scene, "[Home page image]," accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hillcumorah.org/>.

with some variation of the statement, “I am a Mormon / And a Mormon just believes.”⁸⁰ The second portion of the statement, “a Mormon just believes,” quickly becomes the laughing point as the number progresses. Each listed belief sounds more and more outlandish to a non-Mormon audience and Price’s continual sincerity in declaring that “a Mormon just believes” compounds the number’s humor.

While almost everything Elder Price says regarding his faith is relatively accurate, the loose re-phrasing of the beliefs makes them sound absurd to an outsider (non-Mormon) audience.⁸¹ For example, when addressing the General, Price exclaims, “...I believe that in 1978 God changed His mind about black people!”⁸² This line consistently gets laughs from the audience and seems almost too comical to be true. Of course, the gist of the statement is accurate; the Mormon leaders issued its “Official Declaration 2” affirming all male members of the Church, regardless of race, were eligible to be ordained into the priesthood.⁸³ The phrasing of

⁸⁰ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, 68. In his review of the musical, Michael Hicks notes that the phrase “I am a Mormon” is set to the opening five-note fanfare of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, a musical “Easter egg” of sorts for Mormon audiences. Hicks, “Elder Price Superstar,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 233.

⁸¹ In his interview with Terry Gross, Matt Stone explains that they structured the song in a way that makes Elder Price’s relatively factual statements sound outlandish: “[I]t’s done on a rhythm of one, two, three, and three is always the joke when you’re doing comedy. And so we just put the weirdest Mormon beliefs in the third slot and they become jokes even though they’re just facts.” “*Book of Mormon* Creators on Their Broadway Smash,” interview by Terry Gross.

⁸² Parker, Lopez, and Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, 69-70.

⁸³ The Declaration is described as follows: “The Book of Mormon teaches that ‘all are alike unto God,’ including ‘black and white, bond and free, male and female’ (2 Nephi 26:33). Throughout the history of the Church, people of every race and ethnicity in many countries have been baptized and have lived as faithful members of the Church. During Joseph Smith’s lifetime, a few black male members of the Church were ordained to the priesthood. Early in its history, Church leaders stopped conferring the priesthood on black males of African descent. Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice. Church leaders believed that a revelation from God was needed to alter this practice and prayerfully sought guidance. The

the lyrics, however, is deceptive, as it insinuates that people of color were actually excluded from the Church entirely before “God changed His mind,” not just that they were banned from the priesthood. Those who are Mormon in the audience would be aware of this discrepancy, of course. Another misstatement that makes for comedic fodder is Price’s exclamation, “I believe that God is on a planet called Kolob.”⁸⁴ Again, the idea is there in the lyrics, but the finer details are lacking, namely the belief that Kolob is the planet located nearest to God, not that God is *on* Kolob.⁸⁵ Ultimately it is not the beliefs themselves that are funny, per se, but the ways in which they are summarized lyrically and then combined with the endless refrain of “a Mormon just believes,” creating a backhanded commentary on religion and faith.⁸⁶

The humor of “I Believe” and its commentary on religion extends to the musical construction of the number. After a brief detour into the realm of “I Have Confidence” from *The Sound of Music* film (where Price asks, “A warlord that shoots people in the face. / What’s so

revelation came to Church President Spencer W. Kimball and was affirmed to other Church leaders in the Salt Lake Temple on June 1, 1978. The revelation removed all restrictions with regard to race that once applied to the priesthood.” “Official Declaration 2,” accessed March 13, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2?lang=eng>.

⁸⁴ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, 70.

⁸⁵ “And I saw the stars, that they were very great, and that one of them was nearest unto the throne of God; and there were many great ones which were near unto it; And the Lord said unto me: These are the governing ones; and the name of the great one is Kolob.” (Abraham 3: 2-3).

⁸⁶ In his review of the show and reflection on why audiences do not seem scandalized by the show, Michael Giltz offers the following: “Imagine how a Mormon feels. If you’ve seen *The Book of Mormon*, you’ve already heard some of the most exaggerated or arcane elements of their faith -- in other words, you’ve been pre-scandalized. Instead of Elders having to bring up the underwear and the one-time ban on black priests (into the 1970s!) and the idea of God living out there in the universe near a planet called Kolob and Jews coming to America before Columbus, LDSers can just let *you* ask if that’s true and then give the more nuanced, accurate description of what they believe. No wonder the Church has put posters up in Times Square. This show might just help recruitment.” Giltz, “*The Book of Mormon – Why aren’t more people offended?*” *Huffington Post Entertainment – The Blog*, June 28, 2011.

scary about that?”⁸⁷), the number takes on the feel and sound of a gospel power ballad, complete with instrumental support from a rock ensemble and piano, a slow musical build-up, increasingly melismatic vocal phrases from Price, and a full backup chorus echoing each of Elder Price’s phrases. Once he enters the General’s camp, Price even takes the General by the hand and leads him in some awkwardly stilted “praise and worship” choreography (e.g., raised arms, outstretched hands, feet “step and touch” to the beat, closed eyes) in an attempt to engage the warlord in the number. Price’s efforts, however, do not work as planned, a reality that subverts the typical “storybook” ending of such a conversion number. Despite the General’s brief tolerance of Price’s actions, Price is swiftly dragged offstage screaming to receive his punishment for trespassing.

As mentioned above, mainstream camp in *The Book of Mormon* also draws on popular culture for its supply of humor, which in many ways informs the show’s more overtly campy moments. The Act II opening number, “Making Things Up Again,” begins with Elder Cunningham reciting the Book of Mormon to a group of very bored villagers. In an effort to get them interested, Cunningham mentions that Christ will help with their AIDS, a “fact” that grabs their attention. Faced with a now attentive audience, Cunningham’s fibs begin to spiral out of control as he improvises teachings that directly address the villagers’ needs and actions. Having never actually read the Book of Mormon, Cunningham instead draws on works he *does* know for names and locations to tell the villagers, including *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* (Lieutenant Uhura from *Star Trek* also makes an appearance). Such central pop culture texts serve as a common frame of reference for many audience members, as well, and bring us in on the joke that Cunningham is making up a religion that the villagers are taking seriously. Some of

⁸⁷ Parker, Lopez, and Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, 68.

the number's more basic references include mention of "the fiery pits of Mordor" and "Jesus [having] Boba Fett turn [men] into frogs." Throughout the number, figures from Cunningham's life, both real (his father) and imagined (Joseph Smith, Frodo, and Yoda, among others), appear as representations of his conscience pointing out his bastardization of the religious texts. As if his spoken invocations were not humorous enough, the physical appearance of his conscience onstage amplifies the comedy of the number substantially. The number culminates with the juxtaposition of the villagers' happy exclamations ("We're learning the truth!") with the negative interjections of Cunningham's conscience ("You're taking the holy word and adding fiction!").⁸⁸

Although the literal appearance of figures from Cunningham's conscience in "Making Things Up Again" functions similarly to staging choices made in the shows discussed earlier in this chapter – where visual elements reinforce (and amplify) the campy components of a given number (such as with "Springtime for Hitler") – the rest of the staging and scene design in *The Book of Mormon* is drastically understated when compared to earlier post-millennial shows. In fact, with the exception of "Turn It Off," "All American Prophet," "Man Up," "Spooky Mormon Hell Dream," and "Joseph Smith American Moses," all of the numbers in *The Book of Mormon* have relatively simple technical designs and blocking when compared to campy extravaganzas found in *The Producers*, *Spamalot*, and even *The Drowsy Chaperone*. What differentiates *The Book of Mormon* from these earlier shows is that because the type of mainstream camp found in *The Book of Mormon* is not specifically motivated by self-reflexive theater humor, the accompanying elements integral to that type of humor (elaborate set and lighting design, extravagant dance numbers, etc.) have no place in the show. The numbers that *do* employ the hallmarks of musical theater-based mainstream camp do so because either they 1) fulfill the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 59.

dramatic requirements of traditionally “showy” numbers as desired by the creative team (e.g., a tap number [“Turn It Off”], a big Act I finale [“Man Up”], and a dream sequence [“Spooky Mormon Hell Dream”]), or 2) the numbers are specifically performances within the context of the narrative (“All American Prophet” and “Joseph Smith American Moses”). Beyond these numbers, however, the show’s campiness derives from the infusion of religion and pop culture for its humor as well as a dedication to utmost sincerity in performance.⁸⁹

...

In his chapter, “New horizons: the musical at the dawn of the twenty-first century,” Bud Coleman offers a brief overview of what he terms self-reflexive musicals (I consider them to be mainstream camp musicals), an off-shoot of the backstage musical. Characters in these productions break the fourth wall often and, in Coleman’s estimation, the show “asks the audience to believe that the production of the musical [...] is happening in real time in front of them.”⁹⁰ He further suggests that self-reflexive musicals “can appear as too much of an insider phenomenon,” but that since “musical theatre never gets tired of looking at its own reflection,” self-reflexive shows will continue to persist.⁹¹

What Coleman’s assessment misses is how the treatment of this “insider” knowledge has changed in Broadway musicals of the past several years. Many of the creative teams developing

⁸⁹ “My hope and my goal nightly is to make the audience believe that *we* believe this, that we just want to convert people to Mormonism because, of course, it’s the greatest religion. We as actors have that in common with our characters – the urgency of communicating our investment, our belief in the story, our passionate earnestness. So I hope that that’s what we’re accomplishing.” Andrew Rannells in Suskin, *Testament of a Broadway Musical*, 18.

⁹⁰ Coleman, “New horizons: the musical at the dawn of the twenty-first century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, edited by William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 291-292.

⁹¹ Coleman, “New horizons,” 192.

the shows he mentions are not established Broadway writers but are instead well-known pop culture creators (e.g., Monty Python and the *South Park* creators). They bring an alternative approach to the musical that comes from a great fondness for the genre, not self-indulgent musings. And because most of these mainstream camp shows come from non-Broadway specific materials, they actually feature complex networks of campy material that can appeal to a wider audience than earlier self-reflexive shows.

In fact, the success of *The Book of Mormon* points to the growing trend of mainstream camp shows that are designed to appeal to non-theater aficionados. We saw the beginnings of the shift with *Spamalot*, whose base audience of Monty Python fans – primarily straight men – were not assumed to be aware of how musicals work. But the Monty Python troupe’s long history of producing campy film and television material familiarized their fans with how camp can function on a basic level, making the campy humor in *Spamalot* less jarring to those unfamiliar with musicals.⁹²

By the time of *The Book of Mormon*, non-theater-specific camp was more prevalent on Broadway.⁹³ Regarding fan bases, *South Park* fans are familiar with Parker and Stone’s love of musicals. They parodied Broadway musicals and tropes in much of their work, including *Cannibal! The Musical* (1993), various *South Park* episodes as mentioned above, as well as the films *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999) and *Team America: World Police* (2004).

⁹² An example is the “Camp Square-Bashing” skit where a platoon is told to “camp it up” during a military demonstration and the men change their body language to appear more effeminate (limp wrists, cocked hip) and even form a kick line. *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” 22, November 24, 1970.

⁹³ Other mainstream camp shows, *Young Frankenstein* (2007) and *Shrek* (2008), feature humor that is based more in the adapted material rather than explicit jokes about expectations in a musical.

Combining song with their purposely crude animation style and satirical attitude toward culture and politics, Park and Stone developed a form of mainstream camp in their projects that in turn gave fans a working knowledge of the sensibility. The increasing visibility of camp in popular culture in the past few decades, then, has primed new audiences to take in a Broadway show and made it possible for mainstream camp to flourish on Broadway once more.

Chapter Four:

Neo-conceptual musicals and commercializing the avant-garde

Alan Lerner, in his foreword to the libretto of *Paint Your Wagon* (1952), offers the following advice to aspiring musical theater creators:

“In recent years there has been an ever-increasing number of adaptations in the theater and, by consequence, a steady decline of original works. [...] This dearth has frequently been mentioned in the press, and when it has been, it has always been accompanied by a mournful cry for more fresh creation. [...] Let me hereby warn all aspiring authors and composers to stuff their ears with cotton and pay no heed to this soulful wail. No one, neither critic nor public, is clamoring for originality. The only desire is for something good. And to be good is quite original enough.”¹

He goes on to address the many challenges facing those wishing to create and produce Broadway musicals, many of which might sound familiar to contemporary artists today. Lerner is not alone in his musings on the state of the American musical. In fact, a brief survey of contemporary newspaper articles tells us that concern regarding the decline of musical theater has been the great American theater critic pastime for the better part of a century.² What Lerner’s comments allude to, however, is that the professed desire by scholars and critics for “original” works on Broadway is rooted in the anxiety that Broadway producers are somehow “selling out” by

¹ Alan Jay Lerner, “Advice to Young Musical Writers” in *Paint Your Wagon* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1952), vii.

² “Dearth of B’way Musicals,” *Variety*, March 11, 1936, 1, 18; Martin Gottfried, “Theatre,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, October 22, 1965, 28; Jesse Gross, “Another Blah B’way Season,” *Variety*, December 21, 1960, 53, 56; Dale Harris, “What Became of the Music in Musicals?,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 1973; Frank Rich, “The Great Dark Way: Slowly, the Lights Are Dimming on Broadway,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1991; Frank Rich, “Stage View: What Ails Today’s Broadway Musical?,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1982; Terry Teachout, “Broadway’s No-Hitter,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2009.

creating shows with the goal of attaining commercial success. In other words, profit is somehow ideologically opposed to true artistic innovation.

History, of course, tells us this is a false fear. Recent scholarship exploring the relationship of Broadway with commerce points out that American musical theater has always been a commercial venture, citing the lavish and spectacular productions created by impresarios such as Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. and Busby Berkeley in the early twentieth century. In response to the claim that Broadway has always been about profit, recent scholars and critics make the careful distinction that while theater is, ultimately, about making a profit, it was not until the 1980s and the development of the megamusical that producers were so patently (and garishly) obvious about their economic goals.³

Heading into the new millennium, the tension between “theater for profits’ sake” and “theater for theater’s sake” permeated critical discussions about new offerings on Broadway. As I discussed in chapter two, Disney’s arrival on Broadway in the 1990s was, for many critics, the death knell for theatrical originality. Disney Theatricals became the scapegoat when discussions about the future of Broadway eventually circled back to assigning blame for why there were no more original musicals. In contrast, the successful Broadway transfers of experimental Off-Broadway musicals during the same decade – most especially *Rent* (1996) – offered critics and scholars the paradigm of originality they hoped to champion. Significantly, a show’s “Off-Broadway” (read: “outsider”) pedigree became code for a show’s (likely) critical success over the next several years.

³ See Jessica Sternfeld, “The Marketing of International Successes” in *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 77-80.

In the new millennium, a growing number of productions actively distinguished themselves as a new generation of Broadway “outsiders,” both in terms of their genesis and their dramatic and aesthetic construction. Because these shows hearken back to structural and design elements found in concept musicals of the 1960s and 1970s, I have chosen the descriptor “neo-conceptual musicals.” The sample of neo-conceptual musicals includes, among others, *Urinetown* (2001), *Avenue Q* (2003), *Spring Awakening* (2006), *Next to Normal* (2009), *Once* (2011), *Violet* (2014), and *Fun Home* (2015). To be sure, the designation “neo-conceptual” initially appears more apt for some of these shows than others, but, as I will argue here, they are linked attitudinally and circumstantially, as reactive responses to perceived excesses of the megamusical, which provided the backdrop for their emergence in the new millennium.

As discussed in chapter one, the concept musical itself emerged as a reactive response to the integrated book musical, creating a permanent aesthetic and thematic division within American musical theater. The emergence of the *neo*-conceptual musical in the post-millennium, following the aesthetically homogenized 1980s and 1990s similarly mimics the bifurcation of musical theater genres that occurred with the rise of concept musicals. While the neo-conceptual musical is not an exact return to the concept musical, its arrival supports my claim that the presence and disappearance of stylistic trends on Broadway follows a periodic structure, rather than a model of progress and inevitable decay.

Musical theater in the post-“Golden Age”

Contemporary conversations at the start of the 1970s about the state of Broadway and its perceived post-“Golden Age” demise are well-documented in critical articles and thought-pieces that make many critics’ personal preferences clear. The musical and visual aesthetics valued by

many aging theater critics were similar to the American realist style of musical theater most popular during the 1940s-1960s, which (conveniently) corresponded to the period of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's successful partnership. Postmodern theater, often characterized by fragmented plots and character development, abstract set design, and harsh stage lighting, was in direct contrast to the dominant realist style of the "Golden Age" (see figs. 4.1-4.2). Postmodernism in musical theater manifested itself in various ways within the new subgenre of the "concept musical" (*Cabaret* [1966], *Hair* [1968], *Company* [1970], *Follies* [1971], *A Chorus Line* [1975]), but the form received mixed reviews from established critics. For the incoming generation of critics,⁴ only the work of composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim seemed to be of any real interest or value in the post-"Golden Age" period, and even then his critical reception was complicated at best.⁵

⁴ David Savran describes Ben Brantley's attitude shift about the avant-garde as changing from "congratulatory to hagiographic" after becoming the chief theater critic for *The New York Times*. Savran adds, "Since the beginning of [Brantley's] tenure, he has endeavored to amass cultural capital by championing the work of the consecrated avantgarde [sic]." Savran, "The Death of the Avantgarde [sic]," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 14.

⁵ For critical and scholarly discussions of Sondheim's career and reception, see Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Dan J. Cartmell, "Stephen Sondheim and the concept musical" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983); Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990); Gordon, *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook* (New York: Garland Pub., 1997); Robert Gordon, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Stephen Sondheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003); Steven Robert Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).



Figure 4.1: American realist style in *Oklahoma!* (1943).⁶



Figure 4.2: Postmodern style in *Company* (1970).⁷

By the early 1980s, however, Sondheim's shows were quickly overshadowed by the influx of hyper-commercialized megamusicals (*Cats* [1980], *Les Misérables* [1987], and *The Phantom of the Opera* [1988], among others), a new musical theater subgenre which critics claimed favored spectacle over any substantive story, and iconic branding over headlining stars, all of which were packaged in an elaborate stage production. The sensational quality of the megamusical – the chandelier in *The Phantom of the Opera* falls right over the audience, after all! – rubbed many critics the wrong way. Although megamusicals remained closer to realism in terms of set and costume design, critics saw the shows as vapid imitations of the “once-great” musical theater genre. The “vulgar realism” of the megamusical served as the cultural catalyst that retroactively made abstraction and stylization in the concept musical much more appealing to critics and scholars.

⁶ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “Joseph Buloff (Ali Hakim) and Celeste Holm (Ado Annie) in *Oklahoma!*” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7db74ce3-6a2e-2c70-e040-e00a18067491>.

⁷ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “*Company*, replacement cast. [Larry Kert]” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/c5d1fbd9-6d02-6406-e040-e00a180654a2>.

And so, in the post-millennium, neo-conceptual musicals benefit from the accumulated cultural capital conferred to the concept musical in the wake of the megamusical era. Many neo-conceptual musicals even draw on avant-garde and postmodern design aesthetics to create visual worlds patently different from the mega-shows they were competing against (see figures 4.3 and 4.4 below). In fact, David Savran argues that the avant-garde – once a biting critique of commercial theater – has now become a “brand” on Broadway, serving as an easy way for creative teams to seek critical acclaim and financial success for their productions.⁸



Figure 4.3: Post-millennium megamusical, *Wicked* (2003). Photo by Matt Crockett.



Figure 4.4: Neo-conceptual musical, *Urinetown* (2001). Photo by Joan Marcus.

The neo-conceptual musical occupies an interesting space in musical theater history where the once-polarizing aesthetic of postmodernism is now a useful marketing tool. It is clear, in both reviews and in critic’s reflections, that contemporary neo-conceptual shows receive greater leeway. This is particularly true of shows with an Off-Broadway pedigree, another “brand” that

⁸ Savran uses the word “brands” in his article, “The Death of the Avantgarde [sic].” Arnold Aronson similarly observes that “‘avant-garde’ has become a designator for a style or genre. [...] Avant-garde-ness has come to be equated with the quirky, the shocking, or the merely offbeat and unexpected [...] The impetus to create comes not so much from a dissatisfaction with the intellectual basis of contemporary theater as from the age-old theatrical impulse to entertain.” See Aronson, *American Avant-garde Theatre: A history* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 209.

signals a show's more "authentic" qualities. Ben Brantley perhaps summarizes the unusual tendency best in a piece written about revisiting productions after they transfer to Broadway:

But most important, *Once* simply looked younger and fresher in the musty environs of Broadway, where newness is hardly at a premium. And I marveled at how different the show's score and its choreography (by Steven Hoggett) were from anything else in the neighborhood. I'm reluctant to admit this, but I realized I hold Off Broadway to a higher standard of originality than I do Broadway.⁹

Brantley's concession is not entirely revelatory, as the association of Off-Broadway (and regional-born) productions with experimentation and innovation is long-standing. Several successful Broadway transfers of "game-changing productions" from key Off-Broadway houses, including the Public Theatre (*A Chorus Line* [1974; Broadway, 1975], *Fun Home* [2013; 2015], *Hamilton* [2015; 2015]), New York Theatre Workshop (*Rent* [1996; 1996], *Peter and the Starcatcher* [2011; 2012]), and Playwrights Horizons (*Assassins* [1991; 2004], *Sunday in the Park with George* [1983; 1984], *Grey Gardens* [2006; 2006])¹⁰ only reinforce the idea that originality is a quality of Off-Broadway productions. What is clear, however, is that when those innovative shows transfer to Broadway, their origins away from the glare of Times Square provide a partial degree of protection against scathing reviews in addition to a degree of forgiveness for artistic risks that may (or may not) be successful when cast against the shadow of Broadway's commercial behemoths.

Neo-conceptual musicals arrived on Broadway primed for critical success. They looked like a fresh, new alternative to the megamusical and were received as such. But much of what critics lauded were ways in which the neo-conceptual musical drew on and transformed previous

⁹ Brantley, "Shows You See Again, For the First Time," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2012.

¹⁰ Years provided here correspond to the show's Off-Broadway debut, followed by its Broadway opening.

styles of performance – the concept musical and avant-garde theater – rather than what it was creating on its own. Despite this reality, critics and scholars used the seeming novelty of the neo-conceptual musical to support their continued ideological debate about the low artistic value of commercialized theater versus the high value of avant-garde/experimental theater. It is worth considering, as well, what it means to have productions that draw on experimental or avant-garde gestures for commercial benefit. As such, in the remaining portions of this chapter, I will begin with a comparison of some of the aesthetic and structural similarities between the concept musical and neo-conceptual musical. I will close the chapter by situating the success of the neo-conceptual musical within the socio-political climate of the post-millennium to consider why the time was right for the reemergence of concept-based productions both historically and commercially.

“Side by Side by Side”¹¹: The concept musical versus the neo-conceptual musical

Concept musicals challenged the integrated musical in several concrete ways, including fundamentally changing the salience of a show’s plot, the way scenographic elements are developed, and the relationships between principal roles and ensembles. In this section I will outline the key changes the concept musical brought to musical theater and, drawing on examples from post-millennial shows, how those changes manifested themselves (or not) in neo-conceptual musicals.

¹¹ George Furth and Stephen Sondheim, *Company: A Musical Comedy* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1996), 77.

Plot

Concept musicals

As mentioned earlier, concept musicals feature a fragmented plot rather than a linear narrative. This notion runs contrary to the “Golden Age” ideal where the book and music function as a seamless, “organic” whole, smoothly shifting between spoken, sung, and danced numbers that each move the narrative forward. In the concept musical, however, the overarching theme or concept determines how the narrative is constructed, whether musical numbers emerge from the action or not, and informs the aesthetics of the set and lighting. Some scholars argue that this form of conceptual unity is Broadway’s version of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*,¹² meaning the abstract concept, rather than a cohesive narrative, defines and unifies the production visually, musically, and dramatically.

A concept musical, then, often eschews certain elements common to the integrated musical – such as a seamless narrative – in service of the show’s conceptual premise. For instance, *Cabaret*, considered to be an early concept-like musical, features an integrated book show enmeshed with a fragmented sub-plot set in the Kit Kat Klub cabaret. The integrated portion of the show focuses on the experiences of a young American writer, Cliff Bradshaw, and his relationship with an English cabaret performer, Sally Bowles, in pre-WWII Berlin. Several book numbers take place within the linear narrative (“So What?,” “Perfectly Marvelous,” “It Couldn’t Please Me More,” “Married”). Alternating with the book scenes, however, are seemingly random musical numbers performed by members of the Kit Kat Klub, which exist outside the book’s narrative time. These numbers, however, offer commentary on the musical’s

¹² Dan J. Cartmell, “Stephen Sondheim and the Concept Musical” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983), 98.

plot action (“Wilkommen,” “Don’t Tell Mama,” “Two Ladies,” “Money,” “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” “If You Could See Her (The Gorilla Song),” “Cabaret”). Musical numbers in the concept musical, then, began to serve a didactic purpose rather existing solely to move the narrative forward.¹³

In later concept musicals, such as *Company*, one could theoretically rearrange several numbers and scenes and still have the show make sense. *Company*, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by George Furth, is typically cited as the first production comprising each of the major elements now considered to be characteristic of the concept musical.¹⁴ The show’s plot evolved from a series of one-act plays by George Furth centering around the concept of marriage. Sondheim and director Harold Prince worked with Furth to create a libretto where the scenes are connected via a common element, the character of Robert (Bobby), a perpetual bachelor facing his thirty-fifth birthday. Sondheim described the musical as being “a series of short revelatory scenes about various kinds of married couples, all seen through the eyes of the bachelor/protagonist, Bobby.”¹⁵ Accordingly, as each scene primarily exists in isolation, none of the show’s numbers specifically function to move the plot forward. Instead, musical numbers either connect scenes together (“Bobby baby” musical motif, “Have I

¹³ Bruce Kirle also observes that several concept musicals ultimately end where they began, forming, on the broadest level, a circular structure. The effect is accomplished through repeating musical motifs or numbers (“Company” in *Company*, “Wilkommen” in *Cabaret*, and “Magic to Do” in the 2013 revival of *Pippin* [orig. prod. 1972]). Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 110.

¹⁴ Cartmell, “Stephen Sondheim and the Concept Musical,” vii.

¹⁵ Sondheim quoted in Eugene Robert Huber, “Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince: Collaborative contributions to the development of the modern concept musical, 1970-1981” (PhD diss., New York University, 1990), 102.

Got a Girl For You/Someone is Waiting”) or they interrupt the narrative time to provide commentary on the action (“The Little Things You Do Together,” “You Could Drive a Person Crazy”). While each scene and number provides commentary on the nature of married life – sometimes positive, sometimes negative – ultimately there is no clear trajectory in terms of making a convincing case for (or against) marriage. The scenes are not arranged in a way where each vignette yields an increasingly convincing argument for Bobby to get married. The only points of reference that offer any sort of grounding for the audience is the recurrence of the “Bobby baby” musical motif from the opening number and repeated “birthday” sequences which bookend each act. Ultimately, save a few minor exceptions, one could rearrange many of the numbers in *Company* and Bobby would still come to the same conclusion that we all need “someone to hold [us] too close.”¹⁶

Plot in the concept musical, then, becomes much less about forward motion and more about rumination. As Bruce Kirle notes in *Unfinished Business*, musicals in the late 1960s and 1970s were no longer escapist fantasies. Instead, the concept musical’s fluid structure created a theatrical space where musicals could interrogate issues of social and political significance without sacrificing their critical lens in deference to a narrative thru-line.¹⁷

Neo-conceptual musicals

Although the neo-conceptual musical mirrors the concept musical in many ways, it deviates significantly with regard to plot construction. Whereas concept musicals typically feature a fragmented plot, neo-conceptual musicals actually favor linear narratives. Of the

¹⁶ Furth and Sondheim, *Company*, 115.

¹⁷ Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 111.

several neo-conceptual shows discussed in this chapter, *Urinetown*, *Avenue Q*, *Spring Awakening*, and *Next to Normal*, all feature a clearly developed, linear plot.

What remains similar between the concept and neo-conceptual musical, however, is that musical numbers in neo-conceptual musicals often exist outside the show's plot development. In *Spring Awakening*, for instance, book scenes are interspersed with musical numbers. This on its own is not unusual, of course, but what makes the scheme distinctive in *Spring Awakening* is that the book scenes are written in a style that evokes the late nineteenth century while the musical numbers are contemporary rock songs. The alternation between the more formal-sounding book scenes and the rock numbers is jarring in terms of register and affect.¹⁸ Furthermore, most of the songs in *Spring Awakening* do not move the narrative forward, but instead serve as internal monologues or reflections. Book writer and lyricist Steven Sater writes in the libretto's preface that the aesthetic choice to alternate the formal spoken prose with contemporary language in the musical numbers was guided by the show's topic and material.

The show is based on Frank Wedekind's 1891 play, *Frühlings Erwachen: Eine Kindertragödie* (*Spring Awakening: A Children's Tragedy*), and the plot generally follows Wedekind's original play, set in 1891-1892 provincial Germany.¹⁹ The play presents "a panorama of the growth of adolescence: the individual problems of puberty, of adapting to the adult world, of the sacrifice of the needs of childhood, of frustration, and of moments of

¹⁸ The lighting and staging in *Spring Awakening* also reflect the register shifts and will be discussed in the scenography section.

¹⁹ Major exceptions include the removal of the Masked Man character from the end of the play and the decision to make the sexual encounter between Wendla and Melchior at the end of Act I appear more consensual. For more discussion on the changes, see Steven Sater, preface to *Spring Awakening: A New Musical* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2007), x.

happiness in both sexes.”²⁰ What Sater found was that the tortured youths depicted in Wedekind’s play shared many similarities with teens at the turn of the twenty-first century. He felt that rock music was the perfect genre to reflect the anxieties and angst – the “unheard, anguished cries” – of teenagers in the face of an unfeeling adult world.²¹ Accordingly, the actors sing into handheld mics during the musical numbers, as if to visually signify that what the characters are expressing is emotionally “authentic.” This “authenticity” is underscored by their body language, where the teens allow their emotional energy to guide their movements rather than containing their performance within movements appropriate to their character.²² Musical numbers in *Spring Awakening* provide moments where the students halt narrative time to express themselves freely, a luxury they do not have once back in reality.²³

The opening number of the show, “Mama Who Bore Me,” bookends the first scene between Wendla and her mother, Frau Bergman. We watch Wendla dress for the day, alone on a

²⁰ Edward Bond, “A Note on the Play” in *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind, ed. Charlotte Ryland, trans. Edward Bond (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), xl.

²¹ Steven Sater, *Spring Awakening*, vii.

²² On the issue of authenticity and the indie-rock genre, Benjamin Nugent notes the rise of the indie-rock musical on Broadway and suggests that the growing attraction to the musical style “may be because the idiom’s technical tics and idiosyncrasies lend their productions a feel of eccentricity, and of endearing amateurism, qualities still largely alien to Broadway.” Nugent, “Indie-Rock Musicals,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 9, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/magazine/09_25_indie.html.

²³ Many of the show’s numbers tap into what children and teens wish they could say to adults in a situation where the children and teens are either wrongly punished or are witnessing an unjust act. To further exaggerate the rift between the teenagers and adults in the show, all fourteen adult characters are played by just two actors, a man and a woman, suggesting that all adults are the same in their unfeeling nature. It is worth noting that the adults in *Spring Awakening* do not have any solo numbers nor do they sing in any numbers, save one: “Totally Fucked.” Even then, they join in on the final chorus singing “Blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa (*etc.*),” a word that offers them no real power in song.

dark stage as she sings the first iteration of the song. The lights come up for the book scene, where, after hearing the news that her sister has given birth to another baby, Wendla inquires as to where babies come from. Throughout the scene her mother continually dodges the question until Wendla begs for an answer. Frau Bergman struggles to give Wendla a real answer (“For a woman to bear a child, she must...in her own personal way, she must...love her husband. Love him, as she can love only him. *Only* him...she must love – with her whole...heart”),²⁴ at which point Wendla cries out in anger and resumes a more aggressive version of “Mama Who Bore Me,” while the lights shift to purple and pink washes punctuated by white overhead followspots. This time she is not alone onstage. The other young women from the community join Wendla in expressing their frustration at being treated like children, which is made clear by their clenched fists and forceful, forte singing. Compared to Wendla’s initial statement of the song, which was supported primarily by acoustic guitar and strings, the recapitulation of the song is supported by the entire orchestra and exhibits greater rhythmic agitation and density than Wendla’s solo.

The two versions of the song represent different views of the teens’ attitude toward the child-parent relationship. Prior to the book scene, the song suggests an eager, innocent hope to learn about the world from a parent. After Frau Bergman’s abrupt deflection, however, the song becomes one of exasperation and restlessness. Despite the shift in emotional temperament, neither version of the number provides Wendla with a sense of any greater agency, but instead emphasizes how little power the teens hold within their society at large and at home.

The alternation between musical numbers and scenes in *Spring Awakening*, then, is more aligned with how the Kit Kat Klub musical numbers function in *Cabaret*. While the overall plot

²⁴ Sater, 17.

of *Spring Awakening* adheres to a linear trajectory, the character's inner monologues interrupt the flow of the plot and offer commentary that does not alter the story's development.

Musical numbers in neo-conceptual musicals can also serve a didactic purpose, as seen in *Urinetown* and *Avenue Q*. In these instances, the show's initial source material typically dictates the dramatic need for instructive songs that may not exist outside the show's plot development. *Urinetown* (which will be discussed more at length in the scenography section) is written as a mock-Brechtian theater piece. Music is a common fixture in Brechtian theater as a rhetorical device for presenting pointed criticism at society and institutions,²⁵ accordingly, *Urinetown* features two numbers ("It's a Privilege to Pee" and "Don't Be the Bunny") that accomplish such a task.²⁶ These numbers emerge from the narrative action as one would expect in an integrated musical, but instead of acting as a moment of internal reflection or relationship-building, they function as pointed socio-political commentary. With "Don't Be the Bunny," the number is sung by Cladwell B. Cladwell, head of the corrupt Urine Good Company, to his daughter, Hope. He offers some allegorical advice on how to stay alive in a world that wants to kill the innocent:

A little bunny in the meadow
Is nibbling grass without a care.
He's so delightful as he hops for you
You say, "Hi, Bunny," and he stops for you.
You pull your trigger and he drops for you.
Goodbye, Bunny-boo;
Hello, rabbit stew!

²⁵ See Bertolt Brecht, "On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, 3rd ed., (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 124-131; Kim H. Kowalke, "Brecht and music: theory and practice," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 218-234.

²⁶ Kathryn Edney provides a compelling argument that the show's most ideologically Brechtian song is not the oft-cited "It's a Privilege to Pee," but rather "Don't Be the Bunny." See Kathryn A. Edney, "*Urinetown*: A New Brechtian Musical?," in *Brecht, Broadway and United States Theater*, ed. J. Chris Westgate (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 100-119.

[...]
Don't be the bunny.
Don't be the stew.
Don't be the dinner.
You have better things to do.
It ain't no joke.
That's why it's funny.
So take your cue:
Don't be the bunny.
Don't be the bunny.²⁷

The imagery Cladwell employs is graphic (death by gun, electric chair, and mallet) as he attempts to make Hope realize that there is no place for naïveté in their world. His dry cynicism reflects the guiding principle behind his business dealings: self-preservation. In a show where many musical theater conventions are inverted, the writing team tempers the number's instructive nature; Cladwell's message comes across as evil and unfeeling, though the tone is softened a bit by Hope's humorous interjections ("But Daddy, we're talking about people, not animals").²⁸ His lesson for Hope and the audience is tough to swallow, but it is also the most direct social commentary we get in the show.

Other examples of didactic music in neo-conceptual musicals appear in *Avenue Q*, a musical parody of the children's television series, *Sesame Street* (1969-). *Sesame Street*'s format features short segments designed to teach children about important social issues and life skills. Some sequences are part of the "Street" scenes of the show, which follow a main through line, while other sequences are short segments that interrupt the narrative time of the episode, often with educational skits. We see both categories at work in *Avenue Q*, a musical which follows the life of a new college graduate, appropriately named Princeton, who arrives in New York City to

²⁷ Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann, *Urinetown: The Musical* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2003), 46.

²⁸ Ibid.

begin his adult life armed with a B.A. in English...and not much else. Throughout the show, we meet his new neighbors, who, in the style of *Sesame Street*, are of either the puppet or human varieties. The puppet characters include Kate Monster, who is a school teacher with aspirations of opening a school exclusively for monsters; Trekkie Monster, an upstairs recluse whose obsessive tendencies rival that of Cookie Monster, though the former's obsession concerns Internet porn instead of baked goods; and Nicky and Rod, whose relationship is a thinly veiled homage to *Sesame Street*'s odd couple, Ernie and Bert. The musical's human characters consist of Brian, a thirty-something, failed stand-up comic who cannot hold a steady job; his fiancée, Christmas Eve, a Japanese social worker with two master's degrees who is unable to procure more than a minimum-wage position; and Gary Coleman (played by a woman in most productions), the former child star of *Diff'rent Strokes*, who serves as the building's supervisor and repair person.

Like *Sesame Street*, *Avenue Q* offers instructive commentary on important issues to its audience. The musical asks the tough questions plaguing Generation Xers ("What do you with a B.A. in English?")²⁹ and offers instructive lessons about the Internet's true purpose (porn), racism, and *Schadenfreude*. Some numbers in the show mirror the "Street" scenes in *Sesame Street* and exist within the plot arc. For instance, "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist" comes out of a conversation where Kate Monster is offended at Princeton's question of whether she and Trekkie Monster are related. In talking through their quarrel with the rest of the neighbors, the group calls attention to each other's racist leanings (as well as those potential leanings of the audience) and ultimately concludes that minor racial aggressions are a fact of life. Dramatically the number is

²⁹ Robert Lopez, Jeff Marx, and Jeff Whitty, *Avenue Q: The Musical* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2010), 1.

set up like a typical pedagogical moment of self-discovery on *Sesame Street*, but the lyrical content of the song turns the convention on its head topically, as with the following exchange regarding racially-charged jokes:

(SPOKEN)

PRINCETON: *All right, stop me if you've heard this one. There's a plane going down and there's only one parachute. And there's a rabbi, a priest –*

KATE MONSTER: *And a black guy!*

(Gary Coleman pops out from behind the fence)

GARY COLEMAN: *Whatchoo talk' about, Kate?*

KM: *Uh –*

GC: *You were telling a black joke!*

P: *Well, yeah, Gary, but lots of people tell black jokes...*

GC: *I don't.*

P: *Of course you don't. You're black! But I bet you tell Polack jokes, right?*

GC: *Sure I do. (He busts up, laughing.) Those stupid Polacks!*

P: *Don't you think that's a little racist?*

GC: *Well, damn, I guess you're right.*

(SUNG)

KM: *You're a little bit racist.*

GC: *Well, you're a little bit too.*

P: *We're all a little bit racist.*

GC: *I think that I would have to agree with you.*

P and KM: *We're glad you do,*

GC: *It's sad, but true! Everyone's a little bit racist – all right!*³⁰

Other instructional numbers in *Avenue Q* interrupt the show's narrative action in way a similar to the educational sequences in *Sesame Street*. "Schadenfreude" is an extended sequence sung by Gary teaching Nicky about what it means to feel *Schadenfreude*. As Nicky learns about the concept ("Happiness at the misfortune of others? That is German!"³¹), he begins to suggest examples and join in on the refrain. Each time the word comes up during the song, it appears on screens on either side of the stage as it might appear on a television skit (first spelled in full, then loosely transliterated as [shad'ˈn froi' də], then spelled out letter by letter, and finally spelled in

³⁰ Lopez, Marx, and Whitty, *Avenue Q*, 29-30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

full again with a flashing background). The number becomes a learning experience that grows out of the narrative moment, but then transitions into a purely instructional moment (in this case, faux-instructional).

In looking at different numbers in neo-conceptual shows, we can see how the presence of a linear narrative alters how musical numbers function as compared to music in the more fragmented plots in concept musicals. The absence of a cohesive plot in many concept musicals meant that musical numbers could potentially operate outside the dramatic constraints of the story. With some neo-conceptual musicals, as with *Spring Awakening* or *Next to Normal*, musical numbers remain independent of the plot development and often provide commentary on the action. Didactic numbers, however, occupy a gray area regarding how songs can function in neo-conceptual musicals, as they can contribute to plot development or they can exist as commentary outside the narrative, as with *Urinetown* and *Avenue Q*. The relationship between the plot and musical numbers in neo-conceptual musicals remains incredibly fluid, allowing creative teams to draw on different structural conventions as needed to tell their story.

Scenography

Concept musicals

The increasing topical diversity of concept shows manifested itself visually with equally diverse set and lighting designs. Productions no longer necessarily replicated a specific location as called for by the plot (e.g., the cornfields of Oklahoma or the beaches of the South Pacific islands). Instead, set and lighting designers were invited to develop abstract environs that reflected, or otherwise commented on, the show's overarching concept, yielding productions that all had drastically different set and lighting designs from one another. The aesthetic differences

between scenography in concept musicals and integrated shows in part stemmed from the fact that many set and lighting designers for musical theater were tapping into the postmodernist movement. The abstract quality, and at times, severity, of postmodern design provided designers with an entirely new set of tools to draw upon. Although the shift toward postmodernism on Broadway began well before the 1960s – Kirle cites Vsevolod Meyerhold, Erwin Piscator, and Bertolt Brecht as early practitioners of postmodernism³² – the emergence of mainstream musicals employing postmodern scenographic elements alongside the American realist style of late “Golden Age” musicals was striking.³³

Boris Aronson’s set design for *Company*, for example, uses steel beams and glass panels to separate the stage space into a series of multi-level rectangular boxes, an abstract depiction of Manhattan living. A functioning elevator center stage helped actors move between the levels. His design depicts a sterile, unwelcoming environment (critic Walter Kerr’s aside: “it looks like the prison setting for *The Last Mile*”) that brings people together as much as it keeps them apart.³⁴ The sub-text of *Company* – that one can be physically close to others while remaining emotionally distant – is realized in Aronson’s design (see fig. 4.6). The set alludes to the experience of the young Manhattanite living in a bustling city yet feeling wholly alone, an uneasy form of existence that was inspired by Francis Bacon’s (1902-1990) paintings (see fig. 4.5). In his book on Aronson, Frank Rich remarks that the paintings “expressed the bleak mood of alienated contemporary New Yorkers who are at once trapped and exposed in their glass

³² Kirle, 122.

³³ Kirle calls attention to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s failed show, *Allegro* (1947), as an early experiment in employing postmodern scenography in musical theater. Kirle, 113.

³⁴ Kerr, “*Company*: Original and Uncompromising,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1970.

enclosures.”³⁵ *Company*’s set design became a visual metaphor for the internal struggles facing each character in the show, culminating in the question of whether sharing the company of others is truly the key to self-fulfillment.

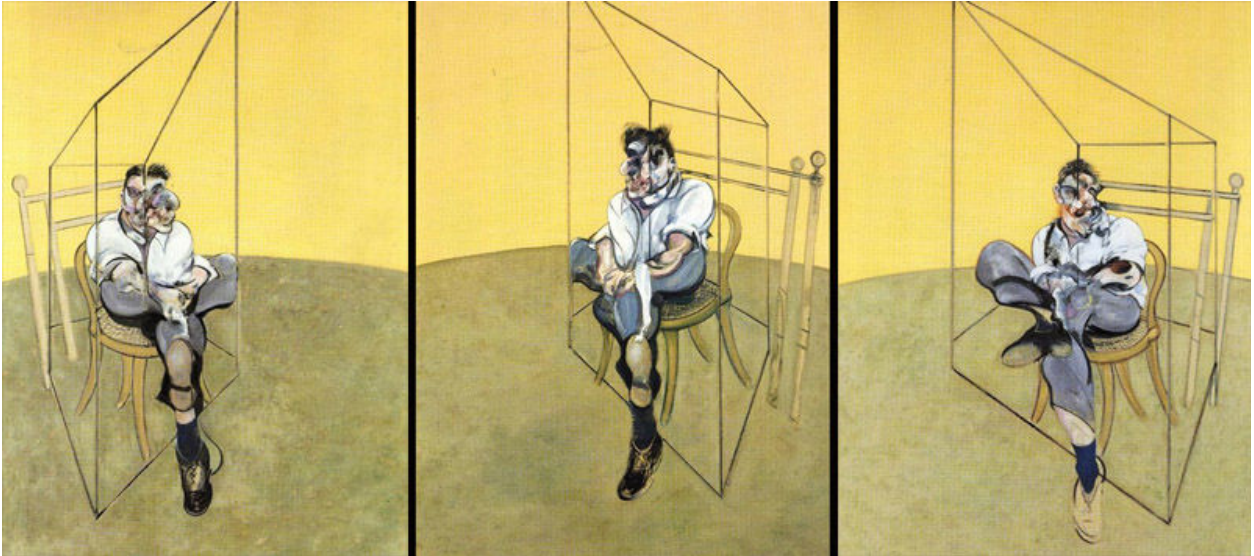


Figure 4.5: Some of the paintings that inspired Aronson’s design. “Three Studies of Lucian Freud” (1969). Oil on canvas.



Figure 4.6: Boris Aronson’s set for *Company*.³⁶

³⁵ Frank Rich, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, with Lisa Aronson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 220-221.

³⁶ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “Legendary abstract multi-level set designed by Boris Aronson for the Broadway musical *Company*. (New York)” New York

Robin Wagner's set for *A Chorus Line* is perhaps one of the most iconic designs of the 1970s and another notable example of how scenography functioned in concept musicals. The show, conceived by Michael Bennett, with a book by James Kirkwood and Nicolas Dante, lyrics by Edward Kleban, and music by Marvin Hamlisch, follows the audition process of dancers who all hope to make it into a Broadway chorus line. Although the set could have been fashioned to look like a more realistic dance studio, Wagner instead chose to create a simple design. An entirely bare stage save a single white line downstage with several mirrored panels along the back wall represented a place of hope and fear, where "[t]he famous line [...] became the visual focus of the production, with each character's motivation and fate balanced precariously upon it"³⁷ (see fig. 4.7 below).



Figure 4.7: Set for *A Chorus Line* (“I Hope I Get It”).³⁸

Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/57e10380-d6a7-0130-739f-58d385a7bbd0>.

³⁷ Virginia Anderson, “Sets, Costumes, Lights, and Spectacle” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 294-308), 304.

³⁸ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “Cast members in line on stage holding headshots in front of their faces in the stage production of *A Chorus Line*,” New York

Similarly, the final number, “One (Reprise)/Finale,” could have had a more elaborate set than a wall of angled mirrors (see the comparison in figs. 4.8 and 4.9). And yet Wagner and Bennett chose to keep the set minimal. Having a bare stage forced the audience to focus on the individuals putting themselves on the line for a job. The audience spends the entire show becoming invested in these individuals who work hard to set themselves apart to get the gig, only to watch them suppress their individual identity to blend into the “one singular sensation” of the chorus line.³⁹



Figure 4.8: “One” in *A Chorus Line*.⁴⁰



Figure 4.9: A scene from a Rockettes revue.⁴¹

Ultimately the final scene rings deliberately hollow. The cast has changed into golden costumes and the number now appears to be an actual performance and yet, the set is unchanged.

Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6ad35a40-f338-0130-55a4-58d385a7bbd0>.

³⁹ Michael Bennett et al., *A Chorus Line* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1995), 110.

⁴⁰ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “Scene from the stage production *A Chorus Line*,” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a768dfa2-1b0d-30c6-e040-e00a18066807>.

⁴¹ UNK, The New York Public Library, “The Rockettes in a scene from the Radio City Music Hall revue ‘Encore’ (New York),” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/13173890-e1f2-0132-a3ca-58d385a7b928>.

Wagner's choice to leave the plain stage in place suggests that the production's ending is not to be celebrated but instead questioned. The combination of the showy music, dancing, and costumes contrasts greatly with the flat set design, creating a sense of futility instead of triumph.

Thus, as the examples from *Company* and *A Chorus Line* both demonstrate, scenography after the "Golden Age" shifted from adhering to the narrative demands of the productions to designs that visually realized the premise of each show. Even more importantly, the scenographic elements of concept musicals created a space to reinforce and contribute to the critical edge of the productions.

Neo-conceptual musicals

As discussed in the opening section of this chapter, the neo-conceptual musical emerged in opposition to the megamusical on multiple fronts. The most obvious difference between the two subgenres is their very different aesthetic worlds. Megamusicals regularly incorporate a highly spectacular realist style, where set pieces derive from the location demands of the plot (e.g., the barricade for *Les Misérables* [1987] or the Phantom's lair in *The Phantom of the Opera* [1988]) but the lighting is heavily supplemented by the stylized, angular lighting plots common in rock shows. Sets for the megamusical are typically large in scale, both for aesthetic and practical purposes (to match the large cast size).



**Figure 4.10: Realist set with rock-inspired lighting design for *Les Misérables*.
Photo by Michael Le Poer Trench ©
Cameron Macintosh Ltd.**



Figure 4.11: Abstract set with rock-inspired lighting for *Next to Normal* (2009). Photo by Joan Marcus.

In contrast to the megamusical, the neo-conceptual musicals are often much smaller in scale. This is in part because of smaller cast sizes and in part because the sets are designed to match the conceptual needs of the production. One holdover from the megamusical, however, is the growing use of rock-inspired and vibrant lighting schemes in neo-conceptual musicals. The set and lighting design for the neo-conceptual musical, then, represents a fusion of the minimalist set of the concept musical with the hyper-stylized lighting of the megamusical. What makes neo-conceptual productions distinctive from their predecessors is the way in which lighting is treated as much more central to generating the necessary aesthetic environment onstage.

Take, for example, *Urinetown*, an early neo-conceptual musical whose unconventional plot topic and stripped-down production values led many critics to align *Urinetown* with the tradition of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre. The show is set in a dystopian world where private bathrooms have been eradicated and all citizens are required to pay for bathroom privileges at public amenities scattered throughout the city. Ultimately, however, the society faces a Malthusian catastrophe *after* the heroes of the story take control ("What kind of musical is this?!

The good guys finally take over and then everything starts falling apart?!”).⁴² Creators Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann wrote the show by “making choices that were not just bad for the sake of being bad but reckless for the sake of seeing where a story goes when it goes where it shouldn’t...[W]hat happens if the play offers no clear prescription for the troubles it imagines, no ‘Love is the answer’ or ‘Be true to yourself and all will be well?’”⁴³ The pair’s nontraditional approach to writing the show became the guiding principle for the rest of the creative team. Instead of a polished, professional megashow, *Urinetown* gave Broadway a crudely lit, poorly danced musical about public urination.

Scott Pask’s immersive set made it clear that the musical was no *The Producers* (2001), in case the title wasn’t clear enough. Instead of a brightly lit, clean, and stately Broadway house, audiences were welcomed by a dingy, water-stained theater ornamented with sweeping police search lights and police officers patrolling the catwalks looming over the audience and stage areas. On its own, Pask’s set could read as sincerely menacing. But Brian MacDevitt’s lighting provided what he called “satirical lighting” to really emphasize the tongue-in-cheek nature of *Urinetown*.⁴⁴ In his interview with David Barbour, MacDevitt discusses his approach to the show, where he mixed elements of lighting in Epic Theatre with conspicuously poor lighting choices. His aim was to create a design that “embraces theatre and makes fun of it at the same time,”⁴⁵ a sentiment in line with the show’s entire conceptual genesis. For the show to work as a

⁴² Kotis and Hollman, 99.

⁴³ Kotis and Hollman, introduction, xiii.

⁴⁴ Barbour, “What kind of musical is this?” *Live Design Online*, January 1, 2002, <http://www.livedesignonline.com/mag/what-kind-musical>.

⁴⁵ MacDevitt quoted in Barbour, “What kind of musical is this?”

satire, all its elements needed to be in on the joke, which is why MacDevitt’s design mixed elements of Epic Theatre lighting (stark uplighting, little color, highly presentational) with obvious and poorly executed cues (e.g., “a bad scroll, from white to pink, when they play the love melody” and multi-colored scrolls throughout the number “Mr. Cladwell”).⁴⁶



Figure 4.12: Above, examples of Brechtian lighting; below, examples of “bad” lighting. Photos by Joan Marcus.

With *Spring Awakening*, lighting is an integral part of the show’s structural scheme of moving between the narrative time of the plot and the teens’ inner monologues. The shift between the two worlds is marked aurally by the change in language with the start of a musical number, and the lighting offers a clear visual distinction between the two worlds (see fig. 4.13-14).

⁴⁶ Ibid.



Figure 4.13: Example of lighting for book scene.
Photo by Joan Marcus.



Figure 4.14: Example of lighting for musical number (“Touch Me”). Photo by Sara Krulwich.

Book scenes are lit in various shades of tungsten white with a mixture of naturalized and modern lighting styles. The monochromatic design suggests a community that is lifeless and one-dimensional. In stark contrast to the book scenes, the musical numbers use vibrant, rock-inspired lighting and clearly distinguishes the shift in dramatic focus. Subdued numbers (“The Word of Your Body,” “I Believe,” “Those You’ve Known”) use softer washes to create a more dream-like atmosphere while follow spots illuminate those singing. The more emotionally agitated songs, particularly where the teens are in direct conflict with adults or societal expectations (parent/child relationship: “Mama Who Bore Me” and “The Dark I Know Well; teacher/student relationship: “Totally Fucked”; chastity: “The Bitch Of Living”), use rapid lighting changes instead of smooth fades, and saturate the stage with washes of complementary colors to create greater visual contrast (as in fig. 4.14 above). Neon lighting along the walls of the set come to life in numbers like “Totally Fucked,” which not only provides additional visual interest onstage but also celebrates the spirit of teenage rebellion via the twenty-first century.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Lighting designer Kevin Adams says of the show, “I think what this show is, is nineteenth-century objects with twenty-first-century light sculptures.” In David Cote, *Spring Awakening: In the Flesh* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008), 69.

Ensemble

Concept musicals

Another substantial difference between “Golden Age” musicals and concept shows was each form’s use of the ensemble. Stacy Wolf, in *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, compares the different ways ensembles were constructed and used during and after the “Golden Age,” noting that prior to the 1970s, the ensemble in traditional integrated musicals was typically a nebulous, anonymous performing force. The chorus was used to populate the stage and serve as background filler, with ensemble members often playing multiple roles throughout the show – Wolf notes how the ensemble in *My Fair Lady* plays everything from street vendors and beggars to wealthy, pretentious socialites. As the structure of musicals shifted toward the conceptual, the role of the ensemble also shifted accordingly. Instead of the ensemble existing primarily as background support for the principals, the ensemble *became* the “musical’s principal.”⁴⁸ This shift in the ensemble – from background to foreground – is paramount, because it affected the Broadway musical on both structural and dramatic levels.

In book musicals, musical numbers and scenes ideally contribute to and drive the show’s linear narrative. What this means for the performing forces is that lead characters will necessarily feature in most, if not all, of the musical numbers, as the plot conflict typically revolves around the leads. For ensemble numbers, a lead character will often state the main musical material first, at which point the ensemble joins in (e.g., “Oklahoma!” from *Oklahoma!*, “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair” from *South Pacific*, “America” from *West Side Story* [1957]). In effect the ensemble functions in deference to the lead roles due to dramatic necessity.

⁴⁸ Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97.

The non-linear plots of concept musicals, however, meant that musical numbers did not need to build on each other in the same way as in integrated shows. The result of this structural change was that the dramatic focus of a given show was no longer restricted to resolving the plot conflict in a clear, linear way. Removing the need for musical numbers to actively move the plot forward meant that musical numbers could go to characters other than the leads without affecting how the story might be received. Ensemble members began to have more substantial singing and spoken parts and were even assigned character names. In contrast with the integrated musical, major numbers in concept musicals were now led by members of the ensemble, who might even have their own song to perform as part of the show (from *Company*: “Another Hundred People,” “Getting Married Today,” “The Ladies Who Lunch”; from *Godspell* [1970]: “Day By Day,” “Learn Your Lessons Well,” “All Good Gifts”; from *A Chorus Line*: “Sing!,” “Dance: Ten, Looks: Three”). In providing individualized material for ensemble members, creative teams destabilized the traditional division between “the leads” and “the chorus.”

Not only were the ensemble members more individualized as characters and performers, but there was also a growing focus on greater racial and gender diversity within ensembles. As concept musicals became increasingly more tied to social life and politics, casts similarly reflected the demographic reality of contemporary society. Shows such as *Hair* (1968), *Godspell*, and *A Chorus Line* are cited as early concept musicals featuring more diverse casts than previous decades.⁴⁹ Although audiences in the 1960s and 1970s were predominantly white and upper-

⁴⁹ Although musicals in the 1960s and 1970s had increasingly more diverse casts than previously, and nontraditional casting practices developed in the 1980s and 1990s to further multi-racial casting, diversity on and Off-Broadway remains problematic. The representation of different ethnicities on stage remains heavily skewed toward Caucasian performers (~70% as of 2014-2015 theater season, according to a report by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition [AAPAC]). Nontraditional casting accounted for only ~10% of ethnic minorities cast

middle/upper class (a statistic that remains largely unchanged through the present day),⁵⁰ the increasing diversity represented onstage spoke to the ongoing changes in the socio-political climate of the era and Broadway's attempt to reflect those changes onstage.

The most noticeable change for ensembles in concept musicals, however, was the emergence of the non-dancing ensemble. Previously, the ensemble in integrated shows (and earlier) served as a "singing and dancing ensemble,"⁵¹ but Wolf notes that the stage directions for *Company* explicitly indicate that "[t]here is no singing or dancing ensemble."⁵² Dancing ensembles did not entirely disappear from the concept musical – *A Chorus Line* takes place during a dance audition, after all – but overall, non-dancing ensembles featured more regularly in concept musicals. Removing the requirement for performers to have special dance training removed another potential point of separation between lead performers and ensemble members. Additionally, choreography in many concept musicals became about more abstracted movement and gestures rather than formalized dance sequences.

The changing role of ensembles in concept musicals disrupted the traditional delineation between principal actors and the chorus found in integrated shows. Greater structural fluidity

in shows in the 2014-2015 season. Pun Bandhu, *Ethnic Representations on New York City Stages, 2014-2015* (AAPAC.com, April 2016), <http://www.aapacnyc.org/stats-2014-2015.html>.

⁵⁰ According to the most recent demographic survey done by the Broadway League, white theatergoers made 77% of all ticket purchases in the 2015-2016 season, a figure virtually unchanged since the Broadway League started issuing demographic reports nineteen years ago. The Broadway League, "Executive Summary – The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2015-2016 Season," accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/research-reports/>; Karen Hauser, *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2012-2013* (New York: The Broadway League, December 2013).

⁵¹ Wolf, 98.

⁵² Furth and Sondheim, *Company*, np.

afforded by the concept musical created the ideal situation for creative teams to change how ensembles operated as a performing force, setting the precedent for ensemble-centered shows in the coming decades.

Neo-conceptual musicals

Ensembles in neo-conceptual musicals function in similar ways to the ensembles in concept musicals. They tend to feature more individualized roles, ensemble-led numbers, non-dancing ensembles,⁵³ and increased racial and gender diversity within casts.⁵⁴ While neo-conceptual shows often adhere to linear plots, the distinction between ensemble and principal roles remains as blurred as it did in the concept musical. So although the traditional hierarchy of lead roles and ensemble members may exist within the musical's plotline, the staging and musical choices made by the creative team ensures that the cast works together as a company.

Cast members remain onstage for extended periods of time throughout a given neo-conceptual shows, even if their characters are not specifically in the current scene. This means ensembles spend a greater amount of time together onstage than they might in traditional book

⁵³ Bill T. Jones, the choreographer for *Spring Awakening*, recalls that during rehearsals “[t]he actors regularly reminded me, ‘We’re not dancers.’ [...] So I went to one of my favorite resources, which is gesture.” In Cote, *Spring Awakening*, 67.

⁵⁴ Again, racial and gender diversity in ensembles is still limited, including in the case studies considered in this chapter. Of the shows discussed here, while most of them do not call for race-specific casts, almost all of them featured predominantly Caucasian casts, apart from *Spring Awakening* and *Avenue Q*. Casting for *Spring Awakening* followed nontraditional casting practices, though actors of color were typically featured in the ensemble – the three lead roles were played by Caucasian actors. In the case of *Avenue Q*, the cast includes two roles for actors of color, each of which is race-specific (the role of Gary Coleman is played by an African-American woman and the role of Christmas Eve is played by an Asian-American woman). Replacement cast members for these two shows appeared to be selected in line with the initial cast line up. See the Playbill Vault for opening night cast and replacement cast information, www.playbillvault.com.

musicals. Part of the motivation for keeping ensemble members onstage in a neo-conceptual musical is practical, as they often assist in scene changes and provide onstage vocal support in musical numbers, as seen in *Spring Awakening* and *Once*. With the shift toward ensemble-centered musical numbers, although the show's narrative may suggest a solo or duet for the lead characters, many numbers in neo-conceptual musicals begin as solos but end with the entire ensemble singing equally.

An interesting consequence of keeping the company onstage throughout a show is that scenes that might once have been staged featuring only the actors required for the moment, such as two performers for a love duet, now include the entire ensemble, which creates a much different dramatic atmosphere. The love scene between Wendla and Melchior in *Spring Awakening* at the end of Act I, for example, takes place on a suspended platform as the rest of the cast surrounds them and watches the encounter while singing "I Believe."⁵⁵ In contrast to the staging of "Some Enchanted Evening" from *South Pacific* or "All I Ask of You" from *The Phantom of the Opera*, where each romantic couple duets in relative isolation, the proximity of the ensemble while Wendla and Melchior are having sex is startling.

From a practical perspective, the ensemble-centric nature of musical numbers in neo-conceptual shows makes sense in keeping full casts on stage for scenes not involving them. From a dramatic perspective, retaining the cast on stage can mitigate the audience's experience of intimate moments in the show that might feel especially voyeuristic for them to witness.

Furthermore, some productions choose to seat some audience members onstage, even "planting"

⁵⁵ In the recent revival of *Spring Awakening* produced by Deaf West in 2015, the scene between Wendla and Melchior was also staged with the rest of the cast watching and singing as they have sex. Unlike the original production, where the ensemble holds onto the suspended platform supporting the couple, the revival staging keeps the ensemble at a more comfortable distance from Wendla and Melchior and the cast is kept in shadow.

some cast members among the patrons, blurring the distinction between the audience and ensemble.⁵⁶ For a show like *Spring Awakening*, aligning the audience so closely with the perspective of the ensemble more directly invites theatergoers to see themselves in the story, a key attribute important to the self-reflective nature of many neo-conceptual shows.

Socio-political parallels between the 1970s and the post-millennium

The 1970s: Concept musicals look inward

The Civil Rights movement and rise of second wave feminism both represented major socio-political shifts in the United States that found its way onto Broadway stages. Meanwhile, throughout the 1970s, U.S. society grew increasingly self-focused in the wake of such political scandals as the Watergate Affair and the military's embarrassing withdrawal from the Vietnam War (1955-1975). In 1976, journalist Tom Wolfe described the inward focus of society as symptomatic of the "Me" decade.⁵⁷ People looked inward, "changing one's personality ... observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)," while ignoring the ensuing political and economic firestorms raging elsewhere.⁵⁸ The result was a "culture of narcissism," to use a phrase coined by Christopher Lasch.⁵⁹ Accordingly, musicals featured stories that explored issues of the self and the role of the self in society, such as *Hair* and *Company*.

⁵⁶ Ben Sisario, "Enter Stage Left, With a Ticket," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2007.

⁵⁷ See Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York*, August 23, 1976: 26-40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁹ See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

Concept musicals addressed socially and politically conscious topics in ways previously untouched by most “Golden Age” shows,⁶⁰ reflecting the ongoing escalation of socio-political unrest that characterized the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. John Bush Jones argues that the fragmented plots and elements of concept musicals “accurately mirrored the fragmented American society of the 1970s and the anxieties of inward-turning individuals.”⁶¹ Because concept musicals foregrounded an aesthetic or ideological concept, the less structured form of the concept musical provided creative teams with the flexibility to create works that could more fully interrogate complicated topical issues without needing to accomplish the task within a coherent, teleological framework. Paired with the sense of community generated by ensembles onstage, the concept musical became the ideal space to present “women and men in more collaborative social units” in otherwise trying times.⁶²

The 2000s: The *Zeitgeist* of the 1970s and questions of self in neo-conceptual musicals

The post-millennium saw a similar engagement in neo-conceptual musicals with socio-political issues. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the complex social and political ramifications of the post-9/11 world were difficult for the U.S. populace to unpack. President George W. Bush issued pointed warnings to the Middle East in his State of the Union address in January 2002, calling Iran, Iraq, and North Korea the “axis of evil, arming to threaten

⁶⁰ For more on the socio-political and musicals, see John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

⁶¹ Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 273. Jones prefers the term “fragmented musical” instead of concept musical because he finds the latter term to be vague and unhelpful as a descriptor. *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶² Wolf, 92.

the peace of the world” with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).⁶³ Bush’s claim that Iraq possessed WMDs was hotly contested by critics, but the President ultimately convinced Congress of the need for preemptive war.⁶⁴

Bush’s triumphant and highly theatrical declaration of “Mission Accomplished” in 2003 was met with dissent by international and domestic critics, opposition which grew when no weapons of mass destruction were discovered in Iraq.⁶⁵ As William Chafe notes, “It now seemed that every argument used to justify the war – Saddam’s aggressive nuclear program, his multiple WMDs, and the allegation of a direct link between Saddam and Osama – had no basis in fact. The United States had lost more than two thousand lives...for a war that lacked a persuasive rationale.”⁶⁶ For post-Watergate America, the Bush administration’s deception conjured up specters of the political turbulence of the 1970s.

In the wake of such a complicated socio-political climate,⁶⁷ neo-conceptual musicals offered audiences stories of self-examination in times of uncertainty, much like the concept musical’s exploration of the self in a disorienting world. Many neo-conceptual shows

⁶³ George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” Washington, D.C., January 29, 2002, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29644&st=&st1=>.

⁶⁴ “We choose to meet that threat now, where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities,” Bush asserted. George W. Bush, “President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq within 48 Hours,” Washington, D.C., March 17, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7.html>.

⁶⁵ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 553.

⁶⁶ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 553-4.

⁶⁷ See Stacy Wolf, “The 2003-2004 Season and Broadway Musical Theatre as a Political Conversant,” in *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriot Dissent*, ed. Jenny Spencer (New York: Routledge, 2012), 19-37.

acknowledge and respond to feelings of lack of control in some form, whether it be social or political. These shows focus on the role of the self in society (*Urinetown*, *Avenue Q*, *Spring Awakening*), on the self in relation to others (*Avenue Q*, *Spring Awakening*, *Once*, *Fun Home*), or on rejection/acceptance of the self (*Avenue Q*, *Next to Normal*, *Violet*, *Fun Home*), topics which all recall the more internal focus of concept musicals in the 1970s.⁶⁸

“Money makes the world go around”⁶⁹: Marketing neo-conceptual musicals

From a commercial standpoint, the neo-conceptual musical made a lot of sense in the post-millennium. Broadway was struggling financially following 9/11 and the recession just a few years later in 2008 sent theater companies and producers looking for ways to stay afloat.⁷⁰ Shows featuring smaller casts, lower technology demands, and an unknown creative team were much more appealing to produce than the (expensive) megamusical, a genre that had become less popular by the early 2000s. The main caveat of producing a small show mounted by a team of unknowns, however, is the potential difficulty of convincing an audience to see the show in the first place.

⁶⁸ Ben Brantley, “*Fun Home* and Other Quests for Self,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2015. See also John Bush Jones, “New Voices, New Perspectives” in *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, 331-358.

⁶⁹ Joes Masteroff, Fred Ebb, and John Kander, *Cabaret [revised]* (New York: Tams-Witmark Music Library, 1998), 46.

⁷⁰ Although Broadway’s economic situation was relatively stable by Spring of 2002, shows relied heavily on the city to subsidize ticket sales in the months immediately following the terrorist attacks to make ends meet. Robin Pogrebin, “How Broadway Bounced Back After 9/11; But Downtown Theater Lacked the Right Ties,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2002. See also Scott Miller, *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007), 226. For a discussion on the effects of the 2008 recession, see Sarah Hart, “Agility Under Pressure,” *American Theatre* 26, no. 7 (November 2009): 32-38; Hart, “Lean and Mean, But True to Mission,” *American Theatre* 27, no. 9 (November 2010): 36-42.

As discussed above, neo-conceptual musicals foregrounded their Off-Broadway pedigree and postmodern/avant-garde aesthetics to distinguish themselves as non-traditional Broadway fare. Stories of the development period for these shows emphasized what little experience members of the creative teams had on Broadway (particularly the book author, lyricist, and composer), implying that the teams' inexperience gave them a unique ability to produce exciting, innovative work because they were not beholden to industry rules of what should and shouldn't work. Interviews and "making-of" books for various neo-conceptual musicals carry a common refrain: "This concept/topic shouldn't have worked, we were told by everyone it wouldn't work, but, look, we made it work." Critics and scholars particularly focused on the self-constructed Cinderella stories of the neo-conceptual musicals because the success of such shows against Broadway's commercial behemoths (Disney, Cameron Mackintosh, Andrew Lloyd Weber) represented another victory against for-profit theater.

The irony, of course, is that these shows *were* commercially successful, sometimes exceedingly so. Of the neo-conceptual shows discussed in this chapter, each of them recouped their initial capitalization (which ranged from approximately \$2.5-6 million), a difficult feat for most Broadway shows, even those with low weekly running costs (see table 4.1 below for financial and run information of each show).⁷¹

⁷¹ Sources for information in table 4.1: Ernio Hernandez, "Give Us Your Money! Musical *Avenue Q* Recoups Investment on Broadway; Tour Next," Playbill.com, May 3, 2004, <http://www.playbill.com/article/give-us-your-money-musical-avenue-q-recoups-investment-on-broadway-tour-next-com-119477>; Andrew Gans and Adam Hetrick, "*Spring Awakening* Recoups on Broadway," Playbill.com, August 28, 2007, <http://www.playbill.com/article/spring-awakening-recoups-on-broadway-com-143284>; Patrick Healy, "Broadway's Unlikely Hit Gives Hope to the Bold," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2010; Patrick Healy, "*Once* Turns a Profit, Faster Than Most," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2012, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/13/once-turns-a-profit-faster-than-most/>; Kenneth Jones, "*Urinetown* Recoups Investment, But Is Future as Grim as the Show's Namesake?," Playbill.com, October 30, 2003, <http://www.playbill.com/article/urinetown-recoups-investment->

Show title	Total performances	Capitalization	Time to recoup ⁷²
<i>Urinetown</i>	965 (25 previews)	\$3.7 million	25 months
<i>Avenue Q</i>	2,534 (22 previews)	\$3.5 million	10 months
<i>Spring Awakening</i>	859 (28 previews)	\$6 million	7 months
<i>Next to Normal</i>	734 (20 previews)	\$4 million	11 months
<i>Once</i>	1,168 (23 previews)	\$5.5 million	21 weeks
<i>Fun Home</i>	583 (26 previews)	\$2.5 million	8 months

Table 4.1: Capitalization and recoup figures of select neo-conceptual musicals

But in articles run by major news outlets, the focus of their reports is not merely that a given neo-conceptual show turned a profit. Instead, the emphasis is on the perceived impossibility of it all and how the show in question proved its worth once again.⁷³ What I find telling about the public discourse on the commercial success of neo-conceptual musicals is how much energy is invested in de-emphasizing the financial figures, as if a show with high artistic aspirations could not also

but-is-future-as-grim-as-the-shows-namesake-com-116078; Michael Paulson, “*Fun Home* Recoups on Broadway,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2015.

⁷² The time to recoup is affected in part by the average ticket price for a given show. Ticket prices currently average \$100, with top ticket prices ranging from \$187 for *Chicago* (1996 revival) to \$849 for *Hamilton* (2015). Higher ticket prices mean higher weekly gross potential which, when combined with low weekly running costs, translates to less time needed to turn a profit. Ticket cost information taken from the Broadway League, “Research & Statistics – Grosses – Broadway in NYC,” accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/grosses-broadway-nyc/>.

⁷³ Regarding *Next to Normal*’s success, lead producer Ira Pittelman said, “When financial triumph arrives for a musical like *Next to Normal* that is so different than the usual Broadway fare, I think it becomes inspiring for a lot of us to take more risks in our shows’ storytelling and music.” Quoted in Healy, “Broadway’s Unlikely Hit Gives Hope to the Bold.”

On *Fun Home*’s recoup: “The producers still remember the reaction of theater world mavens when they said they wanted to bring *Fun Home* to Broadway. Sure, the show had ecstatic reviews and was selling out off Broadway, but it was the coming-of-age story of a lesbian cartoonist whose gay father killed himself. Could that possibly succeed in the famously flop-rich environment of for-profit theater? ‘They said we were insane to do this,’ said Mike Isaacson. ‘Really? You’re bringing that to Broadway?’ recalled Barbara Whitman. ‘I think crazy was the word we heard most,’ said Kristin Caskey.” Paulson, “*Fun Home* Recoups on Broadway.”

be celebrated as a commercial venture. Equally intriguing, as some scholars have noted, is the way many neo-conceptual shows were not just turning a profit, they were in fact commercializing an aesthetic that for many decades was explicitly tied to not-for-profit theater.⁷⁴

For many critics and scholars, however, the recent commercialization of Off-Broadway, the postmodern, and the avant-garde still pales in comparison to the commodification of Broadway by megamusicals in the 1980s and 1990s. While the neo-conceptual musical adheres in many ways to marketing strategies of the megashows (e.g., iconic imagery for marketing purposes, extensive merchandizing, heavy ad campaigns), there appears to be an underlying hope in criticism and scholarship that these productions still align themselves with the spirit of not-for-profit theater. The commercial success of neo-conceptual musicals, however, serves as a reminder that the relationship between not-for-profit and for-profit theater ventures grows more complicated with each new theater season.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See Vicki L. Hoskins, "Marketing musicals: Commercializing the avant-garde in *Spring Awakening*," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 7, no. 3 (December 2013), 359-368.

⁷⁵ See Gordon Cox's article for *American Theatre*, where artistic directors, producers, playwrights, and composers reflect on the state of the uneasy union between not-for-profit institutions and commercial theater. Cox, "Defining the Relationship," *American Theatre* 31, no. 3 (March 2014): 24-29, 69.

Chapter Five:

“How to Succeed in (Show) Business Without Really Trying”:

Revivals, “revisals,” and critical nostalgia on Broadway

Since the 1970s, revivals have enjoyed increased visibility on the Great White Way, so much so that a new Tony Award category for “Best Revival of a Play or Musical” was created in 1977.¹ The uptick in revivals/revisals, of course, put critics and creative teams on high alert; the increase in these productions was interpreted as a sign that Broadway was running out of creative ideas and could make money only by revisiting its golden days.² Other scholars posited that the proliferation of revivals on Broadway also could be read as a symptom of audience nostalgia during politically turbulent and discouraging times.³ These concerns, as noted in chapter one, are not new. Fears of having no original material, and complaints of audiences seeking out the comfortable rather than the innovative, persist from season to season. Given that critics and scholars regularly draw on such rhetoric when discussing the value of brand-based shows (e.g., Disney, Marvel, Dreamworks), it is logical that similar conversations surface when addressing the state of the Broadway revival.

Revivals, after all, are themselves already branded, often by association with a given creator and/or creative team. The business of reviving a Broadway musical mirrors the act of

¹ The category was later separated into “Best Revival of a Play” and “Best Revival of a Musical” in 1994.

² Jesse McKinley assessed the current health of Broadway revivals in the mid-2000s, writing, “There was a time – let’s call it the mid-1990s – when if you wanted to turn a buck on Broadway, you turned to the past.” McKinley, “Hey, Let’s Not Put on a Show!,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2005.

³ See John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 306-308.

adapting film material to the stage in many ways – economically, aesthetically, narratively – when it comes to balancing audience expectations with what a creative team wants to achieve. Different material lends itself to different styles of revivals, of course, which in turn generates numerous ideological layers to untangle about not only what *kinds* of shows are revived, but also *how* these shows are revived. In the post-millennium, the Broadway revival has had mixed success, with the mid-late 2000s seeing a resurgence in traditional and reimagined revivals. Looking at the past several seasons, a clear scenographic difference materializes in how “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age” musicals are remounted for contemporary Broadway audiences, where the former focus on nostalgic, traditional productions and the latter are treated to more radical restagings.

In this chapter I will explore how the scenographic differences between “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age” revivals are symptomatic of the complex web of issues shaping how production teams and audiences (mis)remember Broadway of the past. The differing approaches to reviving “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age” musicals provide a useful starting point to consider how nostalgia for, and the privileging of, the “Golden Age” is enacted on Broadway.⁴ For this chapter, I will use the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and those of Stephen Sondheim as “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age” case studies, respectively. First, I will provide brief analyses of the scenographic treatment of recent revivals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and of Sondheim musicals as compared to their original productions. Then, I will engage in a comparison of the differences in scenography between “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age” revivals. The closing section will offer a reflection on the critical reception for

⁴ One would need a separate dissertation to properly interrogate the complex socio-political, aesthetic, economic, and ethical issues enmeshed in the process of reviving musicals.

these shows and how the language used by critics perpetuates the “Golden Age”/post-“Golden Age” dichotomy.

Types of Broadway revivals

Revivals and revisals over the years have followed various formulas for success: some are direct re-stagings of the material without any essential changes to the book or original show design (a kind of *Werktreue* approach); in other cases, the book, music, and/or lyrics are altered for socio-political reasons (*Flower Drum Song* [2002], *South Pacific* [2008], *West Side Story* [2009], *Rodgers + Hammerstein’s Cinderella* [2013]); and in other cases, the show’s frame and/or design is completely reconceived (*Sweeney Todd* [2005], *Company* [2006], *Into the Woods* [Off-Broadway, 2015]). Typically shows dating to the “Golden Age” (Rodgers and Hammerstein) or earlier (Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, etc.) are mounted using either the first or second approach. They are often treated as inviolable and their revivals do little to address unsavory characterizations (particularly related to race and gender) in the book, music, and/or lyrics. Their scenographic style is realistic, choreographers will recreate original choreography when possible (particularly as created by such major figures as Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, and Michael Bennett), and, when the budget allows, revivals will boast the original orchestration complete with full pit orchestra and a large chorus.

In contrast, revivals for original productions mounted after the “Golden Age” are treated to much more drastic reimaginings, which in turn recast the initial material in starkly different ways. Sondheim’s works, for instance, are often subjected to more radical redesigns. Most visibly, the conceptual framing device of many post-“Golden Age” shows is often drastically altered, which can complicate the original (sub)text of a given musical. As part of this reframing

process, a revival's scenography draws more from postmodern and avant-garde aesthetics, the shows feature reduced cast sizes, and they are often re-orchestrated for smaller performing forces.

Reviving the “Golden Age” of Rodgers and Hammerstein

As mentioned in chapter one, highly restrictive licensing practices by creators and organizations, most famously Rodgers & Hammerstein: An Imagem Company, has encouraged a culture of replica productions on the regional and amateur levels for the past several decades.⁵ Licensed productions are legally required to perform the book, lyrics, and music without significant (or any) alteration without prior approval from the composer/lyricist/book author (or their estates) and there is no set standard for how content changes for an upcoming revival are approved.⁶ Ted Chapin, the president and chief creative officer of Rodgers & Hammerstein: An Imagem Company, explains, “It’s really show by show. [...] *Showboat* [sic] and *Annie Get Your Gun* were revised by their authors in their lifetime, so on those, we give some leeway. Where it begins to get complicated is were somebody to say, ‘I want to change the choreography in *King and I*.’”⁷ The organization additionally affords different degrees of creative flexibility for productions depending on their “tier”: “first-class” productions (Broadway), professional productions (professional regional theater), and amateur productions (community and school

⁵ See Valerie M. Joyce, “Rodgers and Hammerstein: The Sound of Money,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Musical Theatre Producers*, ed. Laura MacDonald and William A. Everett (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 173-190.

⁶ Of course, licensed scripts also feature a notice requiring that any cuts or changes be indicated using soft, black lead pencil to be erased prior to returning the rented materials.

⁷ Chapin quoted in McKinley, “Hey, Let’s Not Put on a Show!”

theater).⁸ A request from a prominent theater director will likely receive greater consideration than requests from a local school or summer stock company. Beyond institution- and legally imposed limits on altering a show's content, the relative accessibility of original cast recordings and film adaptations of many "Golden Age" musicals function as an audio-visual catalogue that production teams can consult when mounting their revival.⁹

Production teams reviving a "Golden Age" musical on Broadway (or at the professional level as directed by a well-known director), then, have the greatest creative leeway,¹⁰ but whether they choose to exercise that leeway is another issue altogether. For some producers, the ideal balance in restaging a show is "when artists take the essence of the original work, add to it subtly or stage it inventively, and make the show live anew without betraying the original."¹¹ Recent Rodgers and Hammerstein revivals directed by Bartlett Sher for the Lincoln Center Theatre – *South Pacific* and *The King and I* (2015) – illustrate how "Golden Age" revivals are often staged in ways that strongly evoke the "essence" of the original productions.

⁸ Jessica Hillman, "Tradition or Travesty?: Radical Reinterpretations of the Musical Theatre Canon," *Theatre Topics* 20, no. 1 (March 2010): 2.

⁹ These forms of media, of course, are created and released with approval from a show's creators or their estate, which ensure the brand of a given show remains intact.

¹⁰ *Oklahoma!* has been revived in a few reimagined productions in recent years (directed by Molly Smith for the Arena Stage [2010]; directed by Daniel Fish for the Fisher Center [2015]), in productions that boast non-traditional casting and, in the case of the Fisher Center production, a deconstructed, semi-interactive show. But even with the success of the latter production, Ted Chapin remained cautious of, though open to, the possibility of bringing it to New York City. Jennifer Schuessler, "*Oklahoma!* Reimagined: Less Cornpone, but Fresh Cornbread," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2015. See also Ben Brantley, "*Oklahoma!* Preserves a Classic While Adding Punch," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2015.

¹¹ Jack Viertel quoted in Patrick Healy, "New Layers Amid the Song and Dance," *The New York Times*, September 15, 2011.

This undefined “essence,” however, is highly problematic. As I will explore below, the production teams for “Golden Age” revivals exploit a show’s historical milieu as an excuse to perpetuate exoticism and racial stereotyping in their productions under the guise of “nostalgia.” And, perhaps more disturbing, theater critics are surprisingly quiet about the nostalgic racism still playing on Broadway stages.

South Pacific

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* was adapted from James A. Michener’s *Tales from the South Pacific*. It centers on the romance between a U.S. army nurse from Arkansas, Nellie Forbush, and a French planter, Emile de Becque, during World War II, and engages with issues of racial intolerance and acceptance. The show was an immediate hit, playing for 1,925 performances, spawning a successful transfer to London’s West End in 1952 and a filmed version in 1958. Public affection for the show was strong, making the lack of a Broadway revival until 2008 surprising for many.¹²

Mark Yeargan’s set designs for the revivals of *South Pacific* and *The King and I* mix realistic practical sets with minimalist backgrounds and other design elements. The combination of the two styles mediates audience expectations by gesturing toward Joseph “Jo” Mielziner’s original designs within a contemporary visual frame. In *South Pacific*, the interplay between realism and minimalism is intended to be the visual manifestation of Sher’s vision for the show,

¹² As Andrea Most points out, the mythology surrounding the importance of *South Pacific* accounts for the show’s popularity while ignoring the hypocritical nature of a musical that purports to be pro-racial tolerance while simultaneously perpetuating racist stereotypes in the show’s text, particularly of Asian characters. Most, ““You Have to Be Carefully Taught’: The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*,” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3 (October 2000): 307-337.

with the vibrant, romantic quality of the islands in Act I giving way to the dark, murky atmosphere of war seen in Act II.¹³ Yeargan’s design centers around a lone palm tree in the sand and a hazy view of the alluring island, Bali Ha’i, on the horizon (see fig. 5.1), all framed by large panels of wooden blinds. These three components – the palm tree, Bali Ha’i, and the blinds – serve as the skeleton of the set and are supplemented by mobile, practical set pieces moved around the stage by cast members and flats that fly in for select scenes.

While many elements of Yeargan’s set gesture toward Mielziner’s designs, none is more evident than the backdrop featuring Bali Ha’i. The image is a clear homage to Mielziner’s conception of the island in his design for the original 1949 production (see fig. 5.1) both in its basic visual of the island and in how it was lit throughout the show. Mielziner’s Bali Ha’i drop was painted on both sides to allow for the dramatic lighting changes appropriate for the mystical island. When lit from the front, the view of the island was of a tropical paradise surrounded by deep turquoise water. When lit from behind for the number “Bali Ha’i,” the drop “was transformed into a dark sky and deep red sea.”¹⁴ Similar to Mielziner’s construction for the Bali Ha’i drop, Yeargan’s adaptable drop design also transformed with changes in the lighting. In the case of the revival, the image of the island was painted on the upstage side of the translucent drop so that backlighting reveals Bali Ha’i looming in the distance while front lighting obscures our view of the island.¹⁵

¹³ David Barbour, “The Island at the End of the World: Creating the tropic setting of Broadway’s new *South Pacific*,” *Lighting and Sound America* (June 2008): 5.

¹⁴ Mary C. Henderson, *Mielziner: Master of Modern Stage Design* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2001), 173.

¹⁵ Barbour, “The Island at the End of the World,” 3.



Figure 5.1: *Above*, two views of Yeargan’s set (photos by Joan Marcus); *below*, Mielziner’s original watercolor concept.

Following the visual reverie that is Act I, Act II is a stark departure from the verdant tropics. The “very compressed, monochromatic, and angular” quality of the lighting and set design provides the necessary dramatic ballast to ground the otherwise soaring nostalgic quality of the revival.¹⁶ Sher chose to retain some of the extended war-related scenes in Act II that are typically cut/trimmed, which gave the creative team the opportunity to approach the material

¹⁶ Holder quoted in Barbour, “The Island at the End of the World,” 6.

without needing to incorporate any preconceived aesthetic notions established by other productions for how those scenes should be staged.¹⁷ While the stage remains as visually open and spacious as it did in Act I, Yeargan's wall of blinds and massive military map combined with Holder's pockets of harsh white overhead lighting creates a design that captures the crushing tension of the dramatic action. Nostalgic lighting or staging gestures have no real place in Act II, save the final scene where the lovers, Emile de Becque and Nellie Forbush, are reunited. In the closing minutes of the show, the uncertainty of the night yields to the new day and we find ourselves once more awash in the rosy hope of a new future.

The King and I

The overwhelming success of *South Pacific* paved the way for the Lincoln Center Theater's revival of *The King and I* several years later, which was helmed by the same creative team as *South Pacific* (directed by Sher, sets by Yeargan, and lighting by Holder). Unlike *South Pacific*, which had not been revived on Broadway since the original 1949 production, *The King and I* had experienced several Broadway revivals since its original run. Sher felt that the visual exoticism present in the designs for many revivals was problematic as it distracted from the complex socio-political issues of the show.¹⁸ The production team's solution was to strip down the show's visuals to a few core elements to allow the social and political issues to come out

¹⁷ Sher describes his decision: "There is this long radio scene, and you go into this almost collage-like structure where everything is suddenly overlapping. Many people cut or tighten it, but we're actually interested in how weird it is. We call the first act the romance act and the second the war act." Quoted in "Building a House: An Interview with Michael Yeargan and Bartlett Sher," *Lincoln Center Theater Review*, no. 45-46 (Spring 2008): 20.

¹⁸ "A Modern Twist: An Interview with Bartlett Sher, Catherine Zuber, and Michael Yeargan," *Lincoln Center Theater Review*, no. 65 (Spring 2015): 9.

more clearly. These elements included a teak wood stage deck inlaid with gold strips running from the front of the stage to the upstage wall, six pillars that track around the stage in varied configurations, and large, sheer curtains to separate different areas of the stage as needed. Mobile practical set pieces would be used to fill in the remaining space. Like their designs for *South Pacific*, Yeargan's and Holder's designs for *The King and I* play to the audience's nostalgic expectations of the revival by producing an lush, jewel-toned world that alludes to previous productions, which is then tempered subtly by the imposing minimalistic pillars (see fig. 5.2).



Figure 5.2: *Above left*, Jo Mielziner's 1951 design¹⁹; *above right*, Yeargan's initial set mockup (photo by Yeargan); *below*, fully realized set pictured from the house (photo by author).

¹⁹ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, "Gertrude Lawrence (Anna Leonowens), Yul Brynner (The King), Terry Saunders (Lady Thiang) with Wives and Royal Children in The King and I," New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7430896d-d6a6-1055-e040-e00a18065094>.

Although Sher and his design team sought to eschew the blatant exoticism of previous productions, the show's aesthetic still reflects some of the work done in the original production and subsequent revivals.²⁰ Yeargan's striking use of the automated pillars evokes Mielziner's palatial design from 1951 as well as the 1977 and 1985 revivals. The movement capabilities of the large pillars puts a modern twist on the design, allowing the pillars to resculpt the otherwise blank space of the stage as they move. The intricate detailing on the pillars and decorative front panels flanking the stage also contribute a modern stylization to the nineteenth century world unfolding onstage. Holder's vibrant lighting palette incorporates washes of deep purple, blue, red, and orange, which instills a heightened sense of theatricality that persists throughout the show. The dramatic nature of the lighting design combined with the extravagance of the set draws Sher's revival roundly into the realm of escapist nostalgia even more than his production of *South Pacific*.

Reviving the post-“Golden Age”

In spite of the success enjoyed by the Lincoln Center Theater's revivals of Rodgers and Hammerstein's work, the most successful revivals to date are in fact post-“Golden Age” musicals: *Chicago* (1996) and *Cabaret* (1998). Both productions experienced enormous success in the age of highly-publicized scandals, trials (including the O.J. Simpson murder trial), and growing cynicism toward the intersection of fame and crime that was becoming a common

²⁰ Though not necessarily a scenographic element, it is worth noting that Christopher Gattelli's choreography draws heavily from Jerome Robbins' original choreography, creating another visual parallel between the 2015 revival and its predecessors. The similarities are most noticeable in the iconic Act II ballet sequence, “The Small House of Uncle Thomas.” See Gattelli's interview in Sylviane Gold, “On Broadway: Revising Robbins,” *dancemagazine.com*, March 1, 2015.

fixture in the media, as noted by many critics and scholars.²¹ The revivals were lauded for their daring reconceptualization of the material and willingness to strip down the productions down to the barest components.

Two of Sondheim's musicals, *Assassins* (2004) and *Sweeney Todd*, received similar reconceptualizations in the post-millennium. Both productions represent some of Sondheim's more controversial work: *Assassins* presents the stories of nine successful and attempted assassins from U.S. history while *Sweeney Todd* musicalizes the story of the fabled "Demon Barber of Fleet Street," who murders individuals who are then baked into meat pies by his accomplice, Mrs. Lovett. Much like the uncanny timeliness of *Chicago* and *Cabaret*'s revivals, the revivals for *Assassins* and *Sweeney Todd* each provided different interpretations of what happens when an individual is ignored and crushed by the socio-political machine.

Assassins

The radical subject matter in Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's *Assassins* was met with a tepid critical response after its Off-Broadway opening at the Playwright's Horizon in January 1991. Most felt there was no clear authorial perspective. Is the audience supposed to feel sorry for the assassins? Are the assassins accusing the audience of not securing the purported "American Dream" for all? Are we (the audience) enablers of such horrific crimes, and thus responsible for these "monsters"? Some of the puzzlement felt by the critics stemmed from the show's structure as a concept musical, which for many made it an ineffective vehicle for

²¹ As of this writing, *Chicago* is still running (8,515 performances as of April 30, 2017). *Cabaret* ran for 2,377 performances, closing in 2004. The revival production was recently "revived" for a time in 2014 for 388 performances and featured some of the 1998 revival's original cast, including Alan Cumming as the Emcee.

addressing the questions it poses. Moreover, the first Gulf War, which coincided with the show's opening, made audiences wary of a musical that seemed to question whether the American Dream was reasonable anymore, and which seemed accusatory in the bargain. And so, despite its sold-out run, *Assassins* did not transfer to Broadway as originally anticipated, with the decision to close Off-Broadway reflecting a general sense that audiences were put off by the "unpatriotic" sentiments portrayed onstage.

Roughly thirteen years later, in 2004, *Assassins* took another shot (so to speak), opening at Studio 54 under the direction of Joe Mantello. It included a new number ("Something Just Broke") written for the 1992 London production, ostensibly to rebalance the show's perspective by presenting the perspective of the average American citizen as affected by the assassinations. Critics responded more favorably to the 2004 incarnation, despite it appearing on Broadway less than three years after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.²² Frank Rich observed, "It's not the show that has changed so much as the world. The huge difference in response to *Assassins* from one war in Iraq to the next is about as empirical an indicator of the larger drift of our post-9/11 culture as can be found."²³ The production managed to run a little longer than its 1991 predecessor (73 performances), but ultimately closed after 101 performances.

Although there was a substantial difference in scale between the two productions, it is

²² The show was originally set to open late in 2001, but with the events of September 11 the production was understandably delayed. See Jesse McKinley, "Ready, Aim, Sing: *Assassins* Hits Broadway," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2004. Among the show's scenes is one in which a would-be assassin plans to fly a plane into the White House—as it happens, the only intended target of the 9/11 attacks that was not successful.

²³ Rich, "At Last, 9/11 has its own musical," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2004.

still beneficial to consider how the revival handled the dramatic material differently.²⁴ One of the fundamental difficulties in staging the material is the fact that most of the characters come from very different eras, and yet they interact with each other frequently throughout the show. The opening conceit of the show eases us into the historical fluidity of the musical by having a carnival barker entreat each would-be assassin with a gun and offer of fame. Once armed, the assassins join together in the first major ensemble number (“Everybody’s Got the Right”).

The original Off-Broadway production featured a rotating set with backlit drops illustrated with imagery related to the scene, either abstracted (technical gun diagrams for the “Gun Song” quartet, see fig. 5.3) or photo-realistic (e.g., palm trees, a park, a view of houses from a street). While there are few major scenographic similarities between the original show and the revival, both productions prominently feature the carnivalesque invitation to “Hit the Prez and win a prize!” at the top of the show (see fig. 5.4).



Figure 5.3: “Gun Song.” Photo by Martha Swope.²⁵

²⁴ The Mainstage Theater at Playwrights Horizon where the 1991 production ran has a capacity of 198 seats, whereas Studio 54, the home of the 2004 revival, has a capacity of 1,006 seats.

²⁵ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “Actors (L-R) Jonathan Hadary, Victor Garber & Terrence Mann in a scene fr. the Playwrights Horizons’ production of the



Figure 5.4: *Above*, 1991 Off-Broadway production (photo by Martha Swope)²⁶; *below*, 2004 Broadway revival (photo by Joan Marcus).

musical ‘Assassins.’ (New York),” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/f9938a40-dc27-0130-7406-58d385a7bbd0>.

²⁶ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “The cast in a scene fr. the Playwrights Horizons’ production of the musical ‘Assassins’ (New York),” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/0ac86640-dc28-0130-0b10-58d385a7bbd0>.

Robert Brill's design for the 2004 revival takes inspiration from the opening carnival barker sequence in the show and frames the musical's action within the decaying wooden support structure of a long-forgotten roller coaster. In removing location-specific backdrops and situating the action in the liminal space of the rotting amusement park, the revival takes on a quality of the *Verfremdungseffekt* of Brechtian theater where the audience has nowhere to hide from the challenging material presented to them. Very few set pieces are used to fill in the remaining space onstage in scenes, save the glittering "Shoot! Win!" marquee sign that descends at the beginning and end of the show, a prize wheel spun by the barker, and shooting range targets featuring the outlines of the assassins' intended victims (see fig. 5.5). Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer's lighting plot featuring a grid of marquee-style lights provides a degree of perverse glamor to the show. The marquee lights illuminate and punctuate key moments throughout the show, as when Lee Harvey Oswald fires the fatal shot killing President Kennedy.



Figure 5.5: The Presidential shooting range. Photo by Joan Marcus.

The mixture of menace and desolation in Brill's design speaks to the fascination many have with abandoned structures and places. The forgotten quality of the theme park onstage

makes the perfect meeting space for the specters of these assassins, people who might have once felt discarded themselves. Robert Sennett, in the introduction to his book, *Flesh and Stone*, writes,

The city has also served as the space in which these master images [of humankind] have cracked apart. The city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers. All these aspects of urban experience – difference, complexity, strangeness – afford resistance to domination. This craggy and difficult urban geography makes a particular moral promise. It can serve as a home for those who have accepted themselves as exiles from the Garden.²⁷

While Sennett is not writing about dilapidated theme parks or Broadway stages, his sentiment remains poignant when applied to *Assassins*. After all, the show brings together these historical figures into an imagined space where we watch them commiserate and ultimately unite in their anger at the world (“resistance to domination”). Imagining the perverse onstage carnival as the “home for [the assassins] who have accepted themselves as exiles from [America]” is chilling enough, but is amplified in the increasingly disturbing socio-political climate of the post-9/11 era. In a compelling dramatic twist, we watch as the Balladeer – the chipper, if questionable, representative of the American moral compass in the musical – “cracks apart” and disappears, only to resurface as the figure of Lee Harvey Oswald, perhaps the most infamous president assassin in modern American history. Sondheim and Weidman’s musical digs at the question of how the American Dream can turn deadly. But the answer Montello’s revival provides is not what we may want to hear.

²⁷ Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994), 25-26.

Sweeney Todd

The original production of *Sweeney Todd* was directed by Harold Prince in 1979 at the end of a decade rife with social unrest caused in part by political uncertainty and corruption. To emphasize class struggle on a grandiose scale, Prince staged the musical in a foundry which was reconstructed on the stage. The extreme disparity between the size of the main set and the size of practical set items was designed to physically overwhelm the performers as a visual demonstration of the political power struggle at hand (see fig. 5.6). A gargantuan banner draped from a downstage catwalk at the top of the show depicted the “British Beehive,” a reproduction of Victorian artist George Cruikshank’s 1840 etching of the same name (see fig. 5.7). Headed by the Queen of England, the illustration is the artist’s rendition of the hierarchy of the social class system of the Industrial Revolution. Although the image was initially created as a celebration of the congruous nature of the hierarchy, some suggest that Prince’s use of the image was to symbolize the “inescapable oppression and dehumanization of the individual by the processes of industrialization.”²⁸

²⁸ Robert L. Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 277.



Figure 5.6: Shot of the 1979 production. Photo by Martha Swope.²⁹



Figure 5.7: The British Beehive curtain.³⁰

²⁹ Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, “Full stage shot of actors Angela Lansbury (C) & Len Cariou (R) w. cast in a scene fr. the Broadway musical ‘Sweeney Todd’ (New York),” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/62db6950-db72-0130-0375-58d385a7bbd0>.

³⁰ Souvenir Program for *Sweeney Todd*, London production (1980), back cover.

Just as Prince's production was known for its massive scale and the looming beehive curtain, John Doyle's 2004 production (transferred to Broadway in 2005) was notable for its small, claustrophobic stage environment. Weathered wooden panels served as the backdrop, and a shelving unit on the back wall holding several of the props towered over the action (see fig. 5.8). Doyle scaled the production down to a minimal set evocative of a psychiatric ward and reduced the cast to one-third its original size, focusing on the insanity of Sweeney's world rather than its class conflict. Visually, the interactions of the characters all took place in the same location with no major set changes (in contrast to the more traditional staging of the 1979 production). The playing area did not even take up all of the available stage space, leading to the exact opposite problem of the Prince production, which had been criticized for being "too big." Furniture pieces such as chairs, ladders, and a coffin were rearranged by the actors to indicate scene changes, recalling stage techniques exploited in black box theaters.



**Figure 5.8: John Doyle's 2005 Broadway revival of *Sweeney Todd*.
Photo by Joan Marcus.**

Certain scenographic choices paid homage to Peter Brook's production of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (full title: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat As Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of The Marquis de Sade*). A defining

feature of the revival was the manner in which the deaths occurred on stage. There was no trick barber chair to send victims down to Mrs. Lovett's bake house as in the original production. Instead, a small white coffin served as the deadly seat. The murders, then, were signified by the blowing of a work whistle, a wash of red light on stage, and by buckets of blood poured into empty buckets (one of the direct stylistic nods to *Marat/Sade*). Since the small cast size required that "murdered" characters stay onstage to be part of the orchestra, the victims then put on a bloodstained lab coat and resumed their position on the side of the stage with their instrument (see fig. 5.9). The effect of the blood-soaked lab coats against the rest of the set's bland world and the buckets of blood was staggering. Certainly the shocks of red against the mundane set provided a clear visual of the toll of Sweeney's rampage.



**Figure 5.9: John Doyle's 2005 Broadway revival of *Sweeney Todd*.
Photo by Sarah Krulwich.**

Given its conceptual approach, Doyle's production was not nearly as specific in its social criticism as Prince's interpretation. For instance, it could possibly be interpreted as comparing Sweeney to a terrorist and Mrs. Lovett to ever-enduring capitalistic greed. More than such specific interpretations, however, the overall thematic element of the production was what held a greater relevance for contemporary society. Indeed, Sweeney embodied two key issues relevant to a post-9/11 apocalyptic era: anger transformed into madness, and the corruption of

institutionalized power. The revival suggested, simply put, that the madness of the world is unavoidable.

Critics: Comparing the “Golden Age” and post-“Golden Age”

The scenographic treatments of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals reveal how revived “Golden Age” musicals attempt to balance nostalgia with modern stage innovations, through romantic lighting, vibrant colors in the sets and costumes, and a concerted effort to incorporate elements from previous productions as possible. Obvious modern stage technology is more often than not downplayed and exercised conservatively. With *South Pacific*, Sher eschewed stage automation so the show would retain the “out-of-the-edge-of-the-universe quality.”³¹ Sondheim’s shows and other post-“Golden Age” musicals are on the other hand often subjected to more inventive treatments that recast the material in a new light. These restagings can include changes in cast size, reorchestrations, and the selection of a new conceptual framing device altogether.

In both cases, critical response to these revivals was highly complementary and praised the productions for their artistic achievement, but the type of praise still fell along party lines of the “Golden” and post-“Golden Ages.” *South Pacific* and *The King and I* were acclaimed for their ability to remain “true” to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original work, for their visual opulence,³² for “reinvigorat[ing] the concept of the organic musical, in which song feels as

³¹ “Building a House,” 21.

³² The specific word choice of “opulent” appears in three separate reviews for *The King and I*. Jason Clark, “*The King and I* on Broadway,” ew.com (*Entertainment Weekly*), April 16, 2015; David Rooney, “*The King and I* Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 16, 2015; Marilyn Stasio, “*King and I* Review: Broadway Revival Opens at Lincoln Center,” *Variety*, April 16, 2015.

natural as breathing.”³³ Meanwhile, the contributions of *Assassins* and *Sweeney Todd* were lauded for their innovative quality and edgy subject matter.

It is clear that even with revivals the dichotomy between the “Golden” and post-“Golden Age” exists. However, although critical disdain for the post-“Golden Age” has abated somewhat, preferential treatment of the “Golden Age” shines through in the blatant avoidance of a revival’s continued problematic depictions of socio-political issues, particularly race. I fully acknowledge that the decision to adjust or leave untouched a show’s potentially dated politics is a complicated one, and, due to licensing restrictions, not always in the hands of those reviving the show. What *is* disturbing, however, is the apparent willingness of critics to ignore (or leave unaddressed) problematic politics that remain in the revival. This form of “restorative nostalgia” reinforces an unspoken status quo of how much “Golden Age” revivals “should” change (i.e., not a lot).

Returning to Svetlana Boym’s work on nostalgia, she claims that what motivates restorative nostalgia “is not the sentiment of distance or longing but rather the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition.”³⁴ It is clear that critics may not want to acknowledge how, despite *The King and I*’s updated look, its premise, book, music, and lyrics are still very much a product of their time. Some critics simply accepted the show as an unparalleled theater piece updated for the twenty-first century (David Rooney: the show “banishes even the faintest trace of mid-century quaintness or patronizing exoticism from the material, treating the 1951 Rodgers and Hammerstein classic with unimpeachable dramatic

³³ Ben Brantley, “Optimist Awash in the Tropics,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2008.

³⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 44-45.

integrity and emotional authenticity”).³⁵ Sher and his collaborators, to their credit, talk about the issue of cultural appropriation and the show’s inherent difficulties by focusing on the modernized framing as their found solution:

So the fun design challenge is how to get to the center of the culture without unnecessary appropriated decorations. And how to get at the core of a design that represents the culture honorably and operates within the play effectively. I would say that the set looks like a kind of ruined temple built into a mountainside where a great myth of the culture is reenacted. And framing the production that way allowed us to have some respect for history, as opposed to worrying about the decoration and the exoticness, particularly of women as objects in such a world. [...] We wanted the set to have a kind of templar quality to it, so it could be a place in which you could theatrically enact and operate this piece.³⁶

He continues:

It’s strange—the farther you get from the original production the deeper you can look. It’s odd that history and time give us a chance to learn more about what they were beginning to understand in, say, 1951. So the benefit of a revival is that we can actually not only stand in awe and incredible devotion to what Rodgers and Hammerstein were able to accomplish way ahead of their time but perhaps pull even more out of the piece than people had ever understood could be there. And, at the same time, keep it entertaining and buoyant and beautiful.³⁷

The perceived need to “keep [shows] entertaining and buoyant and beautiful” is indicative of the problematic mentality underlying efforts to revive “Golden Age” musicals with challenging histories. The theater community acknowledges that works like *The King and I* present substantial dramaturgical issues and yet no one has a clear vision of what the expected response should be.

³⁵ Rooney, “*The King and I* Review.”

³⁶ “A Modern Twist,” *Lincoln Center Theater Review*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

Eileen Blumenthal argues that if the entrenched racism in *The King and I* makes the show too problematic to stage, then “we could suppress all insensitive or unflattering cultural portrayals – including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Turandot*, maybe *Porgy and Bess*.” She adds, “[W]e should not relegate [*The King and I*] to oblivion. First of all, it is too good. And in its own way it *is* authentic documentary: It is a record and a reminder of who we’ve been.”³⁸ Blumenthal, however, misses the point entirely. Who is the collective “we” she evokes in her final sentence? Broadway creative teams? The audience? The United States populace? The world? While she is correct that *The King and I* represents— as does *South Pacific*—a landmark production in the history of the Broadway musical, this narrative reinforces the significance of the “Golden Age” at the cost of missing an opportunity to revisit the period with a more critical eye. These shows may be a record of where the Broadway musical comes from, but the hope, however naïve, would be that audiences today are not the same as audiences over sixty years ago.

...

“You’ve got to be carefully taught”... about the “Golden Age” (revisited)

Gwynn Guilford’s think piece on recent controversial productions of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* attempts to tease out the historical reasons why blackface and yellowface are still widely accepted practices in the opera world. Titled “It’s time to stop using ‘exoticism’ as an excuse for opera’s racism,” Guilford’s article interrogates the tension between entertainment, nostalgia, and the growing awareness of problematic representations of race in canonical works. A lot of the resistance, she argues, comes from the personal investment individuals have in a given work (this would be the restorative nostalgia at play). She writes, “When directors preserve cultural clichés simply because they were exotic a century ago, there’s

³⁸ Blumenthal, “How Thai Is It?,” *American Theatre*, July 1996, 13.

an opportunity cost to those choices: the chance to move audiences anew. The tighter they cling to tradition for tradition's sake, the more they rob the world's most powerful art form of its relevance."³⁹

Few news articles are as direct in their challenge to opera companies to end their exoticist practices. Michael Cooper's article for *The New York Times* features the following headline: "Reviving *The Mikado* in a Balancing Act of Taste."⁴⁰ His choice to term the politically fraught process of reviving a show like *The Mikado* a "balancing act of taste" undercuts what is actually at stake in reviving shows with complicated performance and reception histories. Cooper's softened language parallels the pervasive willingness for critics to overlook (or not address) the issues of uneasy stereotypes found in "Golden Age" musical revivals.

Roundabout Theatre Company's 2011 revival of *Anything Goes*, for instance, retains the plot point where the leading characters (who were played by white performers in the revival) don clothing taken from Chinese missionaries on board the ship and speak in pidgin English as the fictitious "Plum Blossom" and her relatives. Were the musical new, the use of pidgin English as a comedic device in the scene would be roundly criticized (if it made it into the show at all). And yet, in the reviews from major news outlets of the revival, none make mention of the show's seemingly throwaway (racist) moment. Even in an article for *Time Out: New York* that calls out some of Cole Porter's more blatantly offensive lyrics (that were cut), Adam Feldman concludes the piece with this stunning reversal:

But this is hindsight, and blinkered hindsight at that. Yes, of course: Porter was surely not immune to the racism that suffused

³⁹ Guilford, "It's time to stop using 'exoticism' as an excuse for opera's racism," Quartz.com, July 23, 2014.

⁴⁰ Cooper, "Reviving *The Mikado* in a Balancing Act of Taste," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2016.

the world he lived in, and wrote some lyrics that he probably wasn't proud of later. Luckily, the ones in *Anything Goes* could easily be, and easily were, excised from an otherwise sparkling score. And if some vestiges of Ching and Ling still cling to the well-scrubbed Luke and John, is that a bad thing? Even in an escapist nostalgia trip like *Anything Goes*, which is set on a luxury liner that is lousy with insouciant socialites, it is good to have a tiny little hint of a reminder that the real 1930s didn't offer love songs and tap dances to everyone alike.⁴¹

That Feldman can so easily write off the revival's treatment of the Chinese characters and the Chinese culture speaks volumes of where many critics and production companies seem to stand regarding racism disguised as a nostalgic trip down "Golden Age" lane. In trying to explain away the "Plum Blossom" plot device as a necessary, if unfortunate, "reminder" of musical theater's racist past, what actually comes through is a reluctance to address and confront problematic politics in a beloved Broadway show.

In an interview about his involvement with revising the book for the 1984 revival of *Anything Goes*, John Weidman reveals how the specter of an imagined "ideal" version of the show, Cole Porter's original 1934 production, influenced his and Timothy Crouse's creative decisions about reworking the material. He returns again and again to the idea of honoring the authorial intentionality of Porter, which turns out to be a shrewd move on Weidman's part.⁴² In foregrounding his and Crouse's involvement as about "recreating" what the original show was like, Weidman displaces any responsibility for the show's content – racist or otherwise – onto Porter. The historical distance between contemporary society and the world which produced "Golden Age" (and pre-"Golden Age") productions affords creative teams with a convenient loophole to continue ignoring problematic material in the name of being "true to the text." The

⁴¹ Feldman, "Dark secrets of the sunny *Anything Goes*," *Time Out: New York*, April 8, 2011, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/upstaged-blog/dark-secrets-of-the-sunny-anything-goes>.

⁴² Ted Sod, "All Aboard: Libretto Writing," *Upstage*, Spring 2011, 8-9.

tradition of willful ignorance (and enacting restorative nostalgia) by creative teams as applied to “Golden Age” revivals is further enabled by theater critics who remain silent about such issues in their reviews.⁴³ After all, racist stereotypes can’t hurt if they’re done in jest, right? You’ve got to be carefully taught, indeed.

⁴³ On the issue of critics and communities remaining silent about racism in musicals, see Katie Chua’s powerful op-ed written in response to her high school’s production of *Anything Goes* in 2014. She specifically calls attention to how important it is for the school administration to not be silent on the matter of the show’s racism and to instead create a space to both acknowledge and problematize the production’s presentation of Chinese people.

She writes, “I acknowledge that the musical was written in 1934, and preserving the culture of the 30s is important, however this is a public high school in 2014, and personally I don’t think it was okay to show this racism. Because this is a public high school, it seems like Fairview is endorsing and accepting this portrayal of Chinese people. [...] It would have been more appropriate to release a statement that Fairview did not endorse or support the views that *Anything Goes* had shown. However there was not even an acknowledgement of the racism, which I felt was needed. [...] I would like you and others to use *Anything Goes* as an experience that we can learn and grow from, and perhaps move as a Fairview community (especially with its large Asian population) to end the racism towards Asian-Americans and other minorities as well.” Chua, “Letter on *Anything Goes*,” *The Royal Banner*, [2014?], <http://www.fhsroyalbanner.com/stories/katie-chua-letter-on-anything-goes>.

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