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The Other Musical Theatre:  
Political Satire in Broadway Musicals  
From *Strike Up the Band* (1927) to *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964)  
by  
Alisa C. Roost, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2001

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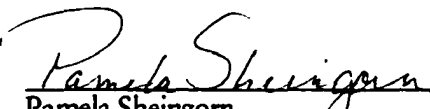
Alisa C. Roost

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jill Dolan  
Chair of Examining Committee

April 19, 2001

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Pamela Sheingorn  
Executive Officer and Supervisory Committee

April 19, 2001

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Marvin Carlson  
Supervisory Committee

April 19, 2001

The City University of New York

Abstract

Political Satire in American Musical Theatre

From *Strike Up the Band* (1927) to *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964)

by

Alisa C. Roost

Adviser: Jill Dolan

Whereas previous studies have privileged the commercially successful integrated musicals as the “mature” form, “The Other American Musical: Political Satire in Broadway Musicals from *Strike Up the Band* to *Anyone Can Whistle*” explores the rich history of politically vibrant musicals that flourished during the twentieth century. My dissertation combines textual analysis with cultural and historical background, focusing on the kinds of subjects that authors satirized, the attitude towards those topics in society at that time, the treatment these subjects received, and the formal characteristics of the genre.

The work of George and Ira Gershwin and George S. Kaufman inhabited a contested cultural space, which embraced musical forms that were both high culture and popular, creating artistically vibrant shows that established a foundation for the genre. I examine their navigation of the cultural hierarchy, *Strike Up the Band*, *Of Thee I Sing*, and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*.

During the 1930s, full-length musical satires became a viable form; I analyze the work of composers/lyricists Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, Harold Rome, Mark Blitzstein, and Kurt Weill. I also explore the musicals produced by Sam

H. Harris and the non-profit organizations Group Theatre, Federal Theatre Project, and ILGWU including *As Thousands Cheer*, *I'd Rather Be Right*, *Krickerbocker Holiday*, *Pins and Needles*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, and *Johnny Johnson*.

With increasing financial stakes, cast albums, and WWII, musicals changed in the 1940s. After examining *Oklahoma!*'s impact, I trace the simultaneous developments of integrated and satirical musicals, including the work of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, Leonard Bernstein, George Abbott, and the shows *Street Scene*, *Love Life*, *South Pacific*, *Lost in the Stars*, *Pajama Game*, and *Candide*. An exploration of *Bloomer Girl*, *Finian's Rainbow*, and *Flahooley* demonstrates that E. Y. "Yip" Harburg was the most important political writer during this time. My project ends with an analysis of the form in the 1960s, with Stephen Sondheim and Arthur Laurents' *Anyone Can Whistle* marking the end of a genre even as some of the political impetus was developed by Harold Prince, John Kander and Fred Ebb in *Cabaret* and in Galt MacDermot's *Hair*.

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As anyone who writes a dissertation knows, all the clichés are true and no one could do it alone. My incredible thanks go to my advisor Jill Dolan who continually challenged me to find my voice and to Marvin Carlson and Pamela Sheingorn who helped hone my writing. I am especially grateful to my entire family, especially my Anna, Eric, Noah, Tris and Ruth and to Jim Wilson, Kathleen Philis and Nancy Reardon; they all provided wonderful moral support, read everything, asked the right questions, and urged me on.

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## Introduction

### The Other American Musical: Political Satire in Broadway Musicals from *Strike up the Band* (1927) to *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964)

The Broadway musical is the most profitable form of theater in America when it is successful. A sophisticated art form deriving from the earlier forms of burlesque, minstrelsy, vaudeville, and comic operetta, its unique combination of story, song, dance, and spectacle make it one of America's most original contributions to twentieth-century theater. Yet this once highly regarded art form seems to be in a state of decline. Producers, concerned by the huge financial risks involved in the production of any new show, press authors for new musicals that they believe will draw large audiences and create sound financial investments.<sup>1</sup> The process discourages innovation as producers search for works that safely fit their perception of what audiences want, which is a narrow definition of the genre. Non-narrative and satirical shows are eschewed in favor of the "integrated musical," a dramatic formula promulgated by musical theater historians as consisting of the necessary criteria for a successful musical.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It costs at least five million dollars to produce a small, "low-budget" Broadway musical and can cost up to twenty million to mount a large musical (including running costs during previews, until opening night). At the same time, weekly operating costs can top \$600,000 a week. This means that only the box office receipts over \$600,000 a week go to repay the millions of dollars in initial production costs.

<sup>2</sup> The "integrated" musical refers to the form popularized by Rodgers and Hammerstein in examples like *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. Their shows are generally set in rural settings, focus on a leading romantic couple and a subsidiary comic couple, incorporate many elements of naturalism into the dramaturgical elements of the show, and use songs to explore emotional material that is too strong (within the context of the show) for words alone, and dance to develop community, further romance, and delve into the characters' unconscious. This is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

As a result, innovative shows that fail to mimic the mainstream examples of “great shows” promoted in musical theater history are rarely produced.<sup>3</sup> An extensive structure of workshops, competitions, and nonprofit theatres has arisen to meet producers’ demands. Designed to teach the fundamentals of musical theater to inexperienced composers, lyricists, and librettists, they repeat the formulas that have been the most economically profitable. Judges of such prestigious competitions as the Richard Rodgers Award and teachers at the Broadcast Music Inc. (popularly known as BMI) musical theater workshops continually favor “integrated musicals” with a strong linear progression, and they ignore the rich history of alternate musical theater.<sup>4</sup> Once popular forms such as satire, burlesque, and revues are trivialized; their potential to comment on political and social conditions is unfulfilled. Even as the genre of American musical theater has become synonymous with the “integrated,” sentimental musical at the expense of all other forms, the inherent ideological implications of this shift have been largely ignored.

This is not to place blame for the situation on the producers. The financial resources required to produce a new musical are considerable, and most shows are not financially

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<sup>3</sup> The musical *Wings* is an example of the difficulty of reaching a wide audience with an innovative show. Produced at the Goodman in Chicago in 1992 and then at the Public in New York in 1993, the musical got excellent reviews, closed quickly, managed to get a cast album underwritten with foundation support that became available in 1996, and has been ignored by subsequent producers and musical theatre chroniclers.

<sup>4</sup> These awards and workshops represent, for many authors, the only way to acquire enough capital for a workshop or staged reading. BMI was started by Lehman Engel and was the first workshop to train writers. The workshop emphasizes the Rodgers and Hammerstein style of musical as the only style. Most of the other workshops, like ASCAP, and the O’Neill workshops have been based on the BMI format. See Lehman Engel’s *Words with Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) for a discussion of this format. See also <http://repertoire.bmi.com/about/workshops/lengel.asp> for information on BMI’s influence. Disney now underwrites the ASCAP Musical Theatre workshops, further focusing musical theatre training on works that producers believe will be commercially successful. While this certainly makes sense, it often limits innovation and risks at a very early stage. See <http://www.ascap.com/membership/workshops-detail.html#musical>.

successful.<sup>5</sup> Due to the higher capitalization and the diverse demographics evident in the last twenty years, Broadway producers now rely on fewer long-running shows rather than numerous short-lived shows. Additionally tourists, a very diverse, heterogeneous group with erratic attendance, are the most significant element of the audience base. As a result of the enormous economic risks, the decreasing number of musicals produced, and the tendency of the histories to support the commercially successful shows (that are generally more conservative), the definition of genre is more constrictive and supports familiar conventions of musical theatre, even as it discourages innovation. The economic factors create profound and unfortunate results that include the reduction of the number of shows that come to Broadway and the limitation of how the potentials of the form are perceived. The primary element that determines whether a new show will be produced is producers' perceptions of what the public wants to see. The perceptions have been narrowly defined by a handful of authors with a very specific view of what musicals should be and can accomplish.

This project developed out of the gaps I see in much of the scholarship about musical theatre. Popular conceptions of musical theatre are shaped and altered by unconscious specific ideologies and assumptions that, for the most part, mirror the assumptions and ideologies of much of American society. These include the primacy of heterosexual romance, the privilege of emotional development over intellectual explorations, the emphasis on capitalism as a fundamental element for the development of communities, and the prominence of the personal over the political. To what extent has the definition of the genre in the history of musical theatre scholarship excluded works that challenge the

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<sup>5</sup>Approximately 75 to 80% of all new musicals do not return their investment. See Bernard Rosenberg and Earnest Harburg, *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 7.

political establishment? The genre has developed into a popular, middlebrow form that essentially supports the status quo, in part through the exclusion of politics from the popular perceptions of how the form developed. Because of the large financial stakes (of producers and the estates of deceased, popular authors) and the relative lack of academic interest in musicals, the form has been narrowly defined. The resulting definition privileges the commercially successful integrated musicals as the “mature” form and marginalizes shows that are not integrated, which includes the politically satirical musicals.<sup>6</sup> My dissertation combines textual analysis with historical background to provide a foundation on which to reintroduce satire into the history of musical theatre. This study focuses primarily on librettos and lyrics of satirical musicals, the kinds of subjects that authors satirized, the attitude towards those topics in society at that time, the treatment these subjects received, and the formal characteristics of the genre.

Before I move on to in-depth discussions – the Gershwins, Depression-era musicals, Rodgers, Hammerstein, and the rise of the integrated musical, Yip Harburg, and the decline of satire and the rise of the conceptual musical – I outline some of the foundations for my argument. I start with a discussion about what satire is, move on to a brief overview of humor in America throughout the 1930s to 1960s, and then focus on an overview of the literature. After I look at the methodological challenges for the project and the taxonomy I will use, I end this introduction with a discussion of intellectual versus emotional responses, and musicals and politics.

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss the development of this narrative later in the overview of the literature.

### *Satire*

Satire has been a part of Western comedy since Aristophanes and includes a variety of styles and structures, from the scatological humor common in Ancient Greek old comedy to Jonathan Swift's dry, acerbic deconstruction of the political reactions to poverty in Ireland, in which Swift sardonically proposes that poor people alleviate their poverty by selling their children to rich families for food, which would generate income.<sup>7</sup> As both a genre and a style, satire has been defined in numerous ways that remain relatively incomplete and contradictory because the boundaries of the genre are continually blurred and broken as authors continually transcend traditional definitions as they experiment with the form. "The demands of scholars for pure types of literatures have frequently been ignored by writers, especially the greatest."<sup>8</sup> Despite the difficulty in the categorization of texts as satire, several elements are constant; satire always includes an element of attack directed at a contemporary public target and that attack is presented with humor or wit.

Satire and tragedy often deal with the same subjects, but satire deals with absurdity and often develops on a larger scale that includes much more of society whereas tragedy tends to deal with the raw emotions and passions of the individual. Satire differs from tragedy by "its persistent refusal to be bled off into tragedy's compassionate awareness of the

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<sup>7</sup> Satire differs from irony in that satire works to make a subject ridiculous through comedic mocking, whereas irony involves the subtext contradicting the text, but does not imply a comic or tragic approach. Irony lacks an inherent moral purpose, but is a tool often used for moral ends. Satire is an end in and of itself. Irony is not "a relationship of art to reality" but "one of art to art, with possible implications" for reality (Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* [London: Routledge, 1985] 20.) See Meyer H. Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, excerpted in *Satire: Theory and Practice* Charles A. Allen and George D. Stephens, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1962), 1941, and Margaret A. Rose *Parody: Ancient, Modern & Postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) for further discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Feinberg, "Satire: The Inadequacy of Recent Definitions," *Genre* 1 (Jan., 1968), 33.

inevitability of error and suffering, or comedy's joyous sense that life always outwits folly."<sup>9</sup>

Northrop Frye draws on Dante to explain satire's relationship to tragedy:

Both tragedy and satire take us into a hell of narrowing circles, a blasted world of repulsiveness and idiocy, a world without pity and without hope. Both culminate in some such vision as that of Dante's, of the source of all evil in a personal form. Tragedy can take us no farther, but if we persevere with the satirist, we shall pass a dead centre, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the employment of distortion, absurdity, and the grotesque, satire is often recognized by several other traits.

Satire is best known as a form employed by the powerless against the rich, powerful, and profligate, or "an artistic attack upon the uneconomical."<sup>11</sup> Molly Ivins, a current political satirist, agrees that: "[Satire] has historically been the weapon of powerless people aimed at the powerful."<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Swift, one of the best-known satirists of all time, and author of "A Modest Proposal" and *Gulliver's Travels*, confirmed his targets' affluence when he argued, "I am ready to change the scene with them whenever they please."<sup>13</sup> Satire generally focuses on content and attacks a status quo judged immoral, rather than individual

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<sup>9</sup> Alvin B. Kernan, "Aggression and Satire: Art Considered as a Form of Biological Adaptation," in *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt*, Frank Brady, John Palmer and Martin Price, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 118.

<sup>10</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Nature of Satire" reprinted in *Satire: Theory and Practice*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Thorpe, "The Economics of Satire: Towards a New Definition," *Western Humanities Review* 23 (Summer, 1969), 195.

<sup>12</sup> Molly Ivins, "Lyn' Bully," *Mother Jones*, May, 1995, reprinted in [http://www.mojones.com/mother\\_jones/MJ95/ivins.html](http://www.mojones.com/mother_jones/MJ95/ivins.html)

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Swift, *The Intelligencer*, reprinted in *Satire: Theory and Practice*, 11.

expression or deviance from the standard (generally parody's domain).<sup>14</sup> Dryden and Pope focused on the moral element of satire, but in the twentieth century the ethical aspect is usually noticeably absent.

Satire can be an artistic destruction of privilege, but it is socially sanctioned. Freud argued that society allowed humor as an acceptable way to convey masked hostility.<sup>15</sup> Alvin B. Kernan builds on Freud and looks at the biological evolution of aggression in animals. He argues that satire combines an outlet for aggression — in the invective of the message — and a social control — in the wit and word play.

The characteristic situation of satire, a witty expression of aggression, is a combination of an irrational emotion, hostility, which is normally repressed, and of a certain flashing, brilliant play of rationality. . . . We are reassured through the presence of the wit that the rational and conscious mind is still very much in control of the irrational aggressive energies.<sup>16</sup>

Thus satire both vents and controls anger. Satire cuts through worn-out myths and conventions to brush away social plaque that protects tradition and privilege.

Satire creates a variety of responses in readers and audience members. Charles R. Gruner concludes that it is the only persuasive form of humor: "While *humor* has not been shown to effect persuasion, *satire*, a form of wit, has a persuasive effect but *only* if the subjects exposed to the satire perceive the serious thesis of the satirist."<sup>17</sup> The impact of

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<sup>14</sup> See Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Joseph A. Dane, "Parody and Satire: A Theoretical Model" *Genre* 13, 145-159.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by A.A. Brill (New York: Dover, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Kernan, 124.

<sup>17</sup> Charles R. Gruner, "Note on Editorial Satire and Persuasion," *Psychological Reports* 60 (1987), 884. Emphasis in original.

satire can range from self-satisfied complacency to horror to uneasiness. Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that successful satire creates a Brechtian effect on its audience, in that it “strives for alienation rather than empathy in its spectators” and the goal of both “was to cause action to take place in the real world, to ‘transform the field itself.’”<sup>18</sup> Spacks argues that, like Brecht, satire attempts to deny the audience a release through emotional fulfillment or catharsis and instead channels that energy into social activism. Ideally the audience “gains energy and impulse to change the society there depicted, to recognize the causes of its discontent, [and] to take action against them.”<sup>19</sup> Effective satire often pulls the audience into a feeling of complacency and then undermines that foundation. It needs to leave the audience with a reaction that a social or political situation is amok and that their involvement can help achieve change.

Whereas satire historically included scatological humor and issues of gender and race, in musical theatre satire focuses on political and social issues and usually lapses into comedy’s recognition that humanity outlives its own follies.<sup>20</sup> American musical satires draw on many forms but rely primarily on English and French musical antecedents. The work of John Gay (*The Beggar’s Opera*, [1728]) balanced commercial interest with satire and was designed to please the public. Gay’s work proved so effective that the Prime Minister of England felt obliged to attend and applaud the show, even though he assiduously censored the sequel, protesting bitterly in private that it “not only wounded his feelings as a man, but

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, “Some Reflections on Satire” *Genre* I (Jan., 1968): 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Spacks makes an intriguing argument, but she does not give examples of how the mechanics might overlap.

<sup>20</sup> See Frye for further discussion.

very materially injured him as a Minister in the estimation of the people.”<sup>21</sup> The comic operettas of Offenbach and of Gilbert and Sullivan in the nineteenth century included many of the conventions and dramaturgical forms that would later be developed by American musical satirists. These conventions include “patter” song/scenes (a quick song, usually half-sung, half-spoken), fantastic plots to comment on current politics, an emphasis on the heterosexual romantic union, and a connection between the success of the romantic relationship and the resolution of the political situation. Gilbert and Sullivan explored the commercial limits of the form. Their lighter operettas (like *HMS Pinafore*, *Pirates of Penzance*, and *The Mikado*) introduced some satire and enjoyed significant popularity, but their darker show, *Utopia Limited*, which is a tragic-satire of corporations’ unbridled control and limited liabilities, enjoyed little success in England and none in America.<sup>22</sup>

Gilbert and Sullivan: operettas were very popular in America with the middle class. American theatre for the working classes includes a long tradition of more overt social and political elements. Although melodrama attracted considerable popularity, most authors writing for working-class audiences tend to use “comedy and satire, rather than melodrama, to shape their themes of social protest.”<sup>23</sup> Early burlesque developed the satirical tradition that spoofed a variety of conventions and issues. American writers in the nineteenth century

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Walpole, quoted in Richard Schechter, “The Theatre of Satire, or Politicians and the Arts” in *Before His Eyes: Essays in Honor of Stanley Kauffman*, Bert Cardullo, ed. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 125.

<sup>22</sup> See Linda V. Troost, “The Economic Discourse in the Savoy Operas of W. S. Gilbert” in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe eds. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 193-207. After the premiere, there was no professional production anywhere until 1975. “*Utopia Limited* ran for 245 performances [in 1893-1894] but was never revived again professionally until 4 April 1975, when it was done as part of the D’Oyly Carte Centenary Season” (Liner notes, Gilbert and Sullivan, *Utopia Limited* [London: London, 1993]. This recording, not available in the United States, can be purchased from European companies; the order number is London 436-816-2.

<sup>23</sup> Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman eds., *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 13.

explored satire in many of the shows in New York's Bowery area. These revues, such as *A Glance at New York in 1848*, featured various urban, ethnic characters in specialty numbers for an urban, working class audience. The more sophisticated Harrigan and Hart shows in the 1890s, like *Mulligan Guard Ball*, looked at the interrelations among various families in a working class, multi-cultural, immigrant neighborhood. Like the later satirical musicals, these shows are set in urban environments and tend to focus on contemporary characters. Throughout the nineteenth century, musical satires appealed more to working class audiences, whereas German and Austrian-influenced operettas and spectacles (set in exotic locales and in distant times) were more popular with the upper class audiences. It was not until the First World War, when American audiences shunned anything related to Germany or Austria, that operettas went out of vogue and satirical shows gained popularity among the upper class in the United States. Traditionally American workers' theatre used musical satire to a far greater degree than the commercial stage.<sup>24</sup>

### *Humor in America from the 1930s through the 1960s*

Musical satire mirrors both the rise and the decline of humor in America. Throughout the Depression, when political humor abounded, satirical musicals enjoyed their heyday. This appreciation of humor built on a tradition of wit and wordplay that extended back to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s humorists built on that foundation and brought in social and political issues. As a result, humor exploded in the

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<sup>24</sup> See Eric Winship Trumbull, *Musicals of the American Workers' Theatre Movement - 1928-1941* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1974).

1920s and 1930s, and the decades are considered the Golden Age of American Humor.<sup>26</sup>

From Will Rogers, H. L. Mencken, the Algonquin writers, *Lie, Puck, Judge*, and *Vanity Fair* which “begin to provide a social satire,” to Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, *Krazy Kat*, and the newly popular cartoons, the 1920s and 1930s enjoyed unprecedented humor that reached a pinnacle in Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency.<sup>27</sup> “There was a great amount of quite sarcastic, and exceedingly amusing, humor during the Roosevelt years. . . . F.D.R.’s career was thoroughly decorated by festoons of jokes, cartoons, lampoons, [and] caricatures.”<sup>28</sup>

Beginning with World War II, musical satires retained far less popularity, as humor simultaneously lost its value in the general society. Probably the Second World War, the atom bomb, the Cold War, and McCarthyism all worked to dampen American political humor. By the 1950s, presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson was hurt by the perception that his humor and wit indicated a lack of integrity.<sup>29</sup> According to Lawrence E. Mintz, “The humour of the forties and fifties represents a distinct low point in the history of humour in America.”<sup>30</sup> In the 1930s society was the butt of most jokes, but by the late forties and fifties, humor again became an important force for defining “normality” and the punishment of deviance; throughout this period musical satires obtained few popular successes.<sup>31</sup>

Kennedy’s term was marked by “buoyancy, wit, [and] enthusiasm” as “playfulness in general

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, “American Humour and the Spirit of the Times,” in *It’s A Funny Thing, Humour*, Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, eds. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), 17-21.

<sup>27</sup> Mintz, 19; see also Jesse Bier’s *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

<sup>28</sup> William F. Fry, M.D., “The Power of Political Humor,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* X, 27-8.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert J. Muller, *Adlai Stevenson: A Study of Values* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> Mintz, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Powell, *Humour as a Form of Social Control: A Deviance Approach*, in *It’s A Funny Thing, Humour*, 53-55.

and humor in particular grew and grew in greater and greater force.”<sup>32</sup> Kennedy’s assassination, however, extinguished most political humor until Watergate.

Just as the general reaction to humor in society contextualizes the foundation of musical satires, so the perception of the genre shapes the shows created within those expectations. Although rarely explored now, political commentary is a latent possibility within the form. Rick Altman writes that genres are “*ideological constructs masquerading as neutral categories.*”<sup>33</sup> The popular perception of American musical theatre leads audiences to expect sentimental, romantic plots, integrated narratives, a tight focus on characters, and songs that explore or develop emotions. The historians of the genre ignore shows that develop representative characters as well as songs that comment on the action or explore political or material concerns. Their descriptions exclude much non-American work (such as Brecht’s musicals), work by people of color in this country like Colin Johnson, Duke Ellington, and Langston Hughes, and overtly political American musicals.<sup>34</sup> The biased history of musical theatre is complicated by the concerns of its creators and their heirs who possess a financial stake in the preservation of the lucrative image of the medium. Altman writes that the genre of movie musicals is not to be identified “with some impersonal structure immanent in a

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<sup>32</sup> Fry, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5. Emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> See Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989) and Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on early Black Minstrel Shows* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1980). Despite the general avoidance of Brecht in texts on American musical theatre, the 1954 off-Broadway production of *Three Penny Opera* that transferred to Broadway in 1955 probably helped *Cabaret* and *Hair* gain acceptance a decade later. Lotte Lenya’s appearance in both productions emphasizes *Cabaret*’s debt to *Three Penny Opera*.

text, but with the discursive activity of the producing industry.”<sup>35</sup> To what extent has the genre of musical theatre developed to privilege the financially lucrative forms?

### *Overview of the Literature*

The popular version of general musical theatre history “is essentially linear or evolutionary, using a chronological organization of material to establish a line of development within the history of the musical.”<sup>36</sup> It gives the illusion of completeness, but leaves out numerous elements. Musical theatre histories generally follow these lines: Jerome Kern first “integrated” the music with the story in 1915. He created a series of musicals with P. G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton for New York’s intimate Princess Theatre. The “Princess Musicals” focused on contemporary, upper middle class characters. Kern worked with Oscar Hammerstein to create the first “mature” musical, *Shoubat* (1927). As Joseph Swain notes, “In virtually every historical study of the American musical theatre, *Shoubat* is recognized as an important landmark. . . . *Shoubat* is the first American musical that integrates the elements of a musical theater into a credible drama.”<sup>37</sup> Musical theatre history traditionally ignores any musicals between *Shoubat* and *Oklahoma!*, which opened sixteen years later.

Despite the facts that the songs of the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter are acknowledged as “standards,” that theatre music provided much of the popular music until Rock and Roll, and that the compatibility of the two forms is often seen

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<sup>35</sup> Altman, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Alicia Kae Koger, “Trends in Musical Theatre Scholarship: An Essay in Historiography,” *New England Theatre Journal* 3 (1992), 76.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Swain, *The Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15.

to mark the twenties through forties as the great age of musical theatre, the musicals of the twenties and thirties are generally denigrated in books about musical theatre as pointless vehicles for stars and hit songs. *Porgy and Bess* (1935) is the exception, but it is identified as a folk opera and usually ignored as part of the evolution of musicals. For example, Ken Mandelbaum's *Not Since Carrie* (a loving chronicle of flop shows that explores many of the non-traditional shows) endorses the traditional historiography: "Musical librettos of the twenties and thirties were often little more than transparent excuses for beloved performers to do their specialties. The rest was filler. . . . As American musicals matured after World War II, writers sought to create serious integrated pieces."<sup>38</sup> Richard Kislak's *The Musical* acknowledges the diverse forms that laid a foundation for musical theatre, which include operetta, ballad opera, minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque, extravaganza, and revue.<sup>39</sup> The work of Kern, Hammerstein, and Sondheim, which he labels as "the mature musical," however, comprises the bulk of his book. "Mature" and "serious" refer to "integrated" pieces in many histories, as historians constantly privilege the sentimental "integrated" musical over the shows of the thirties, which they often dismiss as "transparent excuses" and "filler."<sup>40</sup>

The traditional narrative of musical theatre history continues along these lines: in 1943 Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers crafted the "mature" formula for musicals with *Oklahoma!* that, at 2,212 performances (over five years), became the longest running musical New York had ever witnessed. Historians routinely recognize it as a "landmark in the

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<sup>38</sup> Ken Mandelbaum, *Not Since Carrie* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 52.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Kislak, *The Musical: A Look at American Musical Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980).

<sup>40</sup> Rüdiger Bering's *Musicals* (Hauppauge, New York: Barron's, 1998) is the only general book to include a (small) section on political satire. It was written for a German audience and later translated into English.

evolution of American musical theatre.”<sup>41</sup> Rodgers and Hammerstein developed a formula that included a modified melodramatic plot that supported very “simplistic attitudes to life.”<sup>42</sup> According to David Hirst, “The structure of the show [*Oklahoma!*] and its sentiments seem very old-fashioned now. Until recently, however, both aspects were regarded as fundamental to the well-made musical, whilst Rodgers and Hammerstein were credited with inventing overnight the perfect aesthetic and moral formula for a musical show.”<sup>43</sup> From *Oklahoma!* until the late 60s, many musicals explored the Rodgers and Hammerstein “integrated” formula that emphasized the development of a romantic plot and used the songs to express emotions that are too strong for the characters to speak.

In the late 1960s the “concept” musical developed with *Cabaret*, *Hair*, and *Company*. “Concept” musicals are generally structured by individual scenes connected with a theme, rather than a plot developed chronologically, and their songs often comment on the action rather than explicate the emotions of a character. They are generally attributed to Hammerstein’s protégé Stephen Sondheim. A direct line is developed from Kern to Sondheim, through Hammerstein (who worked with both). As Mark Steyn confirms, the history of musicals “was a straightforward family tree from Jerome Kern to Stephen Sondheim via Kern’s partner and Sondheim’s mentor Oscar Hammerstein with various collateral branches.”<sup>44</sup> The Kern — Rodgers & Hammerstein — Sondheim evolutionary

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<sup>41</sup> Stanley Green, *Broadway Musicals: Show by Show*, Fourth Edition (New York: Hal Leonard Company, 1994), 119.

<sup>42</sup> David Hirst, “The American Musical and the American Dream: from ‘Show Boat’ to Sondheim,” *New Theatre Quarterly* I:1 (Feb 85), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then & Now* (New York, Routledge, 1999), 30.

narrative influences most scholarship about musical theatre; unfortunately, many pieces (specifically full-length satires) that do not easily fit into this lineage are often ignored.<sup>45</sup>

This tendency to ignore political issues in favor of the integrated shows is exacerbated by some of the historians who seem to avidly dislike progressive politics. Mark Steyn's derision of liberals and their causes runs throughout his book.<sup>46</sup> Ethan Mordden

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Sondheim has used satire in several shows in addition to *Anyone Can Whistle*. Most notably he developed incidental satire in "Please Hello" from *Pacific Overtures*, "A Little Priest" from *Sweeney Todd*, "Bobbie and Jackie and Jack" from *Merrily We Roll Along* "Putting it Together" from *Sunday in the Park with George*, and developed a satirical approach throughout *Assassins*. "Please Hello" satirizes both Western Imperialism and caricatures of people from specific nations, and "A Little Priest" looks at the flavors different professions would imbue the workers with, should they be eaten. Both, however, are removed from the audience by time. The political points are made through more conventional tragic, plot-based forms. "Bobbie and Jackie and Jack" is performed as a performance within *Merrily We Roll Along*. Although the intention of the character/authors inside the show is to gently spoof the Kennedys, in the context of the show it works primarily to create a sense of the time period, and of the innocence that the characters and America lose due to Kennedy's assassination. Sondheim does satirize the fundraising and networking that is now expected of artists in *Sunday in the Park with George*. Whereas George Seurat focuses on assembling the elements of a painting, his modern-day counterpart is forced to focus on assembling the financial elements.

*Assassins* differs from the more common political satire in musical theatre in that it focuses on historical figures and makes many of its points by encouraging the audience to empathize with characters that society has refused to sympathize with. The forms comment on content (a barber shop quartet, an unrequited love song, and a new national anthem) and on American culture, but overall the show is more ironical than satirical. For example, Booth has a stirring, passionate, and beautiful song explaining that his undying love of the country is what forced him to kill Lincoln. Audience members can be swept up by the soaring music and stirring rhetoric. Even when Booth says "Nigger-lover," the music is sweeping, and seems to erase that discomfiting element. When an assassination attempt is made on Roosevelt, the people who saved him desperately hog the spotlight as the assassin makes a plea to pay attention to poorer people. The overall result encourages the audience to realize that the society is just as responsible for the assassins as for the presidents, but satire is not the primary vehicle for its political commentary.

There are other pieces in Sondheim's work, like "The Ladies Who Lunch" in *Company*, that could be included as satire. "The Ladies Who Lunch" does not have a double meaning. It is a song of rage, and it would be difficult to misunderstand that. Although there are some very clever lines, like "Clutching a copy of *Life* just to keep in touch," the song is very straightforward. *Follies* has several songs that play against the format of the song, all of the "Loveland" sequence, for example, but with the exception of "Live, Laugh, Love" they are directed at personal targets. In "Live, Laugh, Love" the singer is so aware that his performance is a facade, he cannot continue through with the number. "In Praise of Women," from *A Little Night Music*, is ironical, in that the views are so openly male-chauvinistic, the audience would automatically reject the views. Because the song is so outrageous in its sexism, it is probably not relevant to the current audience. It works primarily to define a character rather than to comment on a political or social view.

<sup>46</sup> Steyn is alone, however, in using musical theatre for unabashed homophobia. His dislike of progressive political movements is clear in unexplained diatribes against various liberal groups from "American feminist deconstructionist cultural studies professors" (106) to "the banality of one farewell message on an Aids [sic] memorial quilt" (206).

excuses Weill's political involvement as ostensibly non-intentional, but the language he uses to condemn Blitzstein indicates a deep dislike of progressive political musicals: Kurt Weill "happened[,] for various complex reasons having to do with the nature of the precarious Weimar Republic, to have collaborated on artwork with Leftists. Blitzstein was a braying stooge of the Communazi [sic] Red Front whose work never succeeded and who is virtually forgotten today."<sup>47</sup> Gerald Bordman faults *Pins and Needles* for its political involvement: "Too many of the sketches and songs gratuitously injected slanted political muckraking into what could have been pleasant apolitical numbers." It could have been better developed as "a basically innocuous, mindless revue." Bordman accounts for the success of the show because "fanatics of any ilk will often accept discomforts and tortures more balanced souls would unhesitatingly reject. So it is not entirely surprising that *Pins and Needles* became a hit."<sup>48</sup> Although these historians rarely display their conservative bias blatantly, it does inform their work.

Part of the reason that the histories created an evolutionary development of the genre is that, for the most part, musical theatre books focus on the most commercially successful shows, and musical theatre enjoyed the most popularity between the beginning of World War II and the arrival of the Beatles. Focusing on the most popular shows, however, tends to privilege the more conservative elements of the form. As Koger writes:

Musical plays that challenged Americans' most cherished beliefs have rarely succeeded in holding the public's attention. The result has been that those

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<sup>47</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Morning: The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 144. The conflation of Communism with the Nazis is particularly indicative of a deep dislike for progressive politics.

<sup>48</sup> Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Revue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 108-109.

musicals that adhere to conventional points of view or espouse traditional beliefs have been commercially successful. This success has invariably led to their prominence in the histories of the genre. . . . In focusing primarily upon the most successful and popular musicals in history, scholars have, in effect, given those shows more legitimacy than their less successful counterparts.<sup>49</sup>

Very few texts work to incorporate the political, social, and economic trends of the time into the development of musical theatre. History is either presented as a cultural Darwinist narrative or a saga of “Great Men.”

The books about “Great Men” (women are ignored except as actresses) vary greatly in scope and intention, but tend to emerge from this evolutionary and apolitical tradition. Because most works are printed for the public by popular presses, popular songwriters are emphasized according to the demands of the marketplace. As a result there are over a dozen books on George Gershwin; the only study of the lesser known Yip Harburg was written by his son. Although there is some discussion of lyricists, directors, and other collaborators, these books tend to privilege the composers over other creative personalities and over the collaborative process itself. Occasionally, shows outside the traditional narrative, are discussed at length; in *Fascinating Rhythm* Deena Rosenberg creates an in-depth analysis of the lives and work of the Gershwin brothers. She combines biography, text analysis, musical theory, and some social history to illuminate satirical musicals, but her broad social and historical development is unusual.<sup>50</sup> Authors’ heirs wrote two excellent books, and this may

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<sup>49</sup> Koger, 77-78.

<sup>50</sup> Deena Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin* (New York: Dutton, 1991).

be due, in part, to their right to quote the material that is rarely granted to others.<sup>51</sup>

However, the biographies devoted to individual practitioners tend to omit the development of the genre and focus primarily on some combination of the individual's contribution and the lives of the writers.<sup>52</sup> Several are little more than hagiography.<sup>53</sup> Even the best books, like Rosenberg's *Fascinating Rhythm* and Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (an in-depth musical analysis of Stephen Sondheim's works), focus narrowly on their subjects.<sup>54</sup>

Along with the many books that focus on a single songwriter, lyricist, librettist, director, actor, or actress, many studies focus exclusively on a single part of the collaboration process. Philip Furia's analysis of lyricists<sup>55</sup> and Alec Wilder's analysis of composers<sup>56</sup> both include chapters discussing many less prolific or popular writers and noting their multiple contributions, but these books focus on the songs outside the context of the show. In general, however, authors like Caryl Brahms and Ned Sherrin, Stephen Citron, Stanley

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<sup>51</sup> Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> Joan Peyser, *The Memory of all That: The Life of George Gershwin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); idem, *Bernstein: A Biography* (Los Angeles: Bill Board Directories, 1998); Meryle Secrest, *Leonard Bernstein: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); idem, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> David Ewen, *George Gershwin: His Journey To Greatness* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1970); idem, *The World of Jerome Kern* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1960); idem, *Richard Rodgers: The Life of an American Musical Genius* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1957); Stanley Green, *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Story* (New York: DaCapo Paperback, 1963); Margery Beddow, *Bob Fosse's Broadway* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

<sup>55</sup> Philip Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>56</sup> Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

Green, and Thomas Hirschak focused on a handful of “greats,” implying that the history is written through the force of personalities, regardless of material and historical issues.<sup>57</sup>

For the most part, a few authors wrote musical theatre history: Cecil Smith, Stanley Green, David Ewen, Lehman Engel, Ethan Mordden, and Gerald Bordman defined the history and the expectations of books about musical theatre. Cecil Smith wrote the first book on musical theatre in 1950, and his conventions, assumptions, and style have been largely accepted. For example most musical theatre history eschews documentation and favors a casual voice for a popular audience. It focuses almost exclusively on Broadway and privileges words over music and texts over production. As Alicia Kae Koger documents:

Smith’s assessment of the musical theatre as inappropriate for scholarly research and analysis signaled that such popular entertainments lacked substance and depth; at the same time, his view derided the methods of the academician. In suggesting that the scholar and the musical could not be compatible Smith established an attitude that would pervade the writing on the musical theatre for the next three decades.<sup>58</sup>

Equally important to Smith’s literary choices, the theatrical development of the time shaped the history:

History is written by the victors and in this case it was the Hammerstein generation who wrote the musical comedy histories. In the wake of *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*, the official line held that a

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<sup>57</sup> Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy* (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1960); Thomas S. Hirschak, *Word Crazy: Broadway Lyricists from Cohen to Sondheim* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Stephen Citron, *The Musical from the Inside Out* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991); Caryl Brahms and Ned Sherrin, *Song by Song: 14 Great Lyric Writers* (Baldon, UK: Ross Anderson Publications, 1984).

<sup>58</sup> Koger, 70.

great musical was well-made, diversely and impeccably joined, and if possible well-meaning. By hindsight, a hit show that wasn't integrated or solemn had to be a fluke — no matter how many there were.<sup>59</sup>

Surprisingly the histories from the politically conservative 1950s, by Smith, Ewen and Green, were all complimentary towards *Of Thee I Sing* and *Strike Up the Band*. Lehman Engel, writing for CBS records in 1967, seems to have started the dismissal of the Gershwins' satirical works. Engel argued that *Of Thee I Sing* "is a ruin because it was stapled into its own time and situations which nowadays we have to ask Great-grandpa or an archaeologist (nearly synonymous) to explain." He concludes that "today it is meaningless, and the show, because it is built squarely on comedy, cannot be revived."<sup>60</sup> As the founder of the BMI workshop and the only scholar who worked on Broadway, Engel enjoyed considerable influence; citations of those statements as fact further bolstered his opinion.<sup>61</sup> Two years after Engel's first book, Abe Laube's *Broadway's Greatest Musicals* also criticized the Gershwins' political satire as not pertinent. He took the issue of timeliness to an extreme, arguing that by 1933 the issues of *Let 'Em Eat Cake* and *Of Thee I Sing* were already irrelevant.

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<sup>59</sup> Mordden, *Broadway Babies*, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater*, Revised Edition (1967, New York: Collier Books, 1979), 219. The same quote also appears in Lehman Engel, *Words with Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 300. The second quote appears in Engel's *The American Musical Theater: A Consideration* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 112. His 1979 book is primarily a reworking of the 1967 book). In *Words With Music* he also argues "The Gershwin librettos (*Porgy and Bess* excepted) achieved little beyond the entertaining of their precisely contemporary audiences. Although the characters were local everyday people, they were nearly as unreal as the ersatz ones of their operetta forebears (83).

<sup>61</sup> BMI exists to train musical theatre writers and Engel's opinions have significantly influenced the development of the conception of the genre. The assumptions of the historians are, in my opinion, influencing the terms under which new work is written. Among others, Joseph Swain refers to this Lehman Engel quote in *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53, and Lari-Dianne Young quotes it in her dissertation, *A Historical View of Twentieth-Century American Society as Witnessed through Musical Theater: 1927-Present*. Ph.D. diss., Texas Technical University, 1994. Thomas S. Hirschak paraphrases Engel in *Words With Music*, arguing "most of the Gershwin musicals are difficult to revive because of the flimsy or outdated books (*Porgy and Bess* is the exception)" in *Word Crazy: Broadway Lyricists from Cohan to Sondheim* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 50.

Despite the continuation of the Depression and the change in style from *Of Thee I Sing* to *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, he argues that the latter's failure was entirely because "the timeliness of the humor was gone."<sup>62</sup> Engel also seems to have started the adoration of *Cradle Will Rock* as the only relevant political musical of the 1930s, writing that it was "a unique work cast in a unique form. The vibrancy and sting of its humor, the genuinely colloquial quality of its music, its pathos, and its general vitality make it a milestone in American musical theater."<sup>63</sup> Engel was the original conductor for the show, and his personal involvement may have influenced his view.

Despite Engel's dismissal, the Gershwins are the most credited and acclaimed of the satirical authors. Even the scholarship focusing directly on the Gershwins, however, primarily examines the Gershwins' music and either ignores their contributions to theatre or specifically derides it. Scholars tend to look at the musicals of the 1920s and 1930s only for their success in helping to lay the foundation for the Rodgers and Hammerstein style of musicals. *Approaches to the American Musical* never mentions any of the satires. Mark Steyn's recent book, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight*, summarizes many of the conventional, often repeated assumptions about musical theatre. Steyn never mentions *Strike Up the Band* or *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. During his discussion of *Shoubout* he talks about how "silly" the other shows were. (This is several months after *Strike Up the Band* closed in Philadelphia.) Steyn writes:

Talented men wrote these shows (Vincent Youmans, the Gershwins) but they accepted implicitly the low ambitions of the genre, and were concerned mainly that you notice their contributions. . . . The Golden Age of Theatre

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<sup>62</sup> Abe Laufe, *Broadway's Greatest Musicals* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 33.

<sup>63</sup> Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater: A Consideration* (New York: CBS Legacy Collection, 1967), 149.

Song left us lotsa song but very little theatre. . . . “There’s no explanation for *Show Boat*,” says James Hammerstein, Oscar’s son. “It came from nowhere in an era when silly musicals with silly books with silly Mitteleuropean comedians were the rule.”<sup>64</sup>

Steyn never backs up his assertion that the Gershwins “accepted implicitly the low ambitions of the genre.” *Strike Up the Band* did not make it to Broadway until 1930 and the other satires were several years later, but the fact that the Gershwins wrote it before *Showboat* demonstrates their desire to experiment with the form, not merely to hope that their contributions were noticed.

Many of the scholars who acknowledge the contribution of the Gershwins frame their work as part of the Rodgers and Hammerstein evolution, arguing that the Gershwins deserve a place in that narrative. If Rodgers and Hammerstein are only about “integration,” and integration is only about imbedding the songs in the dramatic action of the piece, then the Gershwins definitely belong in that tradition. Yet, integration generally implies an unspoken but specific set of priorities and expectations: text develops a story until the emotions, now too strong for spoken words, soar into song. Dance is sometimes used when emotions become too strong for any words, or to develop areas the character is afraid to acknowledge. When historians ignore musicals that focus on political and social commentary, they develop a historical narrative that centers on integration and works to privilege life-long, monogamous heterosexual relationships as the primary focus of musical theatre. The Gershwins certainly included romance in their shows, but they often focused on other issues. Nevertheless, some authors try to fit the Gershwins into the traditional

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<sup>64</sup> Mark Steyn, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then & Now* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 64.

development. Philip Furia writes, “The American musical was moving toward integration of songs and story. . . . *Strike Up the Band* integrated songs into the story and even used them to advance the plot in lengthy stretches of lyrical pastiche, where soloist and chorus sing rhymed dialogue.”<sup>65</sup> Joseph Swain writes, “In these works Gershwin makes a significant advance integrating the music with the story.”<sup>66</sup>

The aim of satirical shows, however, is not to develop characters or advance a plot, but to satirize society, and that element is rarely acknowledged. The Gershwins’ shows are so little understood that the conventionally accepted way to deal with them is to cut the satire and focus on the love plot. The rewritten revivals reinforce the idea that the shows possessed little inherent worth and encourage more radical revision in future productions. These musicals are denigrated by historians, except for their value to help create the foundation for the Rodgers and Hammerstein “integrated” formula. The cycle is perpetuated as the rewritten revivals are incorporated into the conventional perception of their work, which further reinforces the idea that the original shows were superficial.

This narrative of history ignores the “lowbrow” English precedents, the overtly political, and the satirical shows. John Gay’s 1728 satire of corruption in British politics, *The Beggar’s Opera*, established many important traditions, including the two-act format, the use of popular (“hummable”) tunes, the emphasis on working-class characters, and the development of commentary through allegory. Rather than the exclusive reliance on German and Austrian romantic operettas as the primary precedents, the genre’s history

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<sup>65</sup> Philip Furia, *Ira Gershwin, Lyricist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>66</sup> Swain, 52.

should include the English and French traditions, and the lowbrow American traditions.<sup>67</sup>

The best place to start the documentation of musical theatre antecedents might be with Gerald Mast's analogy of a melting pot:

Though the simile [of a turn of the century melting pot] seems overdone as social history, it seems surprisingly relevant to American theater of the same period. From Vienna came the operetta; from France the *opéra-bouffe* and the type of vaudeville called madness (*folies* in French); from England satiric opera and the music hall tradition; from Ireland sentimental ballads; from Eastern and Central Europe the minor harmonies of Jewish and gypsy violins; from Africa, by way of the American South, black upbeat rhythms and the spiritual lament; from the American hinterlands such hybrids as the medicine and minstrel show; while the circus extravaganza came from all over Europe and P. T. Barnum's New England showmanship.<sup>68</sup>

The history should include the various forms that appealed to African-Americans, members of the working class, and immigrants, in addition to the forms that appealed to the middle and upper-class devotees. The musicals during the Depression created important social and political comments. These shows explored diverse issues such as gender roles (*By Jupiter* [1941] and *Girl Crazy* [1930]), political corruption (*Of Thee I Sing* [1931] and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* [1933]), and unionization (*The Cradle Will Rock* [1938] and *Pins and Needles* [1937]). Satire is one part that has been omitted from the genre's description.

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<sup>67</sup> See Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>68</sup> Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singing: The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1987), 25.

Several authors and articles have started to open the genre by their analysis of the complexities of musical theatre. Gerald Mast and Julian Mates, for example, wrote intelligent books that explore greater possibilities. Unfortunately their books are rarely cited. Although Julian Mates created a significant history of musical theatre before the twentieth century, his work is usually omitted from popular treatments of the form.<sup>69</sup> Gerald Mast included social and historical issues in *Can't Help Singing*, in which he looks at the songs of both stage and movie musicals. Additionally Allan Woll looked at economic and race issues in *Blade Musical Theatre from Coontown to Dreamgirls*.

Two works have directly addressed political satire in American musical theatre: Paul Clinton Sherr's 1965 dissertation *Political Satire in the American Musical Theatre of the 1930's* and John R. Clark and William E. Morris' 1978 article, "Scherzo, Forte, and Bravura: Satire in America's Musical Theatre," in *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Sherr's dissertation is useful, if limited in scope; it is comprised of plot synopses of ten musicals from the 1930s.<sup>70</sup> Clark and Morris' 1978 article is clearly influenced by the Darwinist model of musical theatre history. The authors write, for example, "musicals were becoming sharper and more consistently adventurous, attempting to portray the darker side and underbelly of American life."<sup>71</sup> Surprisingly the shows they mention to corroborate their evolutionary argument seem to contradict it: *Gys and Dolls* (1950) hardly seems "darker" than *Shoubout* or *Porgy and Bess* (1935). The authors gloss over many eras, privilege the integrated musical, and make

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<sup>69</sup> Julian Mates. *American Musical Stage Before 1800* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962); idem, *America's Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985).

<sup>70</sup> Paul Clinton Sherr, *Political Satire in the American Musical Theatre of the 1930's* Ph.D. dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1965).

<sup>71</sup> John R. Clark, and William E. Morris, "Scherzo, Forte, and Bravura: Satire in America's Musical Theatre," *Journal of Popular Culture* 12, No. 3 (1978): 463.

unsubstantiated claims. They include many disparate forms without clarifying their terms: farces (*Where's Charley*), romantic comedies (*Gys and Dolls*), and movie soundtracks (including *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Rocky*) are grouped together as satire.<sup>72</sup>

Recently there has been more scholarly attention paid to musical theatre, and this focuses primarily on movie musicals, gays, and lesbians. D.A. Miller and Stacy Wolf analyze various issues with regard to gays, lesbians, and musical theatre, and Peter Kivy and Sam Abel have done important work in opera.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, Jane Feuer and Rick Altman both analyzed movie musicals.<sup>74</sup> Although their analyses do not completely transfer to stage musicals, they began exploring issues of representation and sexuality in American musical theatre.<sup>75</sup> These works focus primarily on “integrated” musicals, however, and do not examine the composition of the traditional canon.

This bias towards sentimental, integrated musicals and away from revues, burlesques, and satirical shows also appears in popular texts that do not focus on musicals but that shape the general understanding of musical theatre. It is continued unquestioningly in most

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<sup>72</sup> The article occasionally reads like patriotic propaganda and makes many over-generalizations, arguing, for example, that “as a ‘democratic’ nation, the United States (and she is usually patriotic about it) never possessed a strong sense of an ‘upper’ class or experienced the bifurcations of ‘the two cultures’ — highbrow and low” (459).

<sup>73</sup> D.A. Miller, *A Place For Us* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Stacy Wolf, “The Queer Pleasures of Mary Martin and Broadway: *The Sound of Music* as a Lesbian Musical,” *Modern Drama* 39, 1 (Spring 1996): 51-63; idem, “Never Gonna Be A Man/Catch Me If you Can/ I won’t Grow Up: A Lesbian Account of Mary Martin as Peter Pan,” *Theatre Journal* 49:4 (Dec, 97); Sam Abel, *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Peter Kivy, *Osmin’s Rage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); idem, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Harold Clurman, *Opera as Drama* New and Revised Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>74</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Rick Altman ed., *Genre: The Musical* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Rick Altman, *Hollywood Musicals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>75</sup> Robert Lawson/Peebles, ed., *Approaches to the American Musical* (Exeter, Devon, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1996). An important early example is the 1973 *Journal of Popular Culture* issue devoted to the musical.

popular books that briefly discuss musicals, like this version included in *The Music Pack*, a colorful pop-up introduction to (Western) music that comes packaged with a compact disk:

The first of the great American story musicals was *Showboat* 1927, by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein. . . . *Porgy and Bess* [is the only other show mentioned before *Oklahoma!*] . . . Rodgers' and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) integrated Americana, a superb score, a new approach to choreography, and a burst of fresh energy to revolutionize the musical.<sup>76</sup>

The makers of most items designed to honor musicals and of commodities for the general public also embraced this narrative. For example, when the post office issued American musical theatre stamps four shows were included: *Showboat*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma!*, and *My Fair Lady* (1956). The shows are also treated as commodities, and when older musicals are revived, they are sometimes rewritten to make them conform to the commercially popular, sentimental formula for musicals.<sup>77</sup>

Nearly all items created around musical theatre support the evolution of sentimental musicals and ignore political and social commentary as a valid function of musical theatre. This unexamined popular dialogue of books, cast albums, and related items shapes what audiences expect and influences the form and content of future shows.

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<sup>76</sup> Ron van der Meer and Michael Berkeley, *The Music Pack* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 13-14.

<sup>77</sup> The rewritten revivals are so common that a new term, "revisal," has been coined to describe them. Producers routinely hire playwrights to rewrite books, and it would be very unusual for an early musical to be presented with the original book intact. *Crazy for You*, a rewrite of *Girl Crazy* without the satire and closely focused on the love story, added other Gershwin hits. Even *Encores*, which is a series dedicated to producing lost musicals as staged readings for only five performances, substantially rewrote the 1927 *Strike Up the Band* to make the love story sentimental, rather than ironical. David Ives changed the context of "The Man I Love" so that the romantic leads sang it sincerely, rather than as the heroine taunting the hero with an ideal romance to fight in a war he did not believe in. Additionally several of the more pointed songs were cut, and songs from the 1930 version were added. "Yankee Doodle Rhythm," a patriotic song with several racial slurs, was cut. If *Encores* set it according to the original stage direction with the singers donning hoods that resembled K. K. K. uniforms shortly after the number finished, the authors' progressive linking of racism with patriotism would have been clearly demonstrated. Instead they cut the entire number.

### *Methodological Challenges*

Satire in musical theatre is the most self-consciously political part of this popular form's history, and it occasionally deals with such serious issues as racial discrimination, corruption in business and politics, and social stratification. Musical theatrical satire is generally presented as a straightforward narrative that exaggerates the issues being critiqued and leaves the audience to link the exaggerated representation with analogous conditions in their society. Implicit in satire is a tension between the way things are and a utopian goal. The fantastic world of the musical encompasses and mediates the relationship between the actual and the ideal. The authors highlight the perceived problems by the creation of a fantasy world that allows the creative teams to remain somewhat removed from the political implications of their critique. The use of song also works to emphasize the fantastical element of the musical.

Satirical musicals include most of the conventions of musical comedy; primarily they privilege heterosexual couples, but there are formal differences in how they treat the material. The authors often rely on irony, so that a song plays against its text within the show but can be removed from that context to become a non-ironic "standard." The authors pull the dramatic frame back from a tight focus on the characters and their romantic interests to include the society in which the couple lives. Nevertheless, the form usually follows the guidelines of the genre that have been created by the interplay between historiographers' influence on the audiences' expectations and the artists' conception of the possibilities.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Raymond Williams' discussion of convention in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

My dissertation will not be a comprehensive analysis of all satire in music/theatre. Satire can be as elusive as an actress lifting an eyebrow as she says a line or as blatant as George S. Kaufman's radical attacks. Rather, I plan to explore the breadth of satire in musical theatre and analyze selected shows in depth to demonstrate the vitality and importance of this sub-genre. Most of the authors I include wrote numerous apolitical pieces and songs that may have questioned elements of the status quo in performance. I center my discussion on the political satires that were artistically or commercially successful and those that explicitly developed political topics or experimented with satirical approaches. I also include unusual pieces and incidental satire that expanded the scope of satire in musicals.<sup>79</sup> I do not seek to ignore the importance, beauty, power, or artistry of sentimental musical theatre, but to challenge implicit claims that it is the only form for American musical theatre. The inclusion of satire in the history of musical theatre will better define the history of the genre and the possibilities for political popular theatre.

My dissertation is limited, in that it focuses on Broadway shows and looks almost entirely at the work of white men.<sup>80</sup> Because I have not seen any of these shows in their initial productions, my dissertation relies on secondary information and press materials. In addition there is relatively little musical analysis. All of these areas should be further developed. Despite these limitations, it is my hope that the rediscovery of this history can, perhaps, allow for new possibilities within the genre of American musical theatre.

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<sup>79</sup> While I intend to cover all the musical satire, I have not analyzed each of the sometimes hundreds of musicals that opened annually on Broadway during this time period. Many of the scripts are no longer extant. It is probable that I have missed satire that may be present in other musicals.

<sup>80</sup> See Eric Winship Trumbull, *Musicals of the American Workers' Theatre Movement - 1928-1941: Propaganda and Ritual in Documents of a Social Movement* (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Maryland, 1991) for a discussion of workers' theatre during the 1930s. See also Alan Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1989), and Henry T. Sampson, *Blades in Blackface: A Source Book on early Black Minstrel Shows* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1980) for discussions of musicals by black authors.

*Radical, Superficial, Covert and Incidental Satire and Sentimental Appeals*

For the sake of this discussion, I divide satire in shows into four types. Some shows, like the 1927 version of *Strike up the Band*, *Flahooley* (1951), *Candide* (1956), and *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) presented fairly defiant satirical commentary. These shows differ from the more popular traditional prescripts for satire, which argue that satire should attack vice and folly. They attack a wide range of topics and are critical of society as a whole. In the tradition of the tragic-satire of Juvenal who would “versify in spite” when “indignation boils within my veins,” they denounce a system that they construct as rotten to the core.<sup>81</sup> In these shows, there are no easy answers because the entire social and political structure is fundamentally flawed. Perhaps the most important element is the conclusion. Either the satire is carried through the end of the musical or the artifice of theatre is acknowledged as the source of a required happy-ending. The audience is thus denied emotional fulfillment and left feeling uneasy. The shows are generally written by relatively young authors and are insistent in their portrayal of society’s ills. These shows do make some concessions to popular demands. All of them include a romance that holds the plot together, but the romance is not the focus of the show. These musicals experiment with formalistic conventions and urge a radical change in society; they are *radical* in both their content and form.

The 1930 version of *Strike Up the Band* emphasized romance and placed the political satire in a dream; it did not hide the satire, but it removed the bite to create a superficially satirical piece that is actually supportive of the dominant paradigm. *Louisiana Purchase* (1940)

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<sup>81</sup> Juvenal, *First Satire*, John Dryden, trans. Reprinted in *Satire: Theory and Practice*, Charles A. Allen and George D. Stephens, eds. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1962), 6-7. See Harold Weber, “The Jester and the Orator: A Re-examination of the Comic and the Tragic Satirist,” *Genre* 13 (Summer 1990), 171-185.

tried to exploit its supposed satire by having an actor portray a lawyer who argues that the authors would be sued because of the controversial nature of the show. *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937) is also structured by a dream that is used to frame the story, and it developed vaudeville in the dream to focus on the political difficulties and trivialities for the creation of a balanced budget. Although all these shows use politics to appear timely and anti-establishment, they supported the status quo and allowed the audience to feel superior and complacent. They usually distanced the action from the audience, not to discomfit the audience in a way similar to Brecht's precepts, but to mollify the audience into complacency.<sup>82</sup> I call these *superficial satires* because they exploit their exaggerated political credentials and simultaneously support the establishment.

The shows that are the most successful at the creation of a balance between political satire and the commercial imperative to attract a large audience, like *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), and *Finnian's Rainbow* (1947), generally center on a traditional love story to anchor the plot and develop some songs for more conventional structural reasons. They usually work to pull the audience in at the start, and then challenge limited areas. They are part of the comic-satire tradition that gently spoofs and laughs at the world, but rarely rails against it. Essentially they follow Dryden's precept for successful satire: they "laughed and scorned them into shame . . . As men aim rightest when they shoot in jest."<sup>83</sup>

As Dryden would suggest, the most successful structure for musical theatre is focused around the ever-popular comedic theme of love. Musical theatre authors developed the satire as essential to the love story's fulfillment and contained the satire so that it did not

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<sup>82</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, when I talk of the distancing devices in this show, I am referring to a superficial distancing of the action from the audience to undercut the satire, not Brecht's alienation effect.

<sup>83</sup> John Dryden, from *An Essay on Satire* in *The Works of John Dryden*. Reprinted in *Satire: Practice and Theory*, 9.

overpower the traditional elements. The conclusions of covert satires focus on the romance, but the satirical points are not negated. Oftentimes, these shows can be seen as simple love stories; the satire is rarely overtly demonstrated, but the commentary is essential to their purpose. Because these shows veil their satire and make concessions to their contemporary audience's idea of the genre, I refer to them as *covert satires*. The political difficulty with these shows is that they always allow the audience an emotional release at the end. It is difficult to gauge how effective they are as a challenge to the political establishment.

Finally, many shows included single songs that satirize a specific subject, but the overall subject of the plot focuses on themes that are more traditional; I refer to this as *incidental satire*. In addition to these forms of satire, musical theatre has engaged political elements through other methods. The most common non-satirical approach is through the development of sentiment. *Sentimental appeals* rely on character development; their commentary comes out of the pain a character experiences because of a social or political situation like racism. The audience is expected to empathize with the character and thus to support the political or social reforms that would end the character's pain. Although this technique has been particularly popular, it can individualize social issues.

### *Intellectual and Emotional Responses*

At risk of greatly over-simplifying, generally the songs before Rodgers and Hammerstein tended to make their political comments through intellectual and comedic arguments while the songs after Rodgers and Hammerstein tended towards sentimental appeals. Authors during the twenties and thirties tended to limit emotional identification or empathy to the generalized emotions expressed in the choruses of the songs. Rodgers and

Hammerstein and other writers of the forties moved the form towards emotional specificity, but simultaneously they moved away from political and intellectual arguments.

Yip Harburg (the lyricist for a number of political shows) worked to combine both approaches, and he discussed the potential of the genre at length. His work has also been cited as inspirational by a number of writers, from Hammerstein to Sondheim. Harburg based his estimation of a song's value on its ability to develop political ideas with emotional appeals:

The magic in song only happens when words give destination and meaning to music and the music gives wings to the words. Together as a song they go places you've never been before. Words make you think thoughts. Music makes you feel a feeling. But a song makes you feel a thought. . . . You can teach more through song and you can rouse more through song than all the prose in the world. . . . Songs have been the not-so-secret weapon behind every fight for freedom, every struggle against injustice and bigotry.<sup>84</sup>

Although political movements of the last forty years depended less on songs, historically political movements relied heavily on music. Union organizers in the late 1990s through 2001 have enlisted the Whiteville Apparel Choir to help the workers express their voice: "Union membership is about voice. These folks can sing— really sing — because they have found, or have been given, or have given themselves, a say in their own destiny."<sup>85</sup> As Stephen Kaye maintained in his dissertation, "Songs have been an integral part of social-

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>85</sup> Sue Halpern, "Blue-Collar Gospel," *Mother Jones*, March and April, 2001, 29.

action rhetoric. They have been used extensively in most, if not all, social-action movements.”<sup>86</sup> Songs reinforce the validity of political ideas.

Peter Kivy explores the general reaction to music in *Music Alone*, arguing that humanity’s relationship to music is possible because of the evolution of hearing. In order to develop the intricacies and subtleties to justify a long-term, abstract, in-depth relationship with music, hearing needs to be well-developed and not necessary to survival. The ear “is capable of sustained perceiving in an abstract, noninterpretive mode.”<sup>87</sup> A protracted, abstract art must relate to a sense that possesses “*both* a survival profile low enough to defeat interpretations perceiving for substantial periods of time *and* an acuity, a complexity, a delicacy of the sense organ enabling it to take in objects of sufficiently complex and interesting magnitude.”<sup>88</sup> It is the combination of an inability to easily analyze music intellectually and an ability to use hearing in precise ways that allows people to develop a relationship with music that is intense, passionate, and conceptual.

Music is very evocative of emotions, which helps explain the continued interest in the relatively conceptual art form. Because of the abstract nature of music, it is difficult to write about, but the emotional element of music is very real. As Kivy explains,

The musical equivalent of the emotional tone of voice is . . . a prime mover in the recognition of what emotions music is expressive of. . . . Although the tendency of the ear to hear music linguistically is easily defeated on the semantic level . . . it may not be so easily defeated at another linguistic level,

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen A. Kaye, *The Rhetoric of Song: Singing Persuasion in Social-Action Movements* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1966), 206.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music Alone* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 5. Emphasis in original.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

that of emotional significance, where semantic parameters are not always required. . . . We can never say what pure instrumental music means (in the semantic sense of that word) but frequently can, within certain limits, say what it is expressive of.<sup>89</sup>

The Music Research Foundation confirmed that music influences the emotions, but it notes that measuring the exact impact of music on emotions is not feasible.<sup>90</sup> If music is evocative of emotions, then songs with words work on several levels; the words appeal to the intellect and the music to the emotions.<sup>91</sup> This can allow a listener to experience both an emotional empathy and an intellectual understanding. This is not to say that all music does this, but the potential is there.

Reaction to music is nebulous, and technical analysis of the musical structure cannot capture the way a song can make us feel. The emotional response is too fragile and fleeting to withstand a harsh, analytical light, and once again, creating an analysis becomes much easier when focusing on the meanings of the words. That said, the combination of music and lyrics can be much more powerful than either alone. The lyric gives the mind something to think about, which allows emotions to develop that many people might otherwise

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 9. Emphasis in original.

<sup>90</sup> Music Research Foundation, *Music and Your Emotions* (New York: Liveright, 1952). Furthermore, people who lose their hearing generally suffer from much worse depression than other segments of the population, including people who lose their sight; this suggests that hearing is more closely tied to emotions than is vision. According to a 1998 study in the Netherlands 27.3% of the males and 36.8% of the women in a sample of 523 deaf or severely hearing impaired adults suffered from depression. See R. de Graaf en R. Bijl, "Geestelijke gezondheid van doven. Psychische problematiek en zorggebruik van dove en ernstig slechthorende volwassenen," Utrecht: Trimbos-instituut, 1998. [http://www.nvvs.nl/info/med\\_psychic\\_deaf.htm](http://www.nvvs.nl/info/med_psychic_deaf.htm) (Nov 2, 2000). Several other studies have confirmed high rates of depression in various hearing impaired populations. I have been able to find no studies of rates of depression in people who have their visual sense impaired. The lack of studies indicates that they are less likely to suffer from depression, and their rates of depression probably do not vary in a statistically meaningful way from the general population.

<sup>91</sup> Arnold Perris also makes this argument in *Music as Propaganda: Art to Persuade, Art to Control* (Westport, CN.: Greenwood Press, 1985).

suppress. This can allow for an increased intensity of emotion and for greater subtlety in the feelings that are acknowledged. When the mind is occupied emotions sometimes feel more intense, for emotions rarely withstand analysis.

There is an additional complication, for these songs are sung by characters. Musical theatre audiences often attempt to empathize and identify with the characters. Like most songwriters, Harburg generally placed sweeter songs at the beginning of the show and worked to lull the audience into serenity. Generally, creative teams reserve the political songs until the audience became familiar with the characters. Thus the audiences already possess an understanding of the characters, and, if the authors have been successful, are inclined to like the characters and appreciate the songs. The songs are sung by characters with whom the audience identifies and can generate complex feelings that, despite our difficulty in analyzing them rationally, are nonetheless real. For me, at least, Harburg's argument holds true. I do "feel thoughts" when listening to music in a way that I rarely experience them otherwise. When listening to songs in a musical theatre context I see a commonality between the character and myself and am open to the ideas in the song that I would rarely otherwise accept. This has had more of a cumulative than a specific effect, but I believe an early and lasting love of political musicals has made me more aware of the pain that political policies impose on people without power.

### *Musicals and Politics*

The satire in musicals usually focuses on the same issues society grappled with at any given time. In addition to the satire of politicians, musicals dealt with a myriad of issues the government created or attempted to solve. The extended role of the government under Franklin Roosevelt, the period when political musicals thrived, allowed authors to tackle a

variety of subjects that were linked to the political debate. Thus during the Depression musicals satirized politicians, businessmen, labor issues, and a variety of social issues that the New Deal attempted to resolve. For the most part, they supported the New Deal. During the forties and fifties political musicals dealt with the blacklist and issues related to poverty and unions, but they focused primarily on racial issues (which both the courts and various levels of governments dealt with from a variety of viewpoints). During the sixties, far fewer political musicals were produced on Broadway, and those shows focused primarily on social issues. As a reaction to the fifties, conformity is the primary political issue satirized during the sixties.

The issue of conformity is less directly linked to politics, but I have included it for several reasons. The widespread frustration with conformity is a reaction to the 1950s, and it began as a grassroots movement that created a significant political and social impact later in the decade. Although the protestors of the 1960s did not have a single target, frustration with the status quo seemed to underpin most political protests.<sup>92</sup> *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Cabaret*, and *Hair* are the three musicals of the 1960s that are the most involved with political issues, and all develop the subject (although *Cabaret* uses it as an unspoken expectation against which to juxtapose the action). The focus in the 1960s is on grassroots rather than governmental political issues. Finally, I believe it is important to link the political satire of

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<sup>92</sup> Although the discontent with the status quo did not become a widespread political force until 1967, the antecedents are a political issue. "During the mid- to late sixties, this upheaval crested. . . . [By 1967] a sizable group of political radicals known as the New Left had emerged, along with a related and equally formidable number of cultural radicals called the counterculture. This rebellion comprised a mix of populist, democratic ideas; concern about the equality of blacks, women, gays, Hispanics, and Native Americans; opposition to the Cold War and Vietnam; communitarian and drug experimentation; [and] transformation of sexual mores. . . . Rooted in the dissent of the fifties, the Movement gathered momentum in the sixties as young people's unique response to specific events, personal experiences, and broad cultural forces crystallized." Douglas T. Miller, *Our Own Americans in the Sixties* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), 180-181.

the early musicals with the destabilization that concept musicals developed during the sixties, for this connection enriches the history of the entire genre.

Although there have been isolated incidents of satire in musicals since *Anyone Can Whistle*, the show marks the end of an era. *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1960) remains the last commercially successful satirical Broadway musical. Although *Anyone Can Whistle* failed commercially, much of the audience would have been able to recognize it as part of a tradition that had resulted in hundreds of performances of satirical musicals throughout the previous decade. By the time *The Selling of the President* opened in 1972, there had been only eight performances of any satirical musicals on Broadway in the previous ten years. Audiences had no framework to measure or recognize the show. *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue's* week long run in 1976 failed to revive interest in the form. No full-length musical satire has since come to Broadway.

To what extent are satirical musicals truly subversive? *Les Miserables* (1985) illustrates the difficulty with effective political commentary in musical theatre. The show seems to be a passionate plea to help the underclass, and the direction evokes several Brechtian production techniques.<sup>93</sup> However, the show is a real tearjerker, and most audience members achieve an emotional catharsis or a “good cry.” This releases the energy the show builds up and can have a numbing effect on any political impulse developed through the evening. Additionally, although the musical portrayed homeless people in the show as sympathetic, it both historicized and individualized the issue. Audiences often exit the show that depicts sentimentalized homeless people, only to ignore the real-life homeless people outside the

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<sup>93</sup> The turntable stage is reminiscent of Brecht's staging of *Mother Courage*. Eponine's cross through a bridge evokes *The Good Person Of Szechuan* on the ice. The back of the set is created to suggest the bare wall of the theatre.

theatre. This indicates that, on a whole, the show has a negligible impact on how audiences view the world.<sup>94</sup>

Does the satire allow only a momentary critique and then reaffirm the status quo? The tradition of satire worked to allow a controlled vent for anger, and these shows are no exception. The shows run along a continuum from radical attacks to superficial pranks that ultimately support the mainstream culture. Ultimately to be successful the show must make a large portion of the audience uneasy with the way things are currently organized. At the same time, they must also avoid an attitude that the audiences perceive as preachy or arrogant. Audiences rarely want to pay the significant amount of money that live theatre costs to feel that the authors condescend to them. In musical theatre for a paying audience, humor is the most effective method to influence audiences. As lyricist Yip Harburg suggests, humor allows audiences to encounter politics without making them feel defensive or even aware that politics is the primary focus of an evening:

When you lose humor, you're in a disaster area. . . . We're getting into the technique of using profound political ideas in an entertaining and titillating way, . . . the ingenious use of phrase so that people can laugh and think at the same time and be left with meaning, and not be clobbered over the head with

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<sup>94</sup> I was especially aware of this when I saw the show in San Francisco in 1990. I saw two men begging for food outside of the theatre. Not only did they get no response, but about a block later, a homeless woman was sleeping and a man coming out of the show either tripped on her or kicked her. I'm not sure which, but he did not apologize, or even seem to acknowledge her existence. A person I attended the theatre with said he felt vulnerable with the homeless outside the theatre, and implied they were taking advantage of his vulnerability. The show did help make the homeless more visible, but is this audience member felt the homeless people were taking advantage of audience members by being there, not that changes should be made to give people without houses better options.

sledgehammer phrases because people run from polemics, but they don't run from laughter.<sup>95</sup>

The belief in the possibility of positive social change is essential to any political movement because people only become active if they believe hope is possible. Songs powerfully influence our emotions and can help channel despair into activism. Musical satires may help create the sense that the dominant hegemony is not all-powerful, but comprised of individuals, subject to change.

The commercially successful, political superficial American musical satires confirmed the status quo and hid a conventional core with a well-publicized political veneer. Some covert musical satires created the opposite effect with a conventional structure and veneer that worked to hide vital political commentary. A few musicals radically challenge the system, but producers rarely produced them, and the shows never succeeded commercially.<sup>96</sup>

Whether or not musical satire can be an effective form for change is impossible to assess objectively, but some assumptions can be made. The most objective issue is that if a show closes immediately and no one sees it, it is not politically effective. Furthermore, aside from the song "Brother Can You Spare A Dime," no musical or song from a show notably impacted political history.<sup>97</sup> However, theatre reflects and reinforces popular ideas. For example, both *Pins and Needles* (1937) and *Hair* might not be particularly effective in changing opinions, but they could be effective in building support for counter-culture movements,

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<sup>95</sup> Yip Harburg and Studs Terkel Interview, 1979. Transcript at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (which will be referred to as NYPL-PA); Harburg Papers, \*T-Mss 1990-002 Box 24, Folder 14

<sup>96</sup> Subsequent revivals of *Candide* have used the radically altered book, which is much less politically involved.

<sup>97</sup> "Brother Can You Spare A Dime" receives almost a page of discussion in *A People's History of the United States*. In Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), Harburg discusses his perception of the considerable impact of the song. See also, Meyerson and Harburg's *Who Put The Rainbow In the Wizard of Oz*, for a further discussion of the song's political impact.

and this is an important political accomplishment. As Michael Denning argues, “It is worth recalling that *most* preaching is to the converted, that the power of any political or religious movement lies in its ability to sustain, inspire, and console its adherents.”<sup>98</sup>

Musicals can work in conjunction with other mediums to influence opinions. Just as a political cartoon in conjunction with an editorial will help change views more effectively than the editorial alone, satirical musicals probably help create an opening that allows audience members to be more receptive to later political commentary.<sup>99</sup> In his 1966 dissertation, Stephen A. Kaye found that songs and speeches on the same topic were far more effective to influence opinions than either alone: “the hearing of a song can result in attitude change, particularly if the song accompanies a speech on the same topic,” a characteristic of musical theatre.<sup>100</sup> Musicals are an effective medium to reach a large number of people through entertainment with progressive political ideas. They are more effective at building communities and illuminating problems, through either satire or the emotional impact of political issues, than discussing solutions. Although the lack of solutions may inhibit their direct political effectiveness, elucidating difficulties can help create momentum to address social concerns.

Patricia Meyer Spacks’ questions are valuable — does a satirical show create a sense of uneasiness in the audience? Are the emotions developed in the show allowed to dissipate

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<sup>98</sup> Denning, 67. Emphasis in original.

<sup>99</sup> See D. Brinkmann, “Do Editorial Cartoons and Editorials Change Opinion?” *Journalism Quarterly* 45 (1968): 724-26.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen A. Kaye, *The Rhetoric of Song: Singing Persuasion in Social-Action Movements* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1966), 206. Kaye created a study to test whether protest songs were persuasive. Kaye’s study found that folk songs, on their own, were not statistically relevant. Speeches were able to create a statistically meaningful change in opinion, and the combination of a speech and song was over twice as effective as the speech alone.

through a cathartic release or through emotional fulfillment and resolution? Does the show encourage the audience to feel complacent? A criterion that Michael Denning might add is, does it energize the politically active base? All these questions help to analyze the political efficacy of a piece.

It may also be important, however, for the authors not to take the satire too far. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the tragic/radical satires have never enjoyed commercial success. They close quickly, and very few people see them. Additionally, in a boomerang effect, satire can increase sympathy for people who are satirized. A 1956 study found that test subjects' sympathy for Senator McCarthy markedly improved after listening to *The Investigator*, a very funny, fairly radical radio satire of the senator who tries to take over the admission requirements for heaven.<sup>101</sup> On the whole, the test subjects felt the satire was not fair to McCarthy. Despite a rise in their estimation of McCarthy, however, the subjects reported markedly lower opinions of congressional investigations after exposure to the satire.

The extent of the changed opinions is related to the impression of the author's intent. *The Investigator* was far more effective for those who thought the show was an attack on the concept of Congressional Investigations; they reported decidedly more negative views of Congressional Investigations and a much better view of McCarthy. Those test subjects who thought the show was an attack on McCarthy conveyed a much smaller change in their views of Congressional Investigations and a smaller increase in their estimation for McCarthy. The results indicate that the boomerang effect is a much more common

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<sup>101</sup> D. K. Berlo, and H. Kumata. "The Investigator: The Impact of a Satirical Radio Drama." *Journalism Quarterly* 33 (1956): 287-98.

response with satires of people than satires of concepts, and that satires that focus on issues are more effective than satires of individuals.<sup>102</sup>

Politically satirical musicals reach a self-selected group: people who are invested in politics or disposed to be sympathetic philosophy of a show. Satires tend to use songs that employ both a satirical verse and a non-satirical chorus, and the chorus is the only part to be marketed outside of the theatre; therefore, any extra-theatrical political impact is negated. The melding of music with satire allowed for corrosive commentary without seeming overly didactic. The music broadens the audience base for the satire, draws the audience into the story through emotional development of the songs, and allows the musical “subtext” to comment on the verbal “text.” For the self-selected group of people who attended these shows the shows were probably relatively effective. They may have helped to make the political structure seem less monolithic, create a sense of hope, and instill a sense of community.

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<sup>102</sup> There may have been something else going on in this study, unidentified by the authors, because the control group demonstrated a nearly identical shift on their pre-test and post-test opinions on McCarthy, whereas the control group experienced almost no shift on their opinions of Congressional investigations. The written comments of text participants, however, support the study's conclusions.

## Chapter One

### Patriotic Pastimes: The Political Satires of Ira and George Gershwin

In 1998 New York's "Encores! Great American Musicals in Concert" produced the 1927 *Strike Up the Band* by George S. Kaufman, Ira Gershwin, and his brother George Gershwin, that ruthlessly satirized the United States' military policies. Encores produces three "lost" musicals a year at New York's City Center. Each musical plays for five performances over the course of a weekend. With a week and a half of rehearsal, most of the actors are on-book, and sets and costumes are minimal. The series prominently features big stars and the house usually sells out, with a renewal rate over 90% and a waiting list of several years.<sup>1</sup> The management brags that people leave their Encores subscriptions in their wills, demonstrating that there is clearly a large, supportive audience base.

For *Strike Up the Band* Encores sentimentalized the mordant tone of the original 1927 show by removing the satire from both the embellished love plots and from many of the musical numbers and by cutting the most pointed satire. Playwright David Ives "adapted" the book. He cut several songs and significant portions of dialogue, rewrote other dialogue, and added songs from the 1930 rewrite of the musical. Morrie Ryskind toned down the 1927 book for the 1930 revival. He cut the most caustic political commentary, dissolved the connection between the romantic plots and the political action, and placed the action in a

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<sup>1</sup> The gallery of City Center, which is usually closed, is not sold by subscription and rarely sold out. These seats, five stories from the stage, are some of the worst in New York and rarely used. The popularity of Encores fills these seats. The rest of the house, save a couple of rows in the orchestra for large donors and corporate sponsors, is sold entirely by subscription.

dream. Far from challenging its audience, the producers made drastic changes to make it palatable, even though they presented it to a subscription audience with an obvious interest in the history of musical theatre. These changes indicated that musical satires are so rarely presented that audiences have no frame of reference to understand them. Most audience members are no longer aware of the extent to which the Gershwins challenged the status quo.

The commercial difficulties of doing political satire, especially in musical theatre, challenged all the authors. George S. Kaufman, librettist for many satirical shows, famously said, "Satire is what closes on a Saturday night." Ironically some of Kaufman's most popular shows were musical satires, including *The Cocoanuts* (1925), *Animal Crackers* (1928), *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), and the Gershwin satires. Authors have developed ways to combine satirical political commentary with musical theatre, but those methods have been dismissed in written histories and ignored in revivals like the Encores production of *Strike Up the Band*. The desire to cut satire and focus on love plots when reviving the Gershwin musicals is a common reaction. This is exacerbated by George Gershwin's status as an icon. The 1992 Broadway "revisal" of *Crazy for You* rewrote *Girl Crazy*, eliminating all the satire. *My One and Only* (1983) rewrote song lyrics and amalgamated various songs from other Gershwin musicals, focusing on a boy meets girl plot. *Fascinating Rhythm* (1999) cut all context and commentary from assorted Gershwin songs, imitating the style of popular music videos.

Although the Gershwins have been well represented on Broadway, none of the recent musicals featuring their songs have acknowledged the artistic merit of the original shows; only the songs are treated as having integrity.<sup>2</sup> The widespread acceptance of

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<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the reworking of Yip Harburg's *Finnian's Rainbow* currently headed for Broadway has cut much of its social commentary; this will be dealt with in Chapter 4.

rewriting satirical musicals stems from the current understanding of musical theatre history, which is affected by both the biases in histories of musical theatre, and the rewritten books of “revisals,” which often claim that the weakness of the original book justifies the changes.

During their time, the Gershwins inhabited a contested cultural space, which they explored to embrace musical forms that were both high culture and popular. Ironically the highbrow/lowbrow debate is unconsciously replicated by theatre historians when musical theatre is looked down upon as being foolish, and by the musical theatre historians, who seemingly argue in favor of a homogenized artistic method rather than embracing the diversity of formats that have enriched the history of the form. During the 1930s, full-length musical satires became a viable form, but that is now non-existent on Broadway. This is, in part, because musical satires violate the current demarcations of the genre, confusing audiences as well as producers and historians.

The Gershwins and George S. Kaufman presented the most artistically innovative musicals in American history, both because American politically satirical musicals had not been presented to a Broadway audience, and because they systematically experimented with how to present politics in musicals to reach a broad audience. Ira Gershwin’s continued interest in parody matched George S. Kaufman’s interest in political satire. George Gershwin balanced both elements, and the team synthesized the Gilbert and Sullivan format with an American style and popular music. Despite the fact that their first show, *Strike Up the Band*, is a political and artistic success, it did not reach its audience. The creative team included many more comedic elements and toned down the satire when they rewrote it, and *Strike Up the Band* became a popular success in 1930. The team then started experimenting with adding more political commentary. Their next show, *Of Thee I Sing*, developed a lighthearted comedic satire, was a popular and critical success, and became the first musical

to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. They followed that accomplishment with *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, which experimented with the cohesive and radical satire of the original *Strike Up the Band*. Again, the radical satire failed to gain a large audience. Interestingly George and Ira Gershwin's next show, *Porgy and Bess*, broke numerous other expectations in both form and content. Although it also failed economically, it is widely regarded as the best American opera and continues to be a high mark in musical theatre.<sup>3</sup>

The Gershwins and George S. Kaufman created the first musicals that developed political and social critiques, and their work demonstrates that social and political history and dramaturgical analysis is imperative for understanding the potential of the genre. Reducing the Gershwins to merely songwriters diminishes an important element of their work and their contribution to theatre of the time. The Gershwins' work combined popular appeal with prescient political commentary and challenged the cultural hierarchy, contemporary audiences, and historians of musical theatre; their work created a strong foundation for political satire in American musical theatre. To understand the importance of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Porgy and Bess* is the only American opera to be continually performed at numerous opera houses throughout the world, including the Metropolitan and Glyndebourne. Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Night Visitors*, originally written for an NBC special, has become widely performed by community groups at Christmas, it does not have acclaim like the following. "Porgy and Bess will gradually establish itself as arguably the greatest truly American opera" Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. ed. *The Almanac of American History* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993), 470. "Porgy and Bess was the most ambitious creation of the decade; it still remains the most universally acclaimed operatic work by any American composer" Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy: The Story of the American Musical Stage as Told Through the Careers of its Foremost Composers and Lyricists* (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1960), 2-3. "Porgy and Bess is a masterpiece, if ever America has produced a musical masterpiece" Thomas S. Hirschak, *Word Crazy Broadway Lyricists from Cohan to Sondheim* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 48. *Porgy and Bess* "undoubtedly represents the most effective theatrical employment of ensemble singing and writing ever heard in any American stage work" Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theatre* (1968, Reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1975), 145. "The Gershwins became immortal with *Porgy and Bess*" Lehman Engel, *Words With Music* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 84. "*Porgy and Bess* comes closest to the ideal of European opera" Joseph Swain *The Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12. Swain also calls *Porgy and Bess* "America's Folk Opera" (51). "*Porgy and Bess* has become so thoroughly assimilated into our folkways that discussion of it is hazardous. Certainly it has become the best-loved American opera" Ceceil Smith, *Musical Comedy in America* (1950, Reprint, New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1981), 162-163. *Porgy and Bess* "has proved a lasting characteristically American opera. . . . Many Americans have written operas, but not many have created truly American operas" "Opera," George Hauger, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 741.

Gershwins' work, and the difficulties with the dismissive attitude towards it, I will look at the Gershwins' complex place in the developing cultural hierarchy. I will examine the cultural and political landscape of their time and the dramaturgical elements of their musical satires. Finally I will develop close readings of the musicals through the context of the social and political issues of the time that will demonstrate the value of their work, both in their own time, and in the creation of a foundation for the interweaving of politics and musical theatre.

The Gershwins' satires did include significant elements of musical comedy. As in most comedies, romance is the single most common catalyst of musical theatre plots, and the Gershwins continually focused on a romance at the center of their shows. However, in both *Strike Up the Band* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, the romance is not a positive thing. In the former, romance is a central plot element with three couples united in the end, but it also functioned as a hegemonic element that is used to coerce participation in a corrupt system by making romantic fulfillment contingent on support of the status quo. In *Strike Up the Band* this is seen in the introduction to "The Man I Love" and explored to a lesser degree in "Meadow Serenade" and a comic romantic sub-plot. Even though *Of Thee I Sing* centers around the coupling of a Presidential candidate and campaign worker, much of the show's critique revolves around romance that overshadows issues in the presidential campaign. However, the show allows the romance to develop fully; it criticizes the culture's infatuation with romance and avoids a confrontation with the lovers. In the sequel, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, the Gershwins, Kaufman, and Ryskind explore the manipulation of the masses by distracting them with romance. Whenever there is a political problem, the First Couple tries to sell their marriage as a cure for the country's problems and divert attention to their family life. The chorus continually accepts that distraction until a revolutionary points out their tactics; at that point the couple has to deal with the real political problems they've created.

The Gershwins used incidental, radical, superficial, and covert satires throughout their careers. I look at the incidental satire in *Girl Crazy*, which follows a New Yorker banished to Arizona by his parents because of his debauched lifestyle. He proceeds to turn the ranch into a hub of nightlife and falls for the local mailwoman. Although the plot avoids social commentary, satire is woven throughout the piece. The full-length Gershwin satires are *Strike Up the Band* (1927 & 1930), *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933). *Strike Up the Band* focuses on the war that an American cheese manufacturer (Fletcher) sponsors with Switzerland over a cheese tariff. His only opposition is Jim, a young journalist who is in love with his daughter, Joan. The show is a radical satire in its 1927 incarnation and a superficial satire in the 1930 version. *Of Thee I Sing*, a covert satire, is about John P. Wintergreen, a national presidential candidate who runs on the platform of "Love" because it is something that "everybody is interested in, and that doesn't matter a damn."<sup>4</sup> *Of Thee I Sing* is the best known of the musical satires.<sup>5</sup> A Broadway revival of *Of Thee I Sing* in 1952 disappointed many critics; after that revival many dismissed the show as trivial fluff. *Let 'Em Eat Cake* takes place four years after *Of Thee I Sing*, and again the authors attempt the radical satire first developed in the 1927 *Strike Up the Band*. John loses reelection, so he puts together an army of "blueshirts" and establishes a "dictatorship of the proletariat." John is quickly deposed and nearly beheaded, with his wife Mary again coming to the rescue. As Ira Gershwin noted:

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<sup>4</sup> George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind (book), and Ira Gershwin (lyrics), *Of Thee I Sing* (New York Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), 31.

<sup>5</sup> It was the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize and the longest running book musical on Broadway during the Depression. As late as 1990, Throttlebottom, the bumbling vice-president, was included in political editorials, and the phrase "Of Thee I Sing, Baby" (the title song) stayed popular throughout the 30s and 40s.

If *Strike Up the Band* was a satire on War, and *Of Thee I Sing* one of Politics, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* was a satire on Practically Everything. Straddling no fence, it trampled the Extreme Right one moment, the Extreme Left the next. Kaufman and Ryskind's libretto was at times wonderfully witty—at other times unrelentingly realistic in its criticism of the then American scene.<sup>6</sup>

Although recent recordings of *Strike Up the Band* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* increased their availability and stature, neither show had popular support during its first runs, and both have been mostly ignored. The critical dismissal for *Of Thee I Sing* in 1952 made it easy to ignore the Gershwins' political work altogether.

### *Navigating the Cultural Hierarchy*

The work of the Gershwin brothers still challenges implicit notions about high and low culture in this country. George Gershwin's work is usually considered highbrow, a reputation that may have been enhanced by his tragic death at thirty-eight, and he is sometimes treated as an "archetypal myth" of an artistic genius.<sup>7</sup> His work, especially *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and *Porgy and Bess* (1935), has been fully inducted into the cultural canon of this country; philharmonic orchestras all over the world perform the former and opera houses perform the latter. At the same time, however, Ira is routinely ignored, and George's Broadway work is denigrated and trivialized.

As the Gershwins worked to combine both popular and elite forms during the 1920s and 1930s, the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow was quite pronounced, both from the social elite and from the newly politicized mass culture. During this time, African

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<sup>6</sup> Ira Gershwin, *Lyrics on Several Occasions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 162.

<sup>7</sup> Mast, 67.

American, German, Jewish, and Irish cultures became more predominant in New York, and the established elite continued to use culture to demarcate their privileged parameters. Yet rigid cultural categories were constantly challenged. Lawrence W. Levine outlines some of the tension between elite highbrow culture and lowbrow popular culture that existed as massive waves of immigrants were entering the country:

There was also an escape into Culture, which became one of the mechanisms that made it possible to identify, distinguish, and order this new universe of strangers. As long as these strangers had stayed within their own precincts and retained their own peculiar ways, they remained containable and could be dealt with. . . . But these worlds of strangers did not remain contained. They spilled over into the public spaces.<sup>8</sup>

As the elite used culture to define upper-class values, the working classes developed increased access to commercial apparatuses necessary to develop and distribute a popular culture.

According to Michael Denning, during the 1930s the combination of “a powerful democratic social movement — the Popular Front — and the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education” meant that the left in America enjoyed “a powerful, indeed an unprecedented, impact on the US culture in the 1930s.”<sup>9</sup> The influence of politically progressive artists developed out of “a new generation of plebian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working-class neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis” who used the commercial apparatus to create and distribute

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1997), xviii, xvii.

popular culture.<sup>10</sup> Tin Pan Alley, which distributed millions of pieces of sheet music for popular songs, combined with the developments of radio, records, player pianos, and mass-produced popular culture, allowed songwriters to penetrate society in ways previously unimagined. Like most of the other artists of the time, many of the early Tin Pan Alley writers and most of the Broadway composers and lyricists were the children of working-class immigrants, in this case Eastern-European Jewish immigrants. Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein, the Gershwins, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Otto Harbach, and Dorothy Fields were all Jewish.<sup>11</sup> Cole Porter is the only major American musical theatre writer who was not Jewish. This reflects the affinity of the style of American musical theatre with the music of Jewish cantors. It also probably results from the fact that popular music was a new industry with little status and therefore accessible to socially stigmatized groups.

In 1911 Irving Berlin wrote "Alexander's Ragtime Band," which, enabled by the development of "Tin Pan Alley," became the first international hit. In Manhattan numerous sheet music publishers started the first worldwide distribution of popular song hits. Players, known as "pluggers," played the songs for potential buyers on pianos with newspapers woven through the strings to dim the din. (George Gershwin started his career as a piano plugger.) The newspapers gave the pianos a tinny sound and Tin Pan Alley its name. Tin Pan Alley and Broadway worked together, with the publishers following the theatre district as it moved uptown. As shows helped create many popular songs, Tin Pan Alley distributed

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>11</sup> See Kenneth Aaron Kanter, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley: the Jewish contribution to American popular music, 1830-1940* (New York: Ktav Pub. House ; Cincinnati : American Jewish Archives, 1982).

the songs to a wide audience. The logos and stars from the shows on the covers of sheet music indicate that the musicals were a crucial selling point for the songs.

The mass distribution of popular culture through the apparatus of Tin Pan Alley gave Irving Berlin, a Jewish immigrant, widespread recognition. However, his marriage to Ellin Mackay, a Catholic socialite, enraged society and the papers. When their child died at twenty-five days old, on Christmas day, many said it was God's punishment for a Christian marrying a Jew.<sup>12</sup> Despite Tin Pan Alley's creation of a mechanism for these Jewish writers to market their songs and shape popular culture, society consigned even the most successful Jewish authors to a very limited social space.

The Gershwin brothers challenged the cultural hierarchy both by George's more highbrow symphonic pieces and within the genre of musical comedy itself. New York's musical comedy was designed for financially comfortable audiences but was a comparatively lowbrow entertainment. By the 1920s, the working classes attended movies much more often than theatre, which allowed theatre to move up in the social hierarchy. Simultaneously, Tin Pan Alley started to set the popular musical tastes of most of the country, which further confused musical theatre's place on the social scale. In 1914 *The Atlantic Monthly* hoped that through the popularity of movies, "the art of the stage may escape from the proletariat, and again truly belong to those who in a larger, finer sense are 'the great ones of the earth.'"<sup>13</sup> The newly ubiquitous popular song market (intimately connected with musical theatre), combined with the emergence of movies as a popular form, made the class markers of theatre less obvious.

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<sup>12</sup> Laurence Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 283.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Levine, 207.

Like most of the “capitalist culture industries,” commercial theatre in the United States is a business before it is art, and by necessity, it is a popular art form because it relies on many individual ticket-buyers to support it.<sup>14</sup> Opera is an elite form with numerous supporters and subscribers, but Broadway musicals are almost entirely dependent on ticket prices to survive. Thus any financially successful show on Broadway needs to appeal to a large enough audience both to meet weekly operating costs and to pay back the initial investment. As a result of the economic conditions surrounding the production of musical theatre, the authors needed to be aware of the demands and interests of their audiences.

As movies gained in popularity and theatre prices increased, working class people were increasingly excluded from the theatre by virtue of ticket prices alone. According to U.S. Census reports, in 1929, the most prosperous year of the 20s or 30s, the per capita personal income averaged \$705.<sup>15</sup> Although the movies were available for as little as ten cents, few theatre tickets were offered for the cheapest prices, which were usually upwards of a dollar, and the highest theatre ticket prices were \$7, or one percent of the average annual income. By 1933 per capita personal income was \$374, with finance, insurance, and real estate workers averaging 24% less at \$1,555 and domestic workers averaging \$460, a fall of 37%. By contrast, the costs of necessities fell relatively small amounts; the price per pound of bread fell by just 19% from 8.8 cents to 7.1 cents. Even those on the lower end of the economic system lucky enough to have work needed to make their meager salaries stretch much farther. Between 1929 and 1933 theatre lowered top ticket prices by 37% to

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<sup>14</sup> Denning, 42.

<sup>15</sup> On average, an unskilled man would earn \$24.40 a week and a woman would earn \$17.61. Per capita spending indicated that the average person spent only \$76 a year on durable goods, with \$309 being spent on non-durable goods and \$249 on services. Salaries for workers in the finance, insurance and real estate industries averaged \$2,062 (with many differences in salary within that average) but domestic workers' salaries averaged \$731. (Per capita figures included all people, not just those working.) See *Historical Statistics*.

\$4.40. Many shows charged a top ticket price of \$2.50 with balcony seats available for \$1 and occasionally 55 cents. Yet, despite the price cuts, theatre was a luxury few could afford.

Many people involved with the theatre were aware that ticket prices kept average people from attending. In 1928 a radio personality on WIP in Philadelphia said:

In America, it usually takes money to go to the theatre and plenty of money.

To the average person on a small income, a \$3.30 or \$3.40 ticket is really a huge item out of a weekly pay envelope – so that this average person of ours, instead of going to the theatre for recreation, goes instead to the movies.<sup>16</sup>

The Federal Theatre charged a top ticket price of \$1.10 with most tickets at 55 cents. In 1937 G. B. Shaw specified that the tickets for his show *On The Roads* could not be more than 50 cents. Elmer Rice wrote several articles for *The New York Times*, focusing on the importance of reasonable admission prices. In 1933 he discussed “the wish to help bring back the theatre to those who are hungry for it—and to introduce it to those who have never tasted its delights.” In 1939 he explicated what that meant: “What that rather high sounding phrase really means is reducing the price of theatre tickets. There cannot be the slightest doubt that the chief reason why more people do not go to the theatre is that they cannot afford to go.”<sup>17</sup> Burns Mantle of the *New York Daily News* wrote several columns on the issue, including one immediately following Rice’s article, on the importance of reclaiming theatre from the wealthy that tried to keep it their exclusive domain. He supported the “campaign to get the theatre back from those dumb ones who [thinking theatre only belonged to the wealthy] took it away from them [the working class] back in the boom years

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<sup>16</sup> Included in NYPL-PA clippings folder on Admission Prices. No author is given.

<sup>17</sup> Elmer Rice, “Tickets Going Down,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 1939. (The 1933 statement is quoted in the 1939 article.)

and have been holding on to it ever since.”<sup>18</sup> The cost of tickets meant the audiences for these shows were primarily wealthy.

Ticket prices did come down continually during the 1930s, but they did so at the expense of the poorest people working in the theatre. According to *Equity*, the magazine of the Actor’s Equity Association, the salary of a Broadway actor in 1933 averaged \$30 a week and managers worked to reduce even that.

Beyond cutting salaries and inducing various groups of employees to accept lower wages or less expensive conditions of labor, the managers are not doing anything in particular to offset the reduction in ticket prices. They are not, for instance, developing any new technique of production; or lowering their overhead by pooling resources with other producers; or even going after sections of the public not yet sufficiently stirred by the simple reduction of ticket prices. . . . While the reduction in prices is one step in the right direction there are other steps necessary which do not seem to be even contemplated by the producing managers.<sup>19</sup>

*Of Thee I Sing* enjoyed a very long run and toured all over the country, so it reached many people who rarely saw the theatre. The core audiences, however, were financially secure, regular theatregoers who lived in the New York area.

Despite the relative exclusion of economically disadvantaged audience members, the creators worked to develop political commentary for audience members. As a result, the

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<sup>18</sup>Burns Mantle, “Lower Price Move Gains Converts for New Show Season,” *New York Daily News*, September 26, 1939.

<sup>19</sup> “What is the Lesson of Cheaper Admissions?” *Equity Official Organ of the Actors’ Equity Association and the Chorus Equity Association*, March, 1933, 33.

creative teams needed to balance their critique with entertainment for, demographically, the financially comfortable audience members were less likely to automatically sympathize with liberal political issues than economically disadvantaged people. Although it can seem incongruous to focus on progressive shows created for the financially comfortable, it is an unusual achievement that the Gershwins (and other writers of the 1930s) were able to craft politically liberal shows that appealed to a primarily wealthy audience.

Musical theatre belonged to the low end of theatre, but when *Of Thee I Sing* won the Pulitzer Prize as the best new play in 1932, the musical broke through one of the most clearly defined parameters of the high/low distinction. The fact that the show beat the highly esteemed literary playwright Eugene O'Neill (eligible with *Mourning Becomes Electra* for the 1931 year), who was a pillar of the highbrow "little theatre" tradition, emphasized for some (like critic Brooks Atkinson) the cultural associations of musical theatre had changed. The committee honored librettists George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind and lyricist Ira Gershwin, but they excluded George Gershwin from the honorees, as if to highlight that the popular form of musical theatre must justify itself only with its book. Musical theatre could enter the cultural sanctioned categories only under the criteria for non-musical plays.

As working class Jewish immigrants (both were born in America, but their parents emigrated from Russia just a few years before Ira's birth), the Gershwins were automatically excluded from the upper echelon. Although Ira and George grew up middle class, their mother gave them a great amount of freedom, and they lived on the street, mixed with Irish street gangs, and attended public school. The Gershwins were aware of the tension between popular and elite art forms and deliberately tried to transcend or ignore the cultural hierarchy, incorporating both popular forms and intellectual themes into their shows. In 1916 two years after the *Atlantic Monthly* article, Ira wrote an article for the school paper at

City College of New York called “The Ideal Humorist” which said the eponymous character “Must be a low brow — with, however, a streak of appreciation and sympathy for the ideas of aesthetics.”<sup>20</sup> In a 1922 song Ira wrote, “For though we like to play the high-brow stuff . . . we’re not high brows, we’re not low brows . . . we’re He-brows.”<sup>21</sup> Jewish identity sets them outside of the American cultural hierarchy. They play at the highbrow stuff, incorporating elements, but ultimately Ira Gershwin saw them as apart from the cultural elite.

In 1918 George Gershwin wrote *Swanee*, which became an international popular hit with sales of two and a half million copies of sheet music, and in 1924 he wrote *Rhapsody in Blue*, an art piece that combined jazz rhythms and a symphony structure to celebrate the lowbrow plurality of New York City.<sup>22</sup> After the premiere of *Porgy and Bess*, Edgar Selwyn (an agent in Hollywood who produced *Strike Up the Band*) sent a telegram to George saying, “They are afraid you will only do highbrow songs, so wire me on this score so I can reassure them.” George wrote back, “Rumors about highbrow music ridiculous. Stop. Am out to write hits.”<sup>23</sup> The difficulty of transcending the categorization of highbrow or lowbrow affected the reception of all the Gershwins’ work. As Levine writes, “Rigid cultural categories . . . made it so difficult for so long for so many to understand the value and importance of the popular art forms that were all around them.”<sup>24</sup> In a 1935 article on

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<sup>20</sup> Deena Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythms: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin* (New York: Dutton, 1991), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Complete Lyrics, 29.

<sup>22</sup> See James Ross Moore, “The Gershwins in London” *New Theatre Quarterly* 10: (1995), 37 for discussion on “Swanee’s” reception in Britain.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenberg, 321.

<sup>24</sup> Levine, 232.

George Gershwin in *Modern Music*, Virgil Thomson wrote, “I don’t mind his being a light composer, and I don’t mind his trying to be a serious one. But I do mind his falling between two stools.”<sup>25</sup> For Thomson and many critics of high culture it was fine to fall in either category as long as the categories were respected. Blurring the distinctions, however, challenged the cultural hierarchy.

### *Girl Crazy* (1930) and Incidental Satire

The Gershwins’ satire draws on the long history of incidental satire in American musical theatre, stretching back through the working class musical revues of the nineteenth century. Many of the Gershwins’ shows included both satire and references to the artifice of more traditional musicals. Ira Gershwin’s work explored satire more during the Depression, but incidental satire is an element even in his early work. *Girl Crazy*, written in 1930, is best known for introducing Ethel Merman singing “I Got Rhythm” and Ginger Rogers singing and dancing to “Embraceable You.” The script, by Guy Bolton and Jack McGowan, is tightly focused on the dual love scenes.<sup>26</sup> However, the show also includes some political comments and numerous queries of the construction of gender. The show, opened in 1930, punctuated by a chorus of cowboys singing:

I’m Bidin’ My Time  
 ‘Cause that’s the kinda guy I’m . . .  
 Next year, next year  
 Something’s bound to happen;

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Levine, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Guy Bolton wrote the books for the Princess theatre shows, a series of intimate musicals at the Princess Theatre with lyrics by P.G. Wodehouse and music by Jerome Kern, which are often noted as the first American musicals.

This year, this year,  
I'll just keep on nappin.<sup>27</sup>

Opening the show, and repeated throughout the evening, this song clearly illustrates that the characters are not proactive, a comment on the general reaction to the Depression under Hoover.

One of the comic subplots burlesques political corruption. Goldfarb Gieber, a Jewish New York taxi driver, runs for sheriff in Arizona. In his election campaign song he sings,

They needed a man who was brave and strong to rid the town of crime! . . .  
They needed a man who would not take graft unless it was over a dime! . . .  
They needed a man who knew the game through serving a lot of time.<sup>28</sup>

Graft and dishonesty are the status quo among Gershwin politicians, and the candidates celebrate their own corruption.

The most interesting elements of *Girl Crazy* are its comments about gender. The show appeared at a time when gender (both the differences between men and women and the understanding of homosexuality) became more of an issue, through women's increased political power and more coverage and awareness of homosexuality. During the 1920s, the political momentum developed by the suffragettes was briefly pushed towards the Equal Rights Amendment, flappers developed more androgynous fashion styles, and single women were increasingly moving to cities and getting jobs. Even as gender roles became less stringent, "beauty" became more strictly defined (the Miss America pageant began in 1921)

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<sup>27</sup> Complete Lyrics, 161.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

and the ideal woman became thinner and younger. During this century, women's beauty has been most strictly defined in the periods in which women have made the greatest political gains.<sup>29</sup> The 1920s was one of those moments. The "chorus girls" in musical theatre were a factor in setting a general standard that was impossible for most women to achieve. Even as women were freer to work, the physical characteristics of gender became more constricting.<sup>30</sup>

Simultaneously, communities of gay men in New York became more visible to the public through roof shows in Times Square, "slumming," and increasing newspaper attention. In 1926 the Shuberts produced *The Captive* (a non-musical about lesbianism). The following year a controversy about homosexuality on Broadway erupted. Mae West's show *Sex*, and an even more controversial show she intended to bring to town called *The Drag* brought the issue to the forefront. As William Randolph Hearst campaigned for a New York censorship law, in anticipation of *The Drag's* arrival on Broadway, police raided performances of *The Captive* and *Sex*. Mae West spent ten days in jail. "Two months later, the state legislature amended the public obscenity code to include a ban on any play 'depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or sex perversion.'"<sup>31</sup> Although gay content never disappeared from Broadway, authors needed to hide it.

The Gershwins' *Girl Crazy* explores the construction of gender in operettas like *The Desert Song* and satirizes gender stereotypes. The satire is made primarily through the music, which is supported by some of the lyrics, and through the repetition of small portions of song lines. The song "Bronco Busters" introduces the women in the chorus as "Dudeens"

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<sup>29</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> The importance of beauty for the women in the chorus will be dealt with in the next chapter.

<sup>31</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 313.

who arrive in Arizona from New York. They define themselves in opposition to men: “We made our getaway out here, where there’s no doubt that men are men—Where men are men!”<sup>32</sup> They talk about their own naïveté, and marvel at trees, open spaces, and the moon. The orchestra is high pitched and fast, with woodwinds, strings, and a xylophone creating an airy and lyrical melodic undercurrent that reinforces the stereotype of ditzy showgirls. The melodic line repeatedly climbs up and down an octave, with no regard for the accompaniment, which further emphasizes a wandering, flighty tone to the Dudeens’ song.

The men respond by an extreme display of their machismo. The men’s music defines the opposition with heavy percussion and staccato lines in the lower notes. They are characterized primarily by their violence: “If you trifle, we aim a rifle — Bang! You bite the dust! . . . We pack a wallop.” They define masculinity by homophobia and stereotyped gender roles: “We never doll up — /Our pants have never been creased.” They also link the east with homosexuality: “On Western prairies, we shoot the fairies, or send them back to the East.” The song ends as the cowboys announce, “We’ll sing à la Romberg.”<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Romberg wrote *Blossom Time*, *New Moon*, and *The Desert Song*. His shows tended to rely on very rigid gender stereotypes, and both the music and lyrics of “Bronco Busters” parody that through extreme machismo, femininity, and the overt reference to singing in the style of Romberg.

The show develops numerous homoerotic allusions. When Geiber runs for Sheriff, his rival, the villainous Slick, threatens him. Geiber tries to distract Slick by pretending to be a flirtatious woman and pitches his voice high. Slick is very interested, but when he realizes

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<sup>32</sup> Complete Lyrics, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

it is a man says, “Oh, I beg pardon, I thought I was talking to a girl.” Geiber seems to continue the flirtation with the line, “I never felt more like a man than I do tonight.”<sup>34</sup> In a later scene between Geiber and Slick, Geiber says, “I also do interior decorating.”<sup>35</sup> In the second act Geiber, in drag, passes himself off as a working girl. Slick is adamant about trying to be involved with him in a scene with considerable innuendo. Later, Slick tries to seduce a group of women. He sings,

If I'd ever want to be a man among men,  
I'd have to be manhandled now and then.  
So treat me rough, muss my hair,  
Don't you dare to handle me with care.  
I'm no innocent child.<sup>36</sup>

This indicates that he has been handled by men, and that experience improved his sexual attractiveness.

The representation of gender is a minor element of *Girl Crazy*, but these slippery representations shade the entire show. Although the show resolves with heterosexual couples happily united, it also questions rigid gender identities. Both Gershwin brothers must have been exposed to an aspect of homosexual subculture, for their father owned and/or operated several Turkish/Russian bathhouses.<sup>37</sup> Ira Gershwin also managed the Lafayette bathhouse at the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917. According to George

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<sup>34</sup> Guy Bolton, Jack McGowan and Ira Gershwin, *Girl Crazy*, NYPL-PA, Restricted Material # 4282, 1-2-24

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2-36.

<sup>36</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> Caryl Brahms and Ned Sherrin, 40.

Chauncey, “The Lafayette was the more important” of the gay baths at the time.<sup>38</sup> A 1916 police raid resulted in the previous manager’s suicide during his trial, “apparently because of his distress at the public revelation that he managed a homosexual rendezvous.”<sup>39</sup> Ira Gershwin stayed married for his entire life and rumors circulated about George Gershwin’s girlfriends, but the brothers must have been aware of the innuendo they introduced into the show.

In 1934 Ira Gershwin with Yip Harburg, Harold Arlen, and numerous other collaborators, explicitly developed homosexuality as a subject in a musical revue called *Life Begins at 8:40*. The show explores numerous political issues, including the juxtaposition between what is good for working people and what is good for the stock market. In “The Broker” a stock owner, whose stock previously fell when farmers were doing well, exclaims “The cattle are dying — The homes are burning. . . . Gee — that’s wonderful — if that drought spreads over the whole country, I’ll be even in no time.”<sup>40</sup> In the sketch “C’est La Vie,” two men are getting ready to jump off a bridge into the river Seine. When they discover they are both in love with the same woman, she appears and suggests that they all live together à la Noel Coward. The skit ends with this stage direction:

The two men kiss each other and seem to like it very much. They kiss again and now they are sure they like it. They pantomime to each other and suddenly seize the woman and drop her into the Seine.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Chancey, 215. (Chauncey mentions Gershwin’s management on page 221).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ira Gershwin, E.Y. Harburg, David Freedman, H.I. Philips, Alan Baxter, Henry Clapp Smith, and Frank Gabrielson, *Life Begins at 8:40*, NYPL-PA, “The Broker,” 6. (Each sketch is titled and numbered individually.)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., “C’est La Vie,” page 4 of this sketch, but the pages are misnumbered and it is labeled as the second page.

The incidental satire in *Girl Crazy*, and of the banker in *Life Begins at 8:40*, as well as the comedic questioning of heterosexuality in both shows, allowed the authors to problematize the status quo in small ways without the appearance of moralization or condescension. Social norms are burlesqued in many of these shows, but ignored in much of the history of early musical comedy. The shows also provided a place to experiment with how to develop political ideas in musical theatre. When the opportunity came, the Gershwins were able to work satire through every aspect of their radical and covertly satirical shows.

### *Strike Up the Band (1927)*

The original *Strike Up the Band* is an impressive departure from anything previously done in American musical comedy, and it represents the Gershwins' first full length attempt to bridge political satire (typically a "highbrow" form) with middlebrow musical comedy conventions. *Strike Up the Band* was the most political and acerbic musical written in English since *The Beggars' Opera* two centuries earlier.<sup>42</sup> *Strike Up the Band* criticizes war and the capitalist society that creates wars to benefit corporations at the expense of the working classes. George S. Kaufman, who wrote the libretto, never really cared for musicals, which he associated with sentimental love scenes. He felt, however, that *Strike Up the Band* needed music, and he approached the Gershwins about it. Ira Gershwin long admired the work of Gilbert and Sullivan and wanted to fuse their forms with an American style. The Gershwins and Kaufman created the first American radical satire, which steadfastly criticizes many

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<sup>42</sup> Although Gilbert and Sullivan's *Utopia, Limited* develops some fascinating political ideas, it does not develop the political analysis to the extent of *Strike Up the Band*. It is more light-hearted and less caustic. Much of the humor comes from parodying the princess' lifeguards, the over-developed persona of a tenor who loses his main asset when he is in love and his voice cracks, artificial modesty of young ladies, and older men who are in love with the princess. Most of the political commentary comes from the book and it is not developed in the songs.

elements of society and carries the satire through the entire show with few concessions to popular demands.

The creation of a musical theatre that confronted these social and economic difficulties required considerable maneuvering among entertainment, economics, and commentary. The Gershwins frequently tried to bridge the perceived dichotomy between satire's often sophisticated needs and the demands of writing broadly accessible songs by juxtaposing the verse with the chorus.<sup>43</sup> George and Ira Gershwin often created a conventional "universal" chorus that went on to have a life outside the show through sheet music sales, and many became standards. The verses of the songs, or the dialogue leading into the songs regularly undercut the sentimental emotion of the chorus. Ira often rewrote the lyrics of verses for sheet music sales and the bridge into songs was rarely included in the external life of the music.

"The Man I Love" demonstrates the dual-purpose songs could serve in several shows and sheet music sales. In many ways the song is a typical standard – a popular song that transcends its original context and performers to be remade in numerous styles. The lyrics speak of an earnest hope for a future life partner, but the music disturbs the easy idealism of the lyric. As George Gershwin said, "It has a certain lilt that subtly disturbs the audience instead of lulling it into acceptance."<sup>44</sup> Although many standards are often sung as slow ballads now, in the shows they were usually performed in a much more upbeat tempo that downplayed the sentimentality and focused on their spontaneous, innocent, and

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<sup>43</sup> The verse is the introduction of a song. . The choruses of most Tin Pan Alley songs are in an AABA format, with the first, second and last eight bars of a song repeating the same melody, and the third set of eight bars having a different melody, usually with a contrasting tempo. For example, in "I Got Rhythm" the A sections begin with "I got . . ." and the B section begins with "Old man trouble . . ."

<sup>44</sup> George Gershwin, quoted in Rosenberg, 211.

heartfelt elements. Outside the dramatic context of *Strike Up the Band*, the song is clearly a “standard.” Originally written as a straight-forward song for *Lady Be Good* (a Fred and Adele Astaire vehicle), “The Man I Love” secured much of the funding for that show. The Gershwins cut it in out of town try-outs because Adele Astaire could not perform it well.<sup>45</sup>

The Gershwins then put “The Man I Love” in *Strike Up the Band*. Joan, the heroine, sings it to Jim, the hero, to get him to fight in the war her father has sponsored. Joan is able to convince him to fight because “The man I love will want to go — he’ll be proud to go.”<sup>46</sup> She then sings “The Man I Love,” which implies that Jim needs enlist to be loved. After “The Man I Love” is over, Joan juxtaposes the romance with the importance of following society’s rules: “I love you, Jim. (Another embrace; they separate.) Jim, you’re going to war now, aren’t you?”<sup>47</sup> Despite the melodic tension inherent in the song, and perhaps because of the subtle iambic trimeter rhythm that has the delicate seduction of a march and a heartbeat, Jim agrees to fight to please Joan. The song expresses a “universal” emotion of desire for love. This makes Joan’s manipulation of idealized love to support the status quo, by discouraging Jim from his criticism of the war and business’ involvement with the war, even more pointed. The songs that became standards often work ironically in the context of the shows and on their own as earnest expressions of emotion. Many songs earned considerable revenue from sheet music sales. At the same time, their expression of simple emotions heightened their possibility of exposing some of the manipulations of cultural

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<sup>45</sup> Typically instead of previews where the show plays on Broadway but the press does not review it for a brief period of time to allow the creative team to rework things with an audience, shows used to tour to other cities, where things could be worked out away from the New York critics. The increased costs make out of town try-outs much less common, although some shows still do this.

<sup>46</sup> *Strike Up the Band* script, 1-36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-37.

hegemony, for they showed how the characters manipulated each other into support for the status quo.

The songs reinforce and expand the political commentary throughout the show. Kaufman and the Gershwins drew on the formalistic devices that Gilbert and Sullivan developed. Songs like “Typical Self-Made American” and “The Unofficial Spokesman of the USA” are similar to “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General” and “I’ve Got a Little List.” However, the Gershwins repeated words, which added a syncopated-slang quality, and used numerous contractions. Both of these techniques marked the songs as American and emphasized chosen words. Both teams used introductory “list” songs which, instead of a focus on the emotions of a character, developed the character’s place in the society. Additionally the Gershwins and Kaufman made extensive use of “patter” songs and longer patter scenes.<sup>48</sup>

Although Ira Gershwin used some of W. S. Gilbert’s lyrical formats, the political content is more radical than anything Gilbert and Sullivan did, and the book remained the focus of the entire show. Although some of the songs enjoyed a life outside the show, they all supported the development of the satire. The show was not cast until after it was written, and, like all the elements of the show, the cast was subservient to the satirical intent. No element of the show detracted from the satire, and the audience had no respite from the political issues. “Only once during his long career did Kaufman produce a script that he felt pulled no punches. It was his book to *Strike Up the Band*.<sup>49</sup> Though the show focuses on war, in many ways it critiques the capitalist society that necessitated the war. It opens with

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<sup>48</sup> Patter is a fast, partly sung, partly spoken song. Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady* performing “Why Can’t The English Teach Their Children How To Speak” is an example of this style.

<sup>49</sup> Rosenberg, 201.

workers in a cheese factory and closes with a second war. The show is critical of the involvement of business with politics and military policy, the devastation of civil rights throughout the war, and the role of heteronormative hegemony in upholding the status quo.

George Gershwin quoted melodic lines of popular songs and reused melodic lines from the show in different contexts to link situations together. For example, George Gershwin included a referent to Irving Berlin's popular "O, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning." During World War I, Berlin's song became a popular pro-war piece. Berlin describes how swell everything is: "The Army life is wonderful, the Army food is great." The narrator does have one complaint:

Oh! how I hate to get up in the morning,  
 Oh! how I long to remain in bed;  
 For the hardest blow of all, is to hear the bugler call;  
 You've got to get up, you've got to get up,  
 [Y]ou've gotta get up this morning!<sup>50</sup>

The hindsight the twenties offered on the terror of warfare in the trenches made the song almost a parody of itself. George and Ira Gershwin incorporated it into *Strike Up the Band* with an even more sanguine lyric. The soldiers sing to the melody of Berlin's original "Gee, but it's great to get up in the morning" when they are starting the song "Homeward Bound." Likewise, Gershwin incorporated elements of John Philip Sousa's work and other patriotic marches in the dance portions of "Yankee Doodle Rhythm" and "Strike Up the Band." Incorporating musical references to patriotic marches linked the fictional satire with the

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<sup>50</sup> Irving Berlin, "Oh! How I Hate To Get Up In the Morning" (New York: Waterson Berlin & Synder Co. Music publishers, 1918), 3.

contemporary world of the audience and reminded the audience that their participation was necessary for the continuation of these policies.

The Gershwins created extensive sung-through scenes that worked to highlight the dramatic and fantastic element of the situations. The act one finale of *Strike Up the Band*, slightly over ten minutes of song snippets, recitative and full songs, introduces numerous leitmotifs and is a sophisticated musical and dramatic achievement. The Gershwins also repeated both the melody and the lyric of certain lines in different situations. This technique is similar to Wagner's use of leitmotifs, although the Gershwins usually merged the melody with the bulk of the lyric and rarely separated them. *Strike Up the Band* is the first use of this sophistication in creating a full score for a popular musical theatre audience. When Jim (the young journalist opposed to the war) accuses Fletcher (the factory owner) of using grade B milk, the ensemble reacts by repeating the line from an earlier song: "He is a typical self made American." Jim repeats the melody, and changes the lyric to "He is a true profiteering American." The repetition of the melody implies that the ideas are not mutually exclusive; indeed one may include the other. This develops an important political point in a way that is subtle and avoids preaching at the audience.

George Gershwin creates a tension between musical styles in *Strike Up the Band*. He uses the larger, more stylized operetta style for the characters representing business and political interests and the patriotic/pro-war numbers, whereas he uses a more intimate musical comedy language for the love scenes. As Rosenberg notes:

The brothers used ballads, rhythm songs, humorous patter numbers and marches, placing them in such a way that their differences served dramatic ends. Those characters invented to caricature large institutions, such as corporations or government, or to represent corruption, bureaucracy, or

incompetence, sing comic-operetta or parody songs. Those caught in the madness, the average man and woman, sing jazz-inflected, modern, American theater songs.<sup>51</sup>

The music of *Strike Up the Band*, however, never allows the characters to be merely victims of the society.

The characters are always complicit participants and enforce the cultural hegemony by their direction of the music, but the ensemble is at the mercy of the characters, for only the characters can lead songs. There are distinct class issues about who gets to be a character; only those with social standing or wealth qualify as characters; the working class is relegated to the ensemble. “[*Strike Up the Band*] conveys a sense of people trapped in something larger than they are.”<sup>52</sup> The ensemble goes along with the status quo, supports Fletcher by participation in his various choral societies, and reprises the choruses of various authority figures. Within the structure of the music, a single character could make a difference but the entire ensemble would have to act together to change the system. When Jim is against the war and reveals that Fletcher uses Grade B milk, Fletcher implies that Jim actually attacked the workers and leads the ensemble to threaten Jim; ideological differences are often used to divide members of the working class so that they do not unite in their own interests. The segregation of the chorus from the leaders mirrors a society in which wealth and privilege can manipulate the general populace. It also, however, gives the workers the option to organize, grasp power, and affect the power structure.

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<sup>51</sup> Rosenberg, 207.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

*Strike Up the Band* focuses on Horace J. Fletcher, who “like a hero in an Alger novel” is a “typical self-made American.”<sup>53</sup> The show opens in Fletcher’s factory, where all the workers are at choral practice. This opening is imperative for the audience to accept the show as satire. This number emphasizes the characters’ awareness that they are performers; the chorus starts the show with a proclamation that they are “Singing.” Throughout the song, the overblown nature of the orchestrations, and the repetition of lines that are ragged against the music to disconnect the idea from the melody, work together to emphasize that this is not reality but a musical satire. This is further emphasized when the workers continually repeat “Tra la la la.” The lyrics also highlight the satire when they take conventional attitudes and stretch them to make them ridiculous.

The opening number sets the satirical tone by creating a too-idyllic atmosphere and exaggerating of the idea that what is good for business is good for the workers and the country. The workers love “singing every morning.” Fletcher supports their choral society because if the workers are happy, “work is snappy.” “Since efficiency’s the thing, they encourage us to sing.” Because corporate America has created an ideal situation, all elements are portrayed as perfect. The foreman Timothy assures the workers that they have “cows that are contented working for Fletcher’s cheese.” Sloane, the Manager, tells the employees, “This job should be a joy. I am telling you there’s little to do but work, work, work!” Fletcher’s employees explain the importance of the factory for, “When Fletcher first began it he was working for humanity.” Fletcher himself is so marvelous that the workers proclaim “Three cheers for evolution.” Choral practice is concluded with the “daily ritual.” All the workers repeat after Fletcher: “I firmly believe that Fletcher’s American Cheese —

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<sup>53</sup> Ira Gershwin, George Kaufman and George Gershwin, *Strike Up the Band*, restored by Tommy Krasker, conducted by John Mauceri (Elektra Nonesuch, 79273-2, 58).

makes bigger and better citizens — for the U.S.A!”<sup>54</sup> The song establishes that all workers, even the cows, are very satisfied, that supporting capitalism is a service for humanity, all one needs to find joy, and a patriotic duty. The overly sanguine, idyllic atmosphere, the glorification of all elements of patriotism and capitalism inherent in the workers’ choral practice, and the heightened operetta style, are all clues to the audience that this is a fantastical satire.

It could be possible for the audience not to know what the creative team want them to think for some time, or even to miss the satire completely. Probably by the time Timothy proclaims that the cows are happy to be working for Fletcher’s cheese and the workers pledge their belief that Fletcher’s cheese “makes bigger and better citizens for the U.S.A.,” most audience members would have picked up the satirical intention. There is always a risk with any satire that some audience members will not grasp the satirical elements, but none of the critics for the 1927 or the 1930 version failed to notice the satirical underpinnings of the show.

When Fletcher meets the hero Jim (who loves Fletcher’s daughter Joan), Fletcher reinforces the idea that America is synonymous with capitalism. He assumes that Jim is like all Americans, “ambitious to work your way up in the world.” Jim answers, “Where’d you get that idea? I haven’t got any desire to go higher and I don’t even care if I go lower.” Fletcher responds, “Why— why— that’s sacrilege. . . . It’s un-American.”<sup>55</sup> Jim is working “just for fun,” and he subverts a status quo that requires capitalism to be central to all

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<sup>54</sup> *Strike Up the Bard* Liner Notes, 52-55. All lyrics in the Krasker version are the same as the Lincoln Center Version.

<sup>55</sup> George Kaufman (book), Ira Gershwin (lyrics), and George Gershwin (music), *Strike Up the Bard* (unpublished libretto, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: RM 3855), 1-17 — 1-18.

people. Business's lack of concern for the workers is made explicit at the end of the show, when the soldiers return from the war. Fletcher greets them:

Those of you who used to work in my factory . . . I have a great surprise for you. In your honor, and in honor of this great patriotic war that you have fought, Fletcher's American Cheese will hereafter be manufactured in three colors - red, white, and blue! I regret that I cannot give you back your jobs, but you must remember that this is the age of machinery.<sup>56</sup>

In *Strike Up the Band* the occasional honor for the working-classes is an acceptable substitute for decent working and living conditions, and it might even spur added sales.

The people with power assume that big business has the best interests of the workers and the country at heart, so it is quite natural that business would determine public policy. Fletcher discusses the joys of national cheese week, which climaxed in a 50% tariff on imported cheeses. His pride in the tariff makes his involvement clear. When Switzerland wants the tariff cut down, he has only to send a messenger over and Colonel Holmes, the advisor to the president of the United States and author of *Four Years Near the White House*, rushes over.<sup>57</sup> Holmes is the "Unofficial Spokesman of the USA," who "like a Massachusetts resident who once became a president," "never ever says a word." Politicians may control the country, but they do not communicate with the citizens. After all, "If I tell 'em nothing, how can I be blundering?"<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2-42.

<sup>57</sup> Colonel Holmes is based on President Wilson's advisor Colonel House.

<sup>58</sup> The Massachusetts resident is Calvin Coolidge. Recording, track 4.

Fletcher makes his request in the language of morality and family: “As a patriotic American — as a husband and a father — and an uncle — I feel that the United States must send an answer refusing to repeal the tariff.” Again, the authors take each idea one step beyond conventional expectations; the inclusion of Fletcher’s status as an uncle satirizes the rhetorical device that privileges arguments based on the family connections of the speaker. Holmes replies that it “might mean war.” Fletcher assures him that “a war is the last thing I’d want. Personally, mind you.” Holmes is concerned about the trouble of war, but Fletcher echoes President Wilson to assure him “this’ll be the last one. A war to end war.” Fletcher then entices Holmes with the prospect of selling books about the war. To finish the deal, Fletcher offers to “pay all the expenses of this war and give the Government twenty-five per cent of the profits. . . . On one condition . . . the war has got to be named after me.”<sup>59</sup> Business’s involvement in defining public policy is clear, and business gladly pays for the policies it wants.

Although fantastical in the details, the musical’s concerns about U.S. policies toward other countries and its own workers were based on the United States’ considerable interventions throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many progressive social critics argued that U. S. involvement in World War I developed out of economic necessities, for the United States entered a recession; private foreign investment added \$3.5 billion to the U.S. economy in 1914, and war-related merchandise exceed \$2 billion gross annually by 1917.<sup>60</sup> However, the plot is drawing on much more. “Long before the 1860s

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<sup>59</sup> *Strike Up the Band*, 1-29— 1-32.

<sup>60</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492— Present*, Revised and Updated Edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 353.

Americans had been involved in the affairs of Canada, Latin America, Hawaii and Asia.<sup>61</sup>

This involvement increased in the 1860s with Commodore Perry's "Pacific Overtures" to force Japan to open its ports and markets to U. S. capitalist trade interests. The United States' imperialist colonialism culminated at the turn of the century in the Spanish-American War (essentially a struggle over which country would annex Cuba), and the war in the Philippines (which many American businessmen hoped would be a stepping stone to China's markets). The United States made numerous "interventions" during the nineteenth century to keep markets open. As Walter LaFeber documents:

In Cuba, Hawaii, the Philippines, China, and Central America — and especially during the 1901-1913 years, in Cuba, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, China, and Mexico — Americans demanded opportunity for their trade, investment and security needs. In every instance noted, the result in these countries was upheaval and, in several instances, revolution. But U.S. officials did not back off. They continued to demand economic and other rights, even if the demands climaxed in massive disorder. They valued those rights over the disorder the demands helped cause. At that point, Americans then demanded a new, more vigorous presidency to guarantee continued opportunities for their growing economic machine — and, if possible, to restore order in these foreign countries. The presidents, led by McKinley, Taft, and — most flamboyantly — [Theodore]

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<sup>61</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion: 1860-1898* (Ithaca: American Historical Association/Cornell University Press, 1963), 3.

Roosevelt, used military force to guarantee continued opportunity and, they hoped, order.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, the United States worked to frame these fights as “interventions,” to disavow any imperial role, and to view itself as isolationist. William Appleman Williams argues that “America’s traditional view of itself” is composed of several themes: [“It] was isolationist until world power was ‘thrust upon it,’ . . . America has been anti-imperialist throughout its history, . . . [and] a unique combination of economic power, intellectual and practical genius, and moral rigor enables America to check the enemies of peace and progress — and build a better world — without erecting an empire in the process.”<sup>63</sup> Additionally, “imperial politics denied at home are visibly projected onto demonic others abroad, as something they do and we do not.”<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the U.S. actively and forcefully opened markets for U.S. business to have both a market for “surplus manufactured goods and venture capital, and . . . reliable access to cheap raw materials needed by the American industrial system.”<sup>65</sup> As President McKinley noted, America was particularly interested in developing “new and advantageous markets for our surplus agricultural and manufactured products.”<sup>66</sup> British economist J.A. Hobson argued in 1902 that the Spanish American war was motivated by “Messrs. Rockefeller, Pierpont Morgan,

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<sup>62</sup> William LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad*, Second Edition (New York: W. W. North & Company, 1994), 239.

<sup>63</sup> William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1959), 18.

<sup>64</sup> Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America:’ the Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture” in *Cultures of United States Imperials*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Doland E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>65</sup> William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969), 4.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 406.

and their associates who needed Imperialism and who fastened it upon the shoulder of the great Republic of the West . . . because they desire to use the public resources of the country to find profitable employment for their capital which otherwise would be superfluous.”<sup>67</sup>

These ideas were dismissed by many as “the Marxist Machiavellian analysis of history,” but they underpinned much of the progressive analysis of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>68</sup> The idea that *Strike Up that Band* develops, that the United States would go to Switzerland to fight in the Alps over a tariff enacted at home, is clearly fantastical. Yet, the underlying critique that the United States fought wars to protect the interests of big business at the expense of the workers in this country was relevant, timely, and radical.

The link between patriotism and xenophobia inherent in nationalist appeals is explored in the show as the war progresses. This is one of the most difficult subjects the show tackles. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, the task “of defamiliarizing and thereby visibilizing the nationalism that forms the overarching ideology of our age is difficult to the extent that one or another nationalism tends to become the form of last resort for every legitimizing political appeal.”<sup>69</sup> The authors develop nationalism primarily through the music, which includes parodies of Sousa marches, allusions to other popular songs, and strong march rhythms (a technique that George Gershwin would further explore in *Of Thee I Sing*). As the characters prepare for war, they form “Fletcher’s-Get-Ready-For-War-Choral-Society” which starts with a focus on great Americans and includes a variety of ethnicities, but assigns only “Siss” for the Swiss. The next patriotic number, with an infectious

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<sup>67</sup> J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism A Study* quoted in Philip S. Foner “Why the United States Went to War with Spain in 1898” in *Past Imperfect: Alternative Essays in American History*, ed. Blanche Wiesen Cook, Alice Kessler Harris and Ronald Radosh (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 76.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 146. Emphasis in original.

dance/march beat, is “Yankee Doodle Rhythm,” which includes arrogant references to other nationalities. As the United States gets ready to fight for beneficial trade policies, the characters sing:

Yankee Doodle Rhythm,  
They love it so,  
The Eskimo, the Greek and Jap.  
It’s an insidious rhythm,  
Making the universe sing.<sup>70</sup>

The derogatory comments about other nationalities, the description of U.S. patriotism as “insidious,” and the hubris that the United States affects the universe contradict the infectious tune. As soon as the number is over, Colonel Holmes “is handed a small hood, with a flapper that comes part way down over the face. There is a suggestion of K. K. K. about it. They all don similar hoods.”<sup>71</sup> Linking the patriotic dance number with the extreme racism of the K. K. K. further emphasizes that all patriotism is xenophobic to a certain degree.

The connection of patriotism with racism is part of a sophisticated argument that includes economic imperialism through war. It eventually includes religion, for Colonel Holmes breaks his customary reticence to announce: “I don’t mind telling you, unofficially, that God is on our side.”<sup>72</sup> The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s highlights many of the issues that the country faced. The Klan was concerned with the place of middle

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<sup>70</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 94.

<sup>71</sup> *Strike Up the Band* script, 1-53.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-58.

class white men in a new social structure. Klansmen addressed uneasiness around a variety of issues that included women's rights, labor rights, parental authority, and the change of values. The Klan focused on the increased prominence of immigrants, Catholics, and people of color as well as the shifts in authority between parents and children. As Nancy K. MacLean analyzes in *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*, the members of the K. K. K. were concerned with much more than simply race issues. Caught between increasingly concentrated wealth above them and a strengthened labor movement below them, the members of the Klan focused on race relations as a potent symbol for their generalized concerns.<sup>73</sup> In 1931 the Scottsboro case, wherein an all-white jury convicted nine African American boys of raping two white girls on flimsy evidence, kept racial injustice at the forefront.<sup>74</sup>

The United States' economic imperialism constantly created an external enemy, which helped silence domestic critics of the U. S. system. By creating battles for young men to fight, this imperialistic drive also siphoned energy that would have gone elsewhere, perhaps into the creation of political momentum to deal with social stratification. In the show, Jim is the only opposition to the status quo, and his romantic interest convinces him to fight. However, after he discovers that Fletcher lied, he tries to stop the war. Despite Jim's efforts, war is declared. The act ends with Jim's incarceration for his anti-war efforts as the rest of the cast celebrates war with the title song, "Strike Up the Band."

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<sup>73</sup> Nancy K. MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>74</sup> See James E. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1994) and Kwando Mbiassi Kinshasa, *The Man from Scottsboro: Clarence Norris and the Infamous 1931 Alabama Rape Trial, in His Own Words* (New York: McFarland & Company, 1997).

Like so many of the Gershwins' songs, the opening verse to "Strike Up the Band" can easily be cut to hide the political message, and the song is one of the few that was sold individually as sheet music. The tune became popular as a pro-war song during World War II. Ira Gershwin also rewrote the verse as a UCLA fight song in 1936. However, the fact that the song works as a pro-war/fight song does not dilute its original satire. The song demonstrates that the characters are swept up in the spirit of this cause, a spirit that is manufactured by the businesses and government, both of which plan to profit from the war and the policies it enforces, even as opposition to the system is silenced. If the characters stopped to think, they might disagree with it, but through the obvious manipulations of patriotism, the status quo, and good music, they go along.

The verse, which is cut outside the context of the show, makes the only overt reference to the United States' actual involvement with a real war. It is clearly anti-war. Although most marches are in a major key, which feels optimistic and confident, this song is in a minor key, which, despite the upbeat tempo, feels melancholy and tentative. The song begins:

We fought in 1917./Rum ta ta tum, tum, tum!  
 And drove the tyrant from the scene./Rum ta ta tum, tum, tum!  
 We're in a bigger better war  
 For your patriotic pastime  
 We don't know what we're fighting for—  
 But we didn't know the last time!<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 96.

As the song points out, the people did not know what they fought for, even if they were the ones who, as Jim points out, are expected to “go over and lose a leg or arm or something . . . Lying there flat and letting them shoot.”<sup>76</sup> The show explicates who benefited from the war. The workers were required to fight, yet Fletcher made the profit. He says: “I wish I could go [to war] myself, but you should see my appointments for next week. . . . Look! Tomorrow a poker game. Tuesday, golf. . . . It’s the soldiers that get all the glory. What do I get out of it? Money.”<sup>77</sup> This show also developed the idea of war as entertainment and distraction, both in the verse of “Strike Up the Band” and in the second act in which tours go to Switzerland to see the battles.

Wars historically have helped focus the attention of workers and social reformers onto an outside target and made it much easier for the government to silence opponents who refused to be quiet. During World War I, an “American Protective League,” developed by the Department of Justice, “discovered” three million cases of disloyalty. In 1917 the Espionage Act went into effect; the American government prosecuted around 2000 Americans, with nearly 900 people convicted and incarcerated for anti-war statements.<sup>78</sup> In *Strike Up the Band* the citizens develop a “Very Patriotic League” which tries Jim for treason. Fletcher explains, “We’ve come together voluntarily to see that everyone thinks as we do.” Sloane, his manager, adds: “We’re the most patriotic people in town,” effectively silencing anyone who disagrees with them as seditious.<sup>79</sup> The Patriotic League removes *Swiss Family Robinson* and *William Tell* from the libraries.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 1-36.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 1-54.

<sup>78</sup> Zinn, 356-362.

<sup>79</sup> *Strike Up the Band*, NYPL-PA, 1-58.

Jim offers to prove his charge that Fletcher uses Grade B milk, but Fletcher dismisses him: "You can prove it? . . . We don't want to hear from you at all. Do we? The idea of your proving it. Do you realize if you did that we'd have to change all our plans." Holmes is concerned that Jim threatens the war effort: "Don't you know we're all ready for this war? If we stopped to listen to you we'd never get anywhere." Jim questions their belief in free speech and Fletcher echoes the United States' Espionage Act and responds that he does believe in free speech. "Of course we do. Don't we? But not at a time like this."<sup>80</sup> Jim is convicted and conscripted as Fletcher announces Joan's engagement to Sloane and the army goes to war.

The second act is not as pointed as the first. The authors play with gender issues by having the soldiers engage in traditionally domestic activities: knitting sweaters for loved ones who did not get to tour Switzerland, and dancing drills. Their main concerns, however, are the buttons that continually disappear off of uniforms and their failed attempts to find the Swiss in order to fight them. Sloane, Fletcher's manager and a strong leader in the war, humiliates Jim, who has been forced to work in the kitchen to support the war. Fletcher is furious that the war loses money. Jim saves the day when he masterminds a plan to yodel the Swiss out of their hiding places, wins the war, and is declared a hero. The women in the show are delighted that their boyfriends will return home, and they sing:

Civilization is improving—  
 This war ends all war!  
 Higher and higher we are moving—  
 This war ends all war!

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 1-59.

Fighting is through for Fletcher has said it!

Fletcher deserves all credit! . . .

For the war that ended war!<sup>81</sup>

As Jim is being honored for his efforts to win the war, he reveals that Sloane is the head of the Swiss secret police. He worked as a manager “to adulterate American cheese by using Grade B milk.”<sup>82</sup> Holmes gets a telegram and needs to go to Washington, for Russia wants the tariff on caviar cut down. Fletcher, who expressed his delight that they ended all war, responds:

Caviar? I should say not. I just bought a hundred thousand shares of that yesterday. Men, are we going to stand by and let a country like Russia tell us what we’re going to do? (A chorus of “NO”) I should say not. We’ll fight first. Come on -- let’s show them what we’re made of.<sup>83</sup>

The ensemble starts a rousing chorus of “Strike Up the Band” as they prepare for the next war. The country is in a perpetual cycle to help business prosper (at the expense of employees) through wars.

The only time the ensemble appears without the representatives of business and government is when the soldiers return from the war. The haunting number, “Homeward Bound,” is coupled with a reprise of “The Man I Love” as “The Girl I Love.” The song explores the pain the soldiers experienced at war away from their loved ones. “The Girl I Love” is sung by a single soldier, who does not have enough status to appear anywhere else

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<sup>81</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 100.

<sup>82</sup> *Strike Up the Band* script., 2-45.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-46.

in the show (and does not even have a name in the script) as the rest of the soldiers support him harmonically. It is the one moment in the show that is not undercut by irony. Clearly America's capitalist colonialism exacts a huge price for the men who have little say in the policies and yet are the ones who have to fight.

If *Strike Up the Band* has a hero, it is Jim. He continually challenges society and never joins in the group numbers until the end, but ultimately he allows himself to be caught in the community in exchange for Joan's love.<sup>84</sup> It is only when he discovers the milk is Grade B that he rejects this idealized romance to do what he believes is right. The creative team seems to sympathize with Jim. George Gershwin developed Jim's dilemma through the music. The three dominant notes of the opening of the chorus for "The Man I Love" ("Someday he'll come along, the man I love") are echoed later by Joan in her admonishment of Jim ("Jim — how could you do such a thing"), and then transformed into the opening of the chorus of "Strike Up the Band" ("Let the drums roll out, let the trumpet call").<sup>85</sup> Of course the repetition may have been unconscious. Nevertheless, the connection of the melodic line of "The Man I Love," "Strike Up the Band" and Joan's rebuke of Jim's anti-war views implies that privileging heteronormative romance (the attitude that "The Man I Love" develops) is partly responsible for the coercion of participation in the war. Joan did not manipulate Jim for sinister reasons, but simply because she cared about him and still wanted to fit into society.

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<sup>84</sup> Jim does exact several concessions from the Colonel— no more wars and a league of cheeses where all cheeses will be equal— but these are quickly ignored as the community starts a war against Russia and Jim voices no opposition.

<sup>85</sup> See Rosenberg 211, 214 and 215.

Despite Joan's manipulation, the authors do not present women as responsible for the compulsion of men against their morals. The show creates a sense of people caught in a society with little regard for them. Jim is the only character in the show who challenges the status quo. Joan sees him as a hero throughout the show, even when he challenges the war. She stands up for his right to challenge the system far more than anyone else, but she is never able to let go of her concerns about his confrontation with society. Joan wants Jim to conform because she cares about him and sees the danger in challenging society. She is clearly torn between her father and Jim. At the end of the first act, long before the resolution, she sings, "Alas! Alacaday! [sic] Unlucky me!/My hero and my father can't agree."<sup>86</sup> She comes to his defense when he is humiliated in the second act and assumes she has lost him after he wins the war because "he's a hero, and a hero has so many to choose from." Joan has the most power of any of the women in the show, but it is miniscule. Aside from the businessman and the politician, none of the characters is given a good choice, and the show emphasizes the extent to which these characters are subject to manipulation by the ruling elite.

*Strike Up the Band* played a week in Long Branch, New Jersey, and a week in Philadelphia before the producer, Edgar Selwyn, closed it. Three extant reviews illustrate that the critics were surprised by the radical satire. The critic from the Long Branch paper, *The Record*, did not mention the satire but despised the show. Of a score that includes "The Man I Love" and "Strike Up the Band" he writes: "It cannot be said that George Gershwin has accomplished anything noteworthy. There is not an air that hangs in the memory. Not one of them did any of the audience hum or whistle as they left the theatre. . . . But then the

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<sup>86</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 95.

lyrics of Ira Gershwin were scarcely calculated to move to melody.”<sup>87</sup> He analyzes the book with similar derision: “Mr. Kaufman has imagined an opera bouffe war . . . which implies cleverness, humor, a sparkling quality. The book of ‘Strike Up the Band’ has none of these. . . Its lines are clumsy and dull, its humor anemic and flabby and there is no sparkle to it.”<sup>88</sup> His comments seem overly harsh, and it is possible that the satire offended him, but he did not mention it. The reviewers in Philadelphia who enjoyed the show much more, wrote about the political elements. *Variety* loved it, and noted that the book and lyrics fit beautifully together and seemed to have been “written by the same author.” The critic went on to say, “It is impossible to enumerate all items to the credit side of the show.” The critic, however, thought the political edge would hurt its popularity:

They have attempted the impossible and got away with it. . . . That it will be a commercial smash is doubtful, but it will unquestionably have a *success d'estime*. . . . Book and lyrics . . . are mordant, bitter, and stinging. . . . When the show reaches New York if obvious faults are corrected it will cause a *furor* [sic]. . . . The masses in general still believe in patriotism. People are going to be hurt and resentful at some of the things said, to say nothing of the American Legion and patriotic societies.<sup>89</sup>

The critic of the *Bulletin* also comments on the political daring of the musical:

Every so often Mr. Kaufman’s indignation gets the better of him. He gets out his broadsword and starts slashing right and left at professional patriots.

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<sup>87</sup> Review of *Strike Up the Band* in *The Record*, Long Branch, NJ, 30 Aug, 1927.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Review of *Strike Up the Band* in *Variety*, 7 September, 1927, 54.

And his shafts, aimed in anger, come close to truth. The premiere last night started auspiciously. . . . It is a decidedly acrid ending for even a “musical play.”<sup>90</sup>

Ultimately the producers backed out and this version of the show never made it to New York. Yet, the Gershwins and George S. Kaufman did not let this commercial failure end their interest in political commentary.

### *Strike Up the Band* (1930)

In 1930 with a significantly changed script and score, *Strike Up the Band* became a financial and popular success with 191 performances on Broadway in a very different social climate. In 1927, when *Strike Up the Band* first appeared, the upper echelon of the United States was comfortable and confident.<sup>91</sup> In spite of the fact that times were difficult for working class people, the acknowledged attitude of the country was generally very confident. 264 productions opened on Broadway that year. Musical theatre had not been clearly defined, and the genre included revues, operetta, intimate musical comedies, star vehicles, and *Shoubout*. By 1930, when *Strike Up the Band* finally came to Broadway in a toned-down rewrite, the country was engulfed in the Depression, but to a great extent the elite were in denial as executive compensation and stock dividends were relatively unchanged from the previous years.<sup>92</sup> When the National Economic League voted on “paramount problems of

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<sup>90</sup> Review of *Strike Up the Band* in *The Bulletin*, Philadelphia, 6 September, 1927

<sup>91</sup> The extreme social stratification at this time is, according to T.H. Watkins, a primary cause of the depression: “Because both wage levels and agricultural income remained low for so many throughout the decade, the disparity between the have and the have-nots grew during even the biggest boom years. . . . At the same time industrial productivity continue to increase throughout the twenties, the pool of domestic consumers with the means available to buy all the goods and services being offered grew smaller and smaller” Watkins, *The Hungry Years* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 47-48.

<sup>92</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: 1929-1939* (1940, New York: Bantam, 1965), 24.

the United States for 1930” unemployment came in eighteenth. As Frederick Lewis Allen writes, the polls demonstrate “how well insulated were the ‘best citizens’ of the United States against the economic troubles of 1930, and how prone — as Thurman Arnold later remarked — to respond to public affairs with ‘a set of moral reactions.’”<sup>93</sup>

Despite the desire to blame economic difficulties on the victims of the system, the Depression probably made the theatregoing public much more comfortable with social commentary because, as the economic problems spread throughout the population, no one could ignore the difficulties that faced the country. If the difficulties needed to be discussed, far better to do it with humor and music than with policies that might further hurt the economically privileged. This desire to confront unavoidable problems with laughter and melody probably explains why more political musicals were created in the 1930s than in any other decade in the twentieth century.

Morrie Ryskind made numerous changes to the script (which is believed lost), and built much of the show around the specialties of two performers rather than casting the show to fit the script.<sup>94</sup> The Gershwins rewrote numerous songs and kept the score within the confines of traditional musical comedy. The only extended musical scene is the Act One Finale. The vast majority of scholars believe that Morrie Ryskind significantly watered down the score when he rewrote the script. Ethan Mordden is the only exception; in *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s*, Mordden writes:

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>In Deena Rosenberg’s, “A ‘Lost’ Musical By the Gershwins Makes a Comeback,” *New York Times*, 24 June, 1984, “According to Morrie Ryskind, the only surviving author, the last copies disappeared in a warehouse fire. However, says Mr. Salzman ‘I found out very quickly from talking to people and reading about the work that the 1927 version is much zanier, more cutting and more interesting.’”

The legend has it that a wholesale gentling of the political content, along with an extensive restructuring of the score, is what saved *Strike Up the Band*. The inference that we are to draw is that 1927 was bold while 1930 was cowardly and commercial. *Nothing like it at all*. . . . *Strike Up the Band* was born scornful and revived scornful. This is one unique show.<sup>95</sup>

Mordden does concede, however, that Ryskind did “seem to have pulled a few of Kaufman’s boldest punches.”<sup>96</sup> In an earlier book, Mordden supported the view that the 1930 version displayed a less overtly political style:

[Kaufman] let [the producer] Selwyn bring in Morrie Ryskind to lighten the plot. When *Strike Up the Band* got to Broadway . . . the cheese had become chocolate, the fighting limited to an immense dream sequence, the parts entirely recast and the score radically revamped. . . . Gone too was Kaufman’s savage indictment of the big business of war. . . . Ryskind changed the sardonic 1927 ending to a happy one for 1930 and added a secondary love plot to be on the safe side.<sup>97</sup>

Because the script is not extant and Mordden does not give reasons for his altered opinion, it is difficult to know how much Ryskind toned down the satire. However, based on my comparison of the songs and the original reviews, I have concluded that the 1930 version significantly undercut the satire. *The New York Times’* review of the Boston try-out includes a

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<sup>95</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 200-201. Emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>97</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 136. I do not know why he changed his opinion on this show, although he has reversed his opinions on a number of shows. However, he does not indicate that he found a copy of the 1930 version. I wrote him to ask if he had found it, but he did not answer my letter.

brief synopsis. Horace Fletcher, concerned about the elimination of a tariff on a Swiss product and his daughter's interest in Jim, has a mild heart attack, takes a sedative, and has a dream:

He saw himself declaring war on Switzerland, paying all expenses and reaping all profits accruing from profiteering in grade B milk and other commodities essential to a well-conducted war. Unfortunately, as the campaign progressed, he found himself losing money. Therefore it became convenient for the dream to terminate. Fletcher now seemed to prefer the civilian garb of a business man to that of a General in the army, became disgusted at the very suggestion of war and gave his blessing to Joan and her lover. That is about all the story.<sup>98</sup>

The placement of the primary action of the show in a dream sequence removes the satire even further from the already removed fantastical satire. The dream is twice removed from the audience, for the authors imply that satire is something that would happen only in a dream. Although the satire could still speak to the audience, the use of a dream to frame the action removes the immediacy of the connection between the satire and the audience.

The satire in the 1930 show is significantly reduced to make room for several additional production numbers and several new love songs. None of the love songs in the 1930 version have the irony that Joan introduces leading into "The Man I Love." The other 1927 love songs, "Meadow Serenade" and "17 & 21," have a playfulness to them that gently spoofs romantic conventions. "Meadow Serenade" refers to an ideal meadow, which is

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<sup>98</sup>Review of *Strike Up the Band*, *New York Times*, 29 December, 1929.

undercut by reality for “in that meadow now there lodges a garage for Buicks and Dodges.”<sup>99</sup> In “17 & 21” Anne pokes fun at the idealization of extreme youth in women, singing, “I was getting wrinkled. I had just turned 17.”<sup>100</sup> The 1927 songs work together to emphasize the impossibility of the ideal romance, but the 1930 songs avoid burlesquing romantic conventions.

In the 1930 rewrite, Timothy and his girlfriend Anne have three duets instead of the single duet they performed in the 1927 script, which further emphasizes the romantic elements. In the 1927 script, their song (“Military Dancing Drill”) totally spoofed societal conventions, but their 1930 material is much more conventional. Surprisingly the opposite happens for Joan and Jim, who go from three songs to only one in the 1930 version. The love songs for the 1930 version are all very earnest and are separated from the political commentary of the show. (George Gershwin does incorporate the notes used in “The Man I Love” and “Strike Up the Band” into Joan and Jim’s duet, “Soon.”)

In addition to the added songs that emphasize traditional, romantic material, the direction of the musical seemed to emphasize traditional musical comedy elements. A very short film of a staged rehearsal exists as part of George Gershwin’s home films, and production notes indicate blocking and costumes all help to reconstruct the direction.<sup>101</sup> The film is under two minutes, and was staged for George Gershwin and an unidentified leading actor (probably Bobby Clark or Paul McCullough), who have a comic banter voice-over. The film is shot by a camera positioned at the back of the stage, behind the actors, which

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>100</sup> *The Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin*, ed. Robert Kimball (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 90.

<sup>101</sup> Production notes at NYPL-PA. Film part of the Theatre on Film and Tape archive at NYPL-PA.

focuses almost exclusively on the women in their short skirts. It opens with a woman who stretches on a ladder and seems to preen for the camera. In the background a single man works on an impressively executed tap routine as the orchestra plays “Hanging Around With You.” The camera then follows the women as they perform their dance for “Strike Up the Band” and “I Left My Mademoiselle in New Rochelle.”

The chorus numbers, choreographed by George Hale, are danced entirely by thirty women who were cast as either “dancers” or “singers.” Production notes indicate that the costume designer put all the singers in one color and the dancers in another color. Occasionally there would be five differently colored outfits, in six sets each. The costumes seemed to have differed only in color, and probably the different colored outfits reflected different groups moving on stage. Given that the producers paid the chorus fifty dollars a week when Actor’s Equity dictated the minimum as thirty dollars, these were probably very talented and skilled women. The choreography, however, relies more on the dancers’ looks than their skills. The choreography is very simple: box steps, shuffles, ball changes, and kicks. When the women perform a kick line, their legs are not at a uniform height and several women drop their hips to force their legs higher. Their performance is not at all in line with current expectations regarding dance on Broadway, and this quality would probably be mediocre for a community theatre production. Standards have changed; on Broadway today, any dancer who performed at this level would be cut at the first audition. One song has the women walk around in two circles, but all the rest of the staging has the women either parallel to the front of the stage or at forty-five degree angles. The women bounce with their hands on their knees, shrug on “What the hell,” and fling their right arms back with their thumbs up on “Never go back.” Much of the choreography seems focused on women walking back and forth in groups, as they trade places with each other. They

displayed neither technical precision nor athletic talent. If the women possessed movement talent, the choreography never gave them a chance to use it. The film was supposedly a rehearsal, but it was staged to show the women off in front of the camera. The excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*, which are in the same collection, are tightly crafted and make it clear that the level of dancing in *Strike Up the Band* was not universal for Broadway at the time. In *Porgy and Bess* the movement is less gesture-oriented, but seems to explicate the emotions. It is sharp and, even without sound, totally engaging. The film clips indicate the lack of directorial vision in the 1930 version and the emphasis on conventionally attractive girls being attractive. The superficial satire in the 1930 *Strike Up the Band* seems to have engendered a superficial production.

Based on the lyrics, the 1930 rewrite stays closest to the 1927 version at the start of the dream. As the show progresses it moves farther away from the original. Brooks Atkinson, who reviewed the show for *The New York Times*, thought the show displayed much more cohesive satire in the beginning:

The book is more than a little scrappy. Beginning as satire of a huge American chocolate factory, it spends the first act progressing into satire of war and then evaporates into song cues and unrelated numbers. Especially in the first scene the lines are caustic in their lampoon. . . . Promising as the satire is in its early moments, it becomes as involved and diffuse when it attacks the war spirit that the fun largely trickles out of it.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Brooks Atkinson, review of *Strike Up the Band*, *The New York Times*, 15 January, 1930.

Richard Lockridge, of *The Sun*, makes clear how much was lost between the rewrites.

Although he never mentions the original, he implies that he might have either seen or heard about it:

Somewhere in the long road this musical traveled before it reached Times Square there crept up a gray cloud of caution. The shadow of that cloud lies plainly over everything. . . . Only enough remains of a notion which might have made "Strike Up the Band" memorable as a musical satire to make one regret the rest.<sup>103</sup>

The difference between the 1927 and 1930 reviews is clear. None of the 1930 reviewers talk about the daring, stinging, acrid, and mordant elements or the overall indignation and furor that the 1927 reviewers noted, nor are any of the 1930 reviewers angry at the show. There is, however, always a trade-off with these choices. The authors undercut much of the satire in the 1930 version, but their commercial success meant people saw the show and allowed the authors both the artistic foundation and the financial basis to continue experimenting with their next satire, *Of Thee I Sing*.

### *Of Thee I Sing* (1931)

*Of Thee I Sing* focuses on John P. Wintergreen, a candidate for President of the United States who runs with his fiancée, Mary Turner, on the platform of "love." The show is the most gentle of the three Gershwin satires (not including the *Strike Up the Band* rewrite), and it spoofs politics and parodies operetta but stays fantastical in its subject and treatment of the material. Much of its humor is slapstick, farcical, and focused on the creation of

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Lockridge, "Strike Up the Band,' With Music, Opens at the Times Square Theater," *The Sun*, 15 January, 1930.

laughter in the moment, rather than the development of characters in a situation (much like the humor of the Marx brothers).<sup>104</sup> Compared to the political developments and economic conditions of 1931, *Of Thee I Sing* seemed positively upbeat.

*Of Thee I Sing* opened on December 26, 1931. The Depression devastated the country, and there was a widespread perception that the government would do little to help it.<sup>105</sup> President Hoover did not want either to develop a deficit or to weaken character, and thus refused to help ordinary people.<sup>106</sup> Publicly he claimed that the system would fix itself and local areas should be in charge of charity.<sup>107</sup> However, as the economy rapidly

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<sup>104</sup> *Of Thee I Sing* is more character-driven than the Marx brothers' humor. However humor in American changed drastically with the shift from vaudeville (where audiences saw new performers each week and performers could perform the same routine for a year or two) to radio (where audiences heard the same performers each week, and the performers needed new material for every performance). Humor became much more character-driven with numerous variations on a theme, as opposed to vaudeville that often relied on unusual, absurd, or outrageous humor. See Lawrence E. Mintz ed., *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), especially Mintz's chapter "Broadcast Humor," 91-108.

<sup>105</sup> "His devotion to the principle of self-reliance apparently did not preclude federal relief to the rich. . . . As for direct aid to human beings, Hoover remained persuaded that . . . most aid should come from charitable institutions, not government. . . . No accurate count has ever been made of those who died from exposure or starvation. Presumably, their friends and relatives could take comfort in the fact that the moral fiber of the victims had not been corrupted by direct federal aid" T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 81-83. According to the popular Time-Life series, "Scores of the surviving rich and far too many of those in public office seemed blind to the miserable realities of the Depression. . . . Hoover himself plugged away with firm-jawed righteousness that won him no thanks from the hopeless millions. 'Economic depression cannot be cured by legislative action or executive pronouncement,' he said. . . . He was scorned and derided by most Americans, and his administration was so bitterly blamed for the Depression that his name became an adjective for all the manifestations of the blight" *Hard Times: The 30s* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time Life Books, 1998), 26-27. "Because the stock-market slide from 1929 to 1933 was accompanied by at least a 25 percent reduction in employment during the same period, many observers concluded that the slide was related to the unemployment and that the Hoover presidency was largely responsible for both" Martin L. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 63. (Although Fausold does not agree, he acknowledged the perception.)

<sup>106</sup> Hoover has been, perhaps unfairly, villainized as "the symbol of Republican responsibility for hard times and of Republican indifference to the poor" Anthony J. Gadger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years: 1933-1940* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 41. Of course Hoover was not responsible for the Stock Market crash, but his reputation was hurt. When he made statements, like the one in response to beggars selling apples on the street that "many persons left their jobs for the more profitable one of selling apples," he seemed to many people to be out of touch with reality (Watkins, 76). Roosevelt won by a landslide because many voters had such a negative view of Hoover.

<sup>107</sup> Privately Hoover expressed deep concern about the economic system by November of 1929: "When confronting business leaders privately, Hoover warned them that the nation's economy was on the edge of the

deteriorated (and as the economic elite began to be more affected by it), Hoover intervened to help large institutions and other countries. In 1931 banks began folding rapidly (522 collapsed in October alone), and Hoover supported some of the banks with federal funds.<sup>108</sup> As much of Europe began to collapse economically and politically, Hoover tried to stabilize the situation with a one-year international moratorium on war reparations and debts. No one could ignore the financial state of the country. By December, when *Of Thee I Sing* opened, members of the financial elite were well aware of the problems, and this awareness, coupled with the musical's light tone, made the show readily accepted and admired.

1932 marked the height for *Of Thee I Sing's* popularity, and in many ways, it marked the low point for the Depression. Salaries dropped 40% since 1929 and wages by 60%; the government seemed able to help large banks get loans but uninterested in the procurement of food for families. The failure of the system was obvious. A large group of veterans, many with families, known as the Bonus Army, traveled from all over the U.S. to Washington, DC. They petitioned the government to immediately pay their adjusted compensation, which Congress had approved in 1925. Somewhere between fifteen and twenty thousand people moved into a "Hooverville" (temporary shanty housing named sarcastically after the president) outside the capitol, and when the senate voted against the bill most left. A few thousand stayed on until General MacArthur defied Hoover's commands and led the U.S. Army with tear-gas bombs and threats of machine guns and

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abyss and that public cheerfulness would have to be wedded to action by them if a major depression was to be avoided" Watkins, 38. Despite his realistic assessment of the situation, his public persona indelibly affected the perception of his efficacy, compassion, and competence.

<sup>108</sup> At the time, the government did not insure banks, which meant if a bank collapsed, the depositors lost their money.

tanks to disperse the veterans.<sup>109</sup> Publicly, Hoover supported MacArthur's actions. In this environment of political failure, much of society flocked to the lighthearted *Of Thee I Sing*.

The show conflates the current political situation with operetta and links the incompetence of political figures in the U.S. government with similar figures found in comic operettas. The show opens with Wintergreen's supporters who chant "Wintergreen for President," and carry signs that indicate their support. These include "Vote for Prosperity and See What You Get," "He Kept Us Out of Jail," and "Wintergreen—The Flavor Lasts."<sup>110</sup> The setting moves immediately to a hotel room where the party machinery discusses strategies to win the election and simultaneously consumes significant quantities of liquor, despite the unmentioned Prohibition. They cannot remember who they picked as a vice-president, but are delighted with John P. Wintergreen because his name sounds presidential. Despite their presidential sounding candidate, the party bosses, which includes the owner of numerous newspapers, are concerned that things have changed.<sup>111</sup> They see signs of discontent and worry they might need to offer more than a candidate with a presidential sounding name: "We need — an issue. Something that everybody is interested in, and that doesn't matter a damn. Something the party can stand on."<sup>112</sup> Alexander Throttlebottom, the vice-presidential candidate, arrives; they mistake him for a waiter and try

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<sup>109</sup> See Donald Lisio, *The President and Protest: Hoover, MacArthur, and the Bonus Riot* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996).

<sup>110</sup> *Of Thee I Sing* 4.

<sup>111</sup> By December of 1931 Roosevelt was a serious contender for the Democratic nomination. "Louise McHenry Howe, a newspaperman who had joined Roosevelt's entourage in 1912" and "had long been searching for someone he might groom for the presidency" may have been the basis for the newspaperman character. McElvaine, 105 and George McJimsey, *The Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 12.

<sup>112</sup> *Of Thee I Sing* 31.

to force him out. The party machinery decides Wintergreen will run on the platform of “love.” A beauty contest will be held in Atlantic City to pick “Miss White House,” and the president will marry her during his inauguration.

Unfortunately Wintergreen either gets cold feet or really does fall in love with Mary Turner, a campaign worker. Either way, he announces he cannot marry Diana, the winner of the contest, because “Mary makes corn muffins.”<sup>113</sup> John proposes to Mary at campaign rallies in all forty-eight states and wins by a landslide (although Mickey Mouse almost beat him in Hollywood). After John solemnly swears to “uphold the Constitution of the United States of America and to love, honor and cherish this woman,” at the inauguration/wedding, Diana tries to stop the entire event.<sup>114</sup> She pleads that she should rightfully be the bride; after all, “Which is more important, corn muffins or justice?”<sup>115</sup> The Supreme Court unanimously decides, “corn muffins.”

John and Mary enjoy a slight respite as the first act ends happily, but Diana stirs up discontent in the second act. The French Ambassador arrives to express France’s concern, demanding that John marry Diana, for Diana is “the illegitimate daughter of an illegitimate son of an illegitimate nephew of Napoleon.”<sup>116</sup> John refuses to leave Mary or to resign. The senate decides, “He is stubborn. We must teach him. I’m afraid we must impeach him.”<sup>117</sup> Diana sings a waltz of woe to the senate. Mary interrupts the impeachment vote to

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 104

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 157.

announce that Wintergreen is in a “delicate condition.”<sup>118</sup> Because “this country has never yet impeached an expectant father,” Wintergreen is absolved.<sup>119</sup> France declares war after Mary has twins, for as the Ambassador says “when the president of the United States fails to fulfill his duty — ” Wintergreen finishes the Ambassador’s statement with the *deus ex machina* “his obligations are assumed by” the vice-president.<sup>120</sup> Throttlebottom redeems himself when he marries Diana, and all live happily ever after until the sequel. While the creative team skillfully balanced traditional comedic concerns of the characters and even ends with a marriage proposal and two births, the show reduces politics to the triviality of an absurd comedy of manners.

The primary target for *Of Thee I Sing* is an elaboration of Colonel Holmes’ corruption from *Strike Up the Band*. It explores how the country got a government that possesses few ideas, is out of touch with the people and makes their decisions based on elections, and an electorate that falls for it. The opening tableau sets this mood with the irrelevance of the campaign signs and the lyrics of the song. The music begins in a minor key, but moves to a major key when it quotes famous songs. The song juxtaposes both upbeat portions that arouse with minor elements that disconcert. Ira Gershwin’s lyric is very concise, capturing the banality of presidential slogans: “Wintergreen for President!/He’s the man the people choose;/Loves the Irish and the Jews.”<sup>121</sup> The party bosses have no connection to the people, and are primarily interested in alcohol and chambermaids but consider how to retain power out of necessity for their lifestyle. They clearly manipulate public opinion rather than

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>121</sup> *Of Thee I Sing*, 4.

respond to it. As the newspaper owner says, “The people of this country demand John P. Wintergreen for President, and they’re going to get him whether they like it or not. And, between you and me, gentlemen, I don’t think they like it.”<sup>122</sup> The campaign is focused on love, but even with that platform, they compromise. A rally includes professional wrestling throughout John’s marriage proposal, in case the voters get bored with the love plot.

Politics and love are linked far more explicitly than in *Strike Up the Band*, for the entire country is manipulated to support romance. Importantly the Gershwins and Kaufman balance the development of the love plot with their comments on it. The audience can think that the focus is superfluous and superficial even as they empathize with John and Mary. The title song, with its repetition of “Of Thee I Sing,” draws musically and literally on songs like “My Country Tis Of Thee.” The “baby” sung after “Of Thee I Sing” juxtaposes the formal language of patriotism with the colloquialism of love. The other campaign song, “Love is Sweeping the Country,” trivialized electoral concerns by equating political problems with romantic solutions: “Who’s that loving pair? That’s Capital and Labor.”<sup>123</sup>

The press is perfectly happy to focus on love, and it enthusiastically covers the beauty contest and then Diana’s lawsuit for that sells papers. The reporters do not care about the “League of Nations,/Or the seventeen vacations you have had since you’ve been here.” The only thing “The people of America/Are beside themselves to know” is about “The lady who is suing you.”<sup>124</sup> Given that a major owner of newspapers is a party boss, they would have little reason to cover anything that might upset the party. The reduction of

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 16-17

<sup>123</sup> Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin, 179.

<sup>124</sup> *Of Thee I Sing*, 145.

politics to the absurdly personal is carried to its logical conclusions: after the Supreme Court votes, “by a strict party vote,” that Mary will have a boy, she has a second child; this one is a girl perhaps to appease those who did not like the first decisions.<sup>125</sup>

The final song that links romance and politics is the only part of the show to make a direct reference to current political events. The song ridicules President Herbert Hoover’s most famous statement that “Prosperity is just around the corner” and implies that Hoover and the Republicans ignore the Depression because they are out of touch with the real people who are hungry, homeless and unemployed. After Mary announces she is pregnant, John launches a rousing, up-beat production number: “Posterity is just around the corner.”

The show also contains gentle burlesques of press conferences, international affairs, congress, and the Supreme Court. The satire of congress is some of the strongest in the musical. After a rhyming roll call the congress sings:

The Country thinks it’s got depression. Ha! Ha! Ha!  
 Just wait until we get in session! . . .  
 To get business into tangles we can guarantee more angles  
 Than the town of Boston guarantees in beans!  
 If you think you’ve got depression wait until we get in session,  
 And you’ll find out what depression really means!<sup>126</sup>

Congress and the Supreme Court are portrayed as a bunch of privileged men who are out of touch with reality. The Supreme Court enters to an overly somber whole-tone progression. The musical climax of the song is musically overblown as the Supremes sing “We’re the AKs

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>126</sup> Complete Lyrics, 185.

who give the OKs.”<sup>127</sup> AK stands for “alter kocker,” a Yiddish term that politely translates as “old fart.” The pretension of the music, the robes, and the institution is undermined by the divergent slang. Although not all of the audience would have understood the reference, the Yiddish slang may have allowed Ira Gershwin to be more derogatory in his satire of the court. Notably absent, however, is the interdependency of business and government at the expense of society that *Strike Up the Band* developed.

The France American Society objected to the representation of the French Ambassador and the idea that France owed the U.S. money. Kaufman only agreed to drop the lines if they could “write a couple for me which will get the same big laughs.”<sup>128</sup> The editor of the Paris *Matin* later attended a performance that he reportedly enjoyed, commenting “It would be foolish and unbecoming for a Frenchman to object to a few witticisms directed at France . . . when the whole piece pokes unmerciful fun at the President and Vice President of the United States itself.”<sup>129</sup>

The sets for *Of Thee I Sing*, designed by Jo Mielziner, are a combination of realistic sets on the level of the actors and suggestive backdrops on the upper levels of the stage. They mirror the dramaturgical focusing of the show, in that the human level, like John and Mary’s relationship, is believable, but the overall stage picture is incongruous and stylized. A single real light flown in, and many other lights with their rays painted on the backdrop, dominated John and Mary’s campaign rally. They huddled on a small platform with their handlers, and it seems they are a small hopeful connection in a rather bleak world. George

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<sup>127</sup> *Of Thee I Sing*, 100.

<sup>128</sup> “Happy Birthday to “Of Thee I Sing,” *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 1932.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

Hale reprised his role as choreographer, and so the dances were probably close to those from *Strike Up the Band*.

The casting of the two male leads significantly influenced the show. William Gaxton played Wintergreen, and he displayed a suave, charismatic nature that was also creepy and disconcerting.<sup>130</sup> The single most enduring aspect in *Of Thee I Sing*, however, is the creation of Alexander Throttlebottom, the vice-president. Throttlebottom is a mixture of total incompetence, combined with the irrelevance of his position, and the great personal pathos of Victor Moore, who originated the role. Moore developed a clumsy earnestness that endeared him to many, and references have been made to him in political commentary through 1990.<sup>131</sup> Many of the ideas in *Of Thee I Sing* became imbedded in popular references and culture (specifically Throttlebottom with satire of the vice presidency, and the phrase “Of Thee I Sing, baby”), but since the 30s the show itself has been relatively ignored.

In many ways Throttlebottom is the only representative of people who do not have power and struggle in a system that exploits them. Throttlebottom is first introduced when the party heads are trying to get him off the phone, for they do not know who he is. After Throttlebottom arrives, he tries to resign because he would be ashamed if his mother found out. The party will not let him resign, but wants him to go practice speeches in a cave where

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<sup>130</sup> I am basing this primarily on recordings on him in *Swingtime Carteen* and an appearance on the Ed Sullivan show (which is an undated bootleg).

<sup>131</sup> Although Gore's tenure as vice-president inspired few comparisons to Throttlebottom, Dan Quayle inspired writers to compare the two men. In 1990 *The National Review* wrote about the office of the vice presidency: “Veteran political observers remember when all of the folly associated with the Vice presidency could be summed up in one word: Throttlebottom. To be reminiscent of the hapless Vice President Alexander Throttlebottom spelled political ruin. Every Vice President from John Nance Garner to at least Lyndon Johnson went into the office vowing: ‘I will not be a Throttlebottom.’ . . . Throttlebottom was able to redeem himself and squelch his critics. Whether his current successor [Quayle] will do likewise remains to be seen” (John Roberts, “Throttlebottom's Legacy, *The National Review*, June 25, 1990). For a conservative political magazine to compare the conservative Vice President with an incompetent character out of a liberal musical comedy 59 years earlier indicates how ingrained Throttlebottom had become.

no one would be able to hear him. Symbolically the party needs him, but it has no interest or respect for what he has to say or how it can support him. After the election is over, he sneaks into the White House on a tour for tourists. The tour guide is the first person to give him his job duties, and he is delighted to find out he should preside over the senate. The authors draw a parallel between Throttlebottom and other people without power. He is kind, earnest, and naïve, and he is constantly exploited by the system.

In *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, the sequel to *Of Thee I Sing*, the authors let the other characters treat Throttlebottom viciously. The satire became more ruthless as the political and economic systems (both in the show and in the country) fell apart. The treatment of Throttlebottom became cruel as those with power in the show attempt to behead the earnest representative of people without power. Throttlebottom's treatment enraged several critics, and their response indicates how important he was to both shows. As Brooks Atkinson, of *The New York Times* said:

He has considerable hold on this community's affections. Foolish as he is about the practical matters of politics, he is the one guileless, generous character in the satire, sweetened a good deal by Victor Moore's tender-hearted playing. . . . Alas, his fate has grown increasingly gruesome. . . . Let the authors of "Let 'Em Eat Cake" take warning. Alexander Throttlebottom has become an issue. Destroy the government, if convenient. Destroy mankind, if possible. But spare Alexander Throttlebottom. He has friends.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Brooks Atkinson, review of *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, *New York Times*, 12 November, 1933.

Throttlebottom was the center of the media whirlwind around both shows, which was considerable. According to *The Journal of Commerce* in 1933, *Of Thee I Sing* is “the musical comedy, which became a national institution.”<sup>133</sup> *The Daily News* ran dozens of comic strip structured storyboards about the actors and characters in the show. Newspapers constantly featured the three leads. A line of perfume, lipstick, powder and eau du cologne came out advertised as “De toi je chante” but sold under the American translation: “Of Thee I Sing.” The authors used their popularity constructively, both to garner the financial support to do their next show and for additional satire. According to a 1932 article in *New York World Telegram*, Morrie Ryskind, on behalf of Wintergreen and Throttlebottom,

is preparing to sue the Democratic and the Republican parties for plagiarizing speeches and campaign tactics. . . . “It has gone too far,” said Mr. Ryskind. “The citizens are beginning to take Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Hoover seriously. . . . The fact that the Democrats and the Republicans are attempting to duplicate our candidates is a secret no longer.” President Wintergreen has decided we will have to sue both parties and institute litigation to have the Hoover and Roosevelt campaigns brought to a halt “before the people of this great country are fooled into electing another president.”<sup>134</sup>

Ironically the song “Love is Sweeping the Country,” about the frivolity of politicians who only need a good slogan and the ability to entertain, was introduced by the future Senator of California, George Murphy, who trained for his political career when he sang and danced in numerous movies and shows. As Tom Lehrer noted three decades later, Murphy was

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<sup>133</sup> Julius Cohen, “‘Let ‘Em Eat Cake’ New Political Satire,” *The Journal of Commerce*, 23 October, 1933.

<sup>134</sup> Joseph Mitcher, “Wintergreen and Throttlebottom to Sue Both Parties for ‘Stealing Their Stuff,’” *New York World Telegram*, 17 October, 1932

A senator who can really sing and dance.  
 We can't expect America to win against its foes  
 With no one in the senate who can really tap his toes.  
 The movies that you've seen on your television screen  
 Show his legislative talents at a glance.<sup>135</sup>

The issues in the show have become more and less relevant at particular historical moments, and this has influenced the popular conception of the Gershwin satires.

Despite the relevant criticisms that underlie the show, the authors kept the tone light and playful. A plagiarism suit serves to detail why *Of Thee I Sing* could be so popular in the political climate of 1932. Walter Lowenfels, author of an earlier revue called *USA with Music*, sued *Of Thee I Sing*'s authors for copyright infringement. Judge John M. Woosely ruled in favor of the defendants, and his ruling details the light-hearted nature of *Of Thee I Sing*:

The satire throughout (Lowenfels' play) is bitter. . . . The defendants' play, 'Of Thee I Sing,' belongs to an entirely different species of dramatic composition. It is good natured satire without a trace of bitterness, which — importing a legal phraseology into literary comment — fairly may be said to sound in Gilbert and Sullivan; for example, Throttlebottom, who should be remembered as long as men love laughter, the French Ambassador and his song, and all the episodes involving the Supreme Court, are quite within that delightful tradition. If, as it may be truly said, the spectrum of dramatic composition shades from tragedy at one end through drama, comedy and

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<sup>135</sup> Tom Lehrer, "George Murphy Song," *The Remains of Tom Lehrer* (1965. Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 2000) disk 3, track 3.

burlesque to farce, at the other end, the two plays here involved have almost the length of that spectrum between them.<sup>136</sup>

*Of Thee I Sing* used primarily covert satire, for it made light of the ineffectiveness of politicians and worked to let the audiences feel that things could be made right, even if the politicians could not help them. Despite the lampoon of politics, *Of Thee I Sing* developed the comedic notion that humanity always survives despite humans' follies. The authors kept the tone playful and optimistic. Love is trivial as a political platform, but it is also freely available. Ending with Mary having twins reinforced the overall tone that, despite politics, people will persevere.

*Of Thee I Sing* was the first musical to be published as a book (with George Jean Nathan giving it further stature with his introduction), and the first show ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. The show is the lightest of the three Gershwin/Kaufman satires, and, even in the depths of the Depression, its optimism contributed to its success. The general reception was overwhelmingly positive. A rewritten 1952 revival disappointed nearly everyone, and perhaps influenced the scholarship around the show and satirical musicals in general. The revival made few changes, although those changes seem to have moved the approach from satire to buffoonery. For example, the collaborators changed "Posterity is just around the corner" to "The President is going to be a Daddy."<sup>137</sup> As historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote,

I can still remember the delight with which my father, a historian addicted both to politics and to musical comedy, reported on the show. . . . I did see

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<sup>136</sup> Quoted in "Court Rules Out 'Of The I Sing' Plagiarism Suit," *New York Herald Tribune*, 29 December, 1932.

<sup>137</sup> Ira Gershwin, George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, *Of Thee I Sing* (unpublished libretto of 1952 revival, Helen Tamiris Collection, NYPL-PA \*MGZMEC-Res.24-76), 2-3-33.

the 1952 revival. It was a considerable disappointment—to the critics, to the audiences and to me. What had seemed mordant satire 20 years before now came over as silly tomfoolery. From the perspective of the 1950's, "Of Thee I Sing" surprisingly appeared more a show of the 20's than of the 30's. . . The political commentary [was] straight out of the 20's in its Menckenesque dismissal of the electorate as a bunch of boobs who would fall for anything.<sup>138</sup>

The critical dismissal of the revival probably resulted from the incongruity between that political period and the satire of the show. Because *Of Thee I Sing* focuses on the incompetence and triviality of politicians, it is timid and trivial satire for a time dominated by the extremely reactionary but effective politics of Joseph McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>139</sup>

Despite the dismissal in the 50s, various companies have "rediscovered" the show in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s, and critics have found the show relevant for diverse reasons. Although the scores of both *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* work well for current tastes, the dialogue is too farcical for current standards. Radio and television has radically altered the kinds of humor people expect. As a result, critics and audiences often find *Of Thee I Sing* holds more appeal as an idea than an evening.<sup>140</sup> Despite or perhaps because of the political

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<sup>138</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "How History Upstaged the Gershwins," *The New York Times*, 5 April, 1987.

<sup>139</sup> See Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) and Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980). I deal with the 1950s more in chapter three.

<sup>140</sup> In 1992 Frank Rich reviewed Arena Stage's revival of *Of Thee I Sing* and commented "Walter F. Mondale points out that 'the goings-on in 'Of Thee I Sing' may look almost tame by today's standards' and quickly changes the subject from the show at hand to his own charming observations about the Vice Presidency. Mr. Mondale is being polite. Too many of the musical's 60-year-old jokes are repetitive as well as tame" ("Today's Anxiety Stalks a Revival" *The New York Times*, 29 September, 1992). Four years later, however, when Mrs. Clinton mused about her desire for an additional child in *Time* magazine, Rich used *Of Thee I Sing* as the basis of an op-ed column criticizing the Clintons: "Somewhere the authors . . . must have been rolling with laughter over Memorial Day weekend. Who would have thunk that a lunatic scenario resembling a Marx Brothers

timidity, this musical successfully incorporated political satire for a popular audience of its time.

Because *Of Thee I Sing* was so popular, the authors may have felt they could push the boundaries with their next show. Perhaps they became ever more aware of the difficulties facing not just the United States, but also the rest of the world, or perhaps they simply could not resist the chance to deconstruct the various elements they created. For whatever reasons, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* is a much darker piece, going even further than *Strike Up the Band*.

### *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933)

*Let 'Em Eat Cake* is the first sequel for a Broadway musical, and it starts four years after *Of Thee I Sing* began. This show, however, has a darker tone than the original show, and it appeared in a very different social climate. *Let 'Em Eat Cake* opened the year Roosevelt was inaugurated and followed one of the most unstable years in the United States' history, which marked the financial low-point of the Depression.<sup>141</sup> In June of 1932 the mayor of Chicago said the federal government had a choice: "It could send relief, or it could send troops."<sup>142</sup> Social unrest persisted, exemplified by the Bonus Army, and union strikes that shut down cities.<sup>143</sup> Socialist action became much more common: when tenants were

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movie would 60-odd years later be mimicked by our real-life election campaign?" ("Cradle and All: Clinton Family Values," *The New York Times*, 29 May, 1996).

<sup>141</sup> From the Bonus Army that descended on Washington during May-July of 1932, until the total collapse and closure of the banking system in the United States on the eve of Roosevelt's inauguration on March 4, 1933, the U.S. faced countless rebellions, and strikes. "Even in the United States, the propertied classes genuinely feared insurrection and revolution, and young radicals imagined a Soviet America" Denning, 23. See Watkins, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order: 1919-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 4.

<sup>142</sup> McElvaine, 122.

<sup>143</sup> General MacArthur ignored Hoover's orders not to march on the Hooverville of veterans because he wanted to stop the "incipient revolution in the air" Quoted in T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1993), 102.

evicted, neighbors would deny government authority, ignore the police, put everything back in the home, and then keep the authorities from future evictions. When farms were auctioned, neighbors would keep all outsiders away and buy everything back for the dispossessed farmers for a few pennies.<sup>144</sup>

The United States was also closer to a revolution in March 1933, when Roosevelt was finally inaugurated, than at any point since the Civil War. Some historians argue that Roosevelt represented such a drastic change in the conception of government that his presidency was a revolution.<sup>145</sup> Beginning two weeks before Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, runs on banks forced bank holidays. As runs on banks spread across the country, the Senate Investigative Committee publicly aired some of the corruption and illicit profits of the corporate elite. At 4:30 in the morning on March 4, 1933, the day of Roosevelt's inauguration, both New York and Illinois, the last states to hold out against the closure of banks, declared bank holidays. The system completely collapsed. Roosevelt's inauguration marked a decisive moment for the attitude of the country. Throughout the United States people listened to the emotive rhetoric of his inaugural address on the radio:

This is pre-eminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will

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<sup>144</sup> Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1997), 159-161. See also Badger, 38-39 and Watkins 93-100.

<sup>145</sup> "There was revolution in the air. . . . In spite of all the upheaval that had troubled the nation's life for nearly three years, climaxing on the sorry field of anger in Washington, D.C. [the Bonus Army], what was about to come was something entirely different [from the Bolshevik revolution], a peaceful revolutions that would emerge from within the great puzzle of government, not be imposed from without, a revolution that even in its failures would enlarge the democratic experience and change the way in which the nation was governed so permanently that it is no almost impossible to imagine government in any other form" *The Great Depression*, 106-107.

prosper. So first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. . . . I shall ask the Congress for the . . . power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.<sup>146</sup>

Roosevelt acknowledged the problem not with assertions that “prosperity is just around the corner” but with optimism that took into account the reality of the difficulties. Roosevelt had endured and survived his own difficulty, his battle with polio. “To the deprived, the smiling ‘only thing we have to fear is fear itself’ attitude Roosevelt took in the face of the Depression was acceptable and uplifting only because he had overcome a terrible affliction himself.”<sup>147</sup> Although he did an enormous amount to improve the mood of the country, throughout his first the two years he pursued decidedly pro-business policies. Compared to Hoover, however, Roosevelt seemed “to build prosperity from the bottom up rather than the top down.”<sup>148</sup>

By October, when *Let 'Em Eat Cake* opened, the New Deal was underway and the country desperately wanted the threat of revolution to be vanquished. The possibility of revolution was very real, but FDR's safety nets saved capitalism in this country by giving people faith in the system.<sup>149</sup> The political situation in Europe, with the reaction to the

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<sup>146</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States From George Washington 1789 to Lyndon Baines Johnson 1965* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 235, 238.

<sup>147</sup> McElvaine, 106.

<sup>148</sup> Allen, 97.

<sup>149</sup> See Arthur Schlesinger, *The Age of Roosevelt* and Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday*

general instability epitomized by Hitler's brown shirts and Mussolini's black shirts, illustrated the seriousness of the issues and affected the reception of the show. At the same time, however, Roosevelt's New Deal made many people feel like there was hope and a way to solve this country's predicament.

As the overall mood in the country became more optimistic, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* pushed the boundaries much further into dark satire. *Let 'Em Eat Cake* opens four years after *Of Thee I Sing* starts, the night before the next presidential election. It essentially follows John P. Wintergreen's attempts to reinstate his power through revolutionary tactics, after he loses the election. The plot is not straightforward. Instead it develops extensive subplots and twists to dramatize a plethora of political issues. The show uses most of the characters that the authors developed in *Of Thee I Sing*. The only major new characters are Kruger, a professional protestor who is always against whoever has the power, and John P. Tweedledee, Wintergreen's opponent who wins the presidential election. The rest of the new characters are not people, but institutions; these include the League of Nations, which is comprised of representatives of various nations that owe the United States war debts, and the Union League, a political organization of very old, very conservative members. The inclusion of political institutions as characters is a device that might alienate audiences accustomed to the navigation of a plot through personification. It would be very hard for an audience member to feel empathy or identify with the League of Nations.<sup>150</sup> This dramaturgical element demonstrates the extent to which *Let 'Em Eat Cake* ignored audience expectations and focused exclusively on political ideas.

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<sup>150</sup> See Diana Fuss, *The Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis* for a discussion of identification and mimesis in theatre (New York: Routledge, 1997).

*Let 'Em Eat Cake* opens with John P. Wintergreen's supporters as they sing the same song that opened *Of Thee I Sing*. Instead of the ideal world in *Of Thee I Sing*, Wintergreen's supporters are challenged by supporters of John P. Tweedledee who "loves the Turks and the Greeks" (as opposed to Wintergreen's love for the Irish and Jews), and the scene implies the inconsequential nature of the differences between the candidates. Wintergreen loses the election by a landslide, and he is concerned because neither he nor any of his cabinet members possess any job skills. They decide to sell Mary's handmade blue shirts (a reference to socialist movements, which often donned blue shirts as uniforms, workers' groups like the San Francisco Blue Blouses, and to Hitler and Mussolini's revolutionary movements, with their emphasis on symbolically colored shirts). The partners open a storefront on Union Square where various radicals protest. The most outspoken of the protestors is Kruger who introduces himself as someone who is "against the fellow that's in, I don't care who it is."<sup>151</sup>

John and Mary are unable to sell shirts amidst the poverty of the Depression. As he listens to the protesters, John realizes that people want a revolution, and he suggests that he and his friends give it to them. One of his associates asks what would be in that for them. John replies,

I'll tell you what we'd get out of it! A fortune! . . . You can't have a revolution without shirts! . . . Italy — black shirts! Germany — brown shirts! America — blue shirts! By God, if the American people want a revolution we can give it to them! We've got the shirts for it!<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, 73.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

The authors mock both the desire to exploit everything for a profit, even a worker's revolution, and the political developments in Europe, and they imply that the United States could easily follow the fascists' example.

Wintergreen raises an army and the Blue Shirts march to Washington. Both John P. Wintergreen and John P. Tweedledee appeal to the army for support. The army wants to know what is in it for them. Wintergreen promises to pay the army the war debts, a clear reference to the massive amount of money Americans loaned to Europe during World War I and the 1920s and to the moratorium on war debts that dominated much of the papers the previous year.<sup>153</sup> Tweedledee is deposed and Wintergreen establishes a "dictatorship of the proletariat," echoing the phrase that Karl Marx used to describe the Paris Commune uprising of 1871.

The White House is painted blue in honor of the revolution. To help keep the peace, all lawyers (except the dictators' personal attorney) are imprisoned. Out of loyalty to the corn muffin's decision (which allowed Wintergreen to marry Mary in *Of Thee I Sing*), Wintergreen permits the Supreme Court to leave prison. In the new world order where trials are unnecessary because the government makes all decisions, the Supreme Court is unable to find useful work, a condition of their parole, so they form a baseball team. Meanwhile, the army is upset that they have not been paid the war debts.

This show further develops the critique of the idiocy of war that was introduced in *Strike Up the Band*. Through the connection of "the Great American Pastime" with foreign policy and the threat of war, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* works to highlight the trivialities involved in war. A meeting of the League of Nations ends futilely when "each time you mention

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<sup>153</sup> See Watkins, 48-52.

money—no *comprenez*, no *capish*, no *versteh!*” so Wintergreen suggests a game of baseball to decide the war debts.<sup>154</sup> The substitution of a baseball game for a war develops the idea of war as a “patriotic pastime,” and implies that wars are based on the same foundation as sports — blind allegiance to a team, based primarily on where you live.

The Supreme Ball Players lose when umpire Throttlebottom declares a home run by the League of Nations to be fair. Throttlebottom is sentenced to execution. Kruger exploits the anger at the loss of the war debts, leads the army to overthrow Wintergreen, and sentences the president and cabinet to be executed with Throttlebottom the next day. Throttlebottom is placed in the guillotine and the blade drops, but a problem with the guillotine temporarily saves his neck. Ever eager to please, however, Throttlebottom fixes the problem and is about to be beheaded when Mary overthrows Kruger and saves the day. Wintergreen restores the democracy, but neither he nor Tweedledee want the presidency, so Throttlebottom finally becomes president.

Although the show ends with the revolution bloodlessly overthrown and a democracy restored, it explores the dire possibilities many wished to ignore. The sets and direction emphasized an abstracted view of the show. The top of the proscenium displayed an animal that looked like a wolf’s head, covered with feathers, on an eagle’s body. It seemed simultaneously reminiscent of the American eagle and very predatory. Wintergreen presided over Throttlebottom’s trial in a tribunal marked by oversized, angular set pieces, as a blue shirt floated over the proceedings. When Kruger overturned Wintergreen, the army “heiled” Kruger with body language evocative of a Nazi’s customary salute. The political and economic situation was unstable at the time, but people were much more optimistic

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

than during the end of Hoover's administration when *Of Thee I Sing* opened. *Let 'Em Eat Cake* is diverse and scornful in its targets, and the critics took the show seriously with mixed reviews. Some critics thought it was very important. As Whitney Bolton, of the *Telegraph* wrote:

[It is] a look at the exact and deplorable situation which might have come to us as a city and even as a nation at any time last Winter and still, if you believe the economists, still could come to us. That in itself is sobering. . . . I felt disappointed . . . but that faded away in a Sunday of studying the program and remembering the scenes and numbers. The more you think about "Let 'Em Eat Cake" the more certain you become that it is a stalwart, able and completely acceptable sequel. The thing grows on you and grows and grows and grows.<sup>155</sup>

H. T. P. defended the darker tone of this show in light of world's developments, and the importance of pushing the boundaries of theatrical forms.

[The 1930 rewrite of] "Strike Up the Band" kidded; "Of Thee I Sing" burlesqued; "Let 'Em Eat Cake" satirizes. And there you are in inevitable progression. Must good-nature be an unalterable law of our theater? It certainly is not in our living. Nor has Herr Hitler failed of late to keep us informed of the absurdities that dictators practice, be it choice or necessity that drives.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Whitney Bolton, "Let 'Em Eat Cake,' Surpasses as Sequel; Now comes Tip: See It" *New York Telegraph*, undated clipping in Max Gordon scrapbook, NYPL-PA.

<sup>156</sup> H.T.P., "New Yorkers Follow Suit to Bostonians," *Boston Transcript*, 25 October, 1933.

Ultimately, however, the combination of the political instability at the time and the lack of characters the audiences could identify with hurt *Let 'Em Eat Cake*.

The love audiences and critics harbored for *Of Thee I Sing* also influenced the reviews and reception of *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. As Robert Garland of the *Telegraph* put it: "I tried my best to think of a sequel that managed to live up to its original inspiration. But, from the New Testament to 'Let 'Em Eat Cake,' I recalled no out-and-out example." The specter of revolution haunted many reactions to the show. As Garland explained:

There's no sense in being bitter in musical-comedy. Satirical, maybe. Bitter, no. . . . There's no laughing matter because what they have to say and do is near (much too near, if I'm not mistaken) what is likely to happen at any given moment. Fun is fun . . . but there's no sense in sitting on a volcano and pretending that everything is for the best in the best of all possible musical-comedy worlds.<sup>157</sup>

Garland captures an important conflict that runs through the criticism. He seems to think the show is too dark, but the last part of this quote indicates that he thought the show was also too superficial. It may be that satire needs to limit its targets. It is also possible that the situation was so painful that critics were angry with the authors for bringing up issues they would prefer to ignore. Reviews from the show seem to indicate that critics wanted a lighter tone. They comment that the musical was "cruelty . . . they stretch satire to a point where pain destroys humor." "There is something savage, almost sadistic, in these continued tortures." "It is a shrill, strident wail about Fascism, dictatorships, revolutions: a savage, labored, over-wordy, under-musical snarl which fairly could be named *Of Thee I Screech* . . .

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<sup>157</sup> Robert Garland, "Let 'Em Eat Cake' Comes to Broadway," *Telegraph*, 23 October, 1933.

. bitter, cheerless, annoying.”<sup>158</sup> The anger critics expressed about *Let 'Em Eat Cake* needed to be about much more than the show itself.

Some people probably felt betrayed by the sequel because the characters point out the conventions in the original. Although *Of Thee I Sing* developed heroes, Throttlebottom is the only character the audience can like in the sequel, and he is clumsy and incompetent. Mary and John Wintergreen reuse music and lyrics, and it becomes clear that they exploit their relationship for political gain. The cynicism is obvious as the show opens: the babies that ended the last show have been painted on Wintergreen's banner. His supporters carry signs like “Never Mind His Record,” “He Kept Us Out of Work,” and “The Same Promises As Last Time.” Tweedledee's supporters argue, “Vote for Tweedledee—What's the Difference?,” “More Promises than Wintergreen,” and “Off With the Old Crooks—On With the New.”<sup>159</sup> Soon, all the party bosses from the last show are in shock that they lost. The General complains and explicates the “patriotic pastimes” theme from *Strike Up The Band* that implied that war kept people entertained and distracted: “He could have won if he'd followed my advice. . . . Declare war. There is nothing like war, gentlemen, to bring out the patriotism that is latent in the American people.”<sup>160</sup> In an attempt to enliven Mary after the election loss, John Wintergreen makes it clear how out of touch he is:

Now, we'll come out all right. After all, we're no worse off than anybody else. Twelve million people are out of work. Factories are shut down.

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<sup>158</sup> Brooks Atkinson; review, *New York Times*, 12 November, 1933; Arthur Ruhl, “Second Nights: Comic Cake and Tragic Clock,” *Herald Tribune*, 5 Nov, 1933; and review of *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, *New Outlook*, December 1933.

<sup>159</sup> *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, 4-6.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Banks closed. The farmer can't sell his product. [*Suddenly it begins to dawn on him*] Say, I wonder if that had anything to do with the election.<sup>161</sup>

After Wintergreen begins the revolution, which he started only to sell his shirts, he skillfully addresses the crowd:

My good friends, don't praise *me!*

I owe it all to the little woman. . . .

She's the reason for my success.

Why, when I think how we suffered together . . .

I grow so sentimental I'm afraid I've got to burst into song.<sup>162</sup>

After he and Mary sing through the chorus, Mary and John hum as the ensemble starts a counterpoint. They comment on what the audience can already see and, much like spin doctors, tell them how to react. When the chorus is repeated, the final line, "To know that love like yours is mine," is changed. The new lyric is "To know that Shirt of Blue is mine!"<sup>163</sup> John and Mary explicitly link support for their romance with the purchase of their product and clearly exploit the good will people displayed towards their relationship to push their own personal agenda. When the ensemble points out the various thoughts the audience should have about Mary and John, it focuses the audiences' attention on the way Mary and John manipulate the public through the primacy of their relationship. The creative team highlights how society influences people to ignore issues that affect their lives through the emphasis on heterosexual romances.

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>163</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 209.

After Wintergreen and his committee are sentenced to be beheaded, Mary again enters and repeats the same song she sang to stop John's impeachment. Before she begins, however, she whispers to John who replies, "Try it. It worked once." Mary starts her song from *Of Thee I Sing*, "I'm about to be a mother." After the first eight bars of the chorus, Kruger interrupts her, "Hold on, here! You can't get away with that again! That was all right four years ago, but it doesn't go with the Army. What is it—twins again?"<sup>164</sup> Because the music and lyrics are repeated from the previous show, it is clear that Mary has planned this and exploits her motherhood to manipulate the situation. It also draws into question her sincerity in the previous show and implies that the audience member of *Of Thee I Sing* were foolish to believe in John and Mary. Although audiences voluntarily suspend disbelief, even within the theatrical world many people want to have their loyalties confirmed and returned.

John and Mary's exploitation of their love for each other (which the authors never really question) is taken to its logical extreme. When John cannot get the League of Nations to pay the war debts, he asks Mary to sing to them. The league responds, "Why speak of money where there's love, love, love?"<sup>165</sup> When the leagues uses John and Mary's own argument (that love is more important than politics) against them, it highlights the triviality of the substitution of a slogan for a political debate.<sup>166</sup>

Throughout *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, love is more important than anything else. As a result, the family naturally becomes the weapon of choice for John and Mary to brandish cynically against their opponents. In *Strike Up the Band* Fletcher mentioned

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 215

<sup>166</sup> They sang "Who cares what banks fail in Yonkers, long as you've got the kiss that conquers" in *Of Thee I Sing*

he was a husband, a father, and an uncle when trying to persuade Colonel Holmes to declare war. In *Of Thee I Sing* John and Mary's romance secured him the election. The issue is taken much further in *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. When Wintergreen tries to convince the Army to side with him against Tweedledee Mary sings, "All the mothers of the nation can tell you who your leader ought to be. . . . A man who is a husband, the father of two children,/And not that other man who is a bach'lor! A selfish, old bach'lor he."<sup>167</sup> Whether or not Mary is implying that Tweedledee is gay, she clearly indicates that anyone who does not live within a strict definition of family is unfit to be in politics.

In light of the "family values" that sometimes overshadows current political debates, it is interesting that when the Gershwins, Kaufman, and Ryskind satirized the meaninglessness of politics, they imagined candidates that focused on "family" issues. Just as Fletcher developed his position as a father, husband, and uncle in an attempt to privilege his position, the characters in *Let 'Em Eat Cake* take the issue of family to absurdity. The more absurd the satire gets, the more the candidates focus exclusively on the "family" issues, which indicates that personal attacks based on family are a last resort when a politician will lose based on all other issues. Finally the Army says, "The fam'ly tree, sir,/The genealogy, sir,/Of President Tweedledee, sir,/Does not interest me!"<sup>168</sup> After that point, the authors drop the issue, perhaps because they never considered politics would enter a place in which the family life of the candidate became more important than issues.

Throughout *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, the authors ridicule various elements of political protest movements. Kruger is the only major new character in the show, and he has some

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<sup>167</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 212.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

similarities with the Swedish financial tycoon Ivar Kruger, who killed himself on March 12, 1932. Kruger built a business through lies and fraud, and his business had begun to unravel when he killed himself. Like his real life counterpart, Kruger profits through the deception of others. He is first seen at Union Square, among signs that say “Peace on Earth—Kill the Capitalists,” “Down with Fascism,” and “Down with Spinach” (which is held by a baby in a stroller). Whereas the show has many extended musical scenes, Kruger’s opening is one of the few discrete songs in this musically complex score. He protests the ills of humanity and enumerates the things he is against. He begins with an allusion to anti-immigrant xenophobia, and moves on to condemn representatives from nearly every element in society:

That’s the torch we’re going to get the flame from!

If you don’t like it, why don’t you go back where you came from? . . .

Let’s tear down the House of Morgan!

Let’s burn up the Roxy organ. . . .

Down with all the upper classes!

Might as well include the masses!

So down with this! And down with that!

And down with ev’rything in view!

The hell with this! The hell with that!

The hell with you and you and you!<sup>169</sup>

The juxtaposition of the pillars of capitalism (the House of Morgan) with the entertainment industry (the Roxy organ) implies the importance of entertainment in the recruitment of the support of the masses. Kruger, however, remains true to his stated purpose and challenges

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 207-208.

everything that is accepted into the status quo, regardless of its validity: “No matter who gets in, my job is to get him out of there. And there’s only one thing that can ever stick me. . . If I ever get in *myself*.”<sup>170</sup> Kruger excels at the enumeration of what is wrong, but he is unable to contribute viable solutions. This may be an acknowledgment, on the part of the creative team, of the difficulty of the creation of conceivable solutions, especially during the economic upheaval of the Depression. When Kruger gets into power, he continues his original behavior and sentences all the major characters to death.

Mary, meanwhile, convinces the women to join the revolution when she argues that if high society is brought down, the women will be part of the new upper crust: “Ladies if you would advance socially, then here’s your chance . . . All you have to do is buy a Blouse of Blue, and you become a member of the *new* D.A.R.” They respond: “Purchasing a blouse, you say, is vital?” She replies “Ladies, it’s like marrying a title!”<sup>171</sup> The supporters are not so interested in a change in the status quo as a change of their individual position in an unchanged society.

The authors satirize conservative institutions even more than they lampoon protesters. The Supreme Court’s cheer implies that the law supports those in power. They chant: “The whole truth, the whole truth,/Nothing but the truth! . . . Status quo! Status quo! . . . Habeas corpus! Rah! Rah! Rah!”<sup>172</sup> The Union League, a very conservative group of the time, is treated in a light-hearted manner, but the implications are clear. “When we wake, which is infrequent, We keep wond’ring where last week went. . . . Action would be

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<sup>170</sup> *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, 86-87.

<sup>171</sup> *Complete Lyrics*, 209.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

suicidal. Rip Van Winkle is our idol.”<sup>173</sup> The club is clearly an old-boys club, where the members prefer to sleep until death rather than take any risks involved in life. The most important thing about the members of the conservative club is their lineage; they brag, “We are members; Our fathers were members; *Their* fathers were members; Our great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfathers were members of the Union League.”<sup>174</sup> The social elite is hopelessly out of touch with the situation faced by ordinary people.

All the characters in *Let 'Em Eat Cake* are united by a common scapegoat: Throttlebottom. They blame him for everything, alluding to the tendency of the elite to respond to the crisis of working people with moral solutions. Publicity shots indicate of Victor Moore emphasize his pathetic and vulnerable quality. In one shot of him as the umpire, he is handcuffed and ankle-cuffed with his facemask fallen down from his cuffed ankles, and his padding is torn and frayed. Under the umpire’s regalia, he wears a tuxedo suit. He seems to evoke Charlie Chaplin in that he is a little man who is caught in forces far greater than he can even comprehend, much less control. He tries to catch an unknown ball that he can’t see, and he looks like he has been hit by a number of balls and this one is going to knock out his will to live.

Throttlebottom is eventually sentenced to death to save the people in power. The Gershwins link Throttlebottom to other victimized societal groups, specifically with Jews and African-Americans. When Kruger sentences Throttlebottom to death he says, “Besmirching all of us who feel we’re Aryan/To kill him is an act humanitarian.”<sup>175</sup> Before

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 217.

Throttlebottom is to be killed, the chorus sings a dirge, “Hanging Throttlebottom in the Morning.” As they prepare Throttlebottom to be beheaded by a guillotine, the crowd commemorates Throttlebottom’s death as a hanging. Lynch mobs typically hung victims, and that is emphasized through this dirge. The music in “Hanging Throttlebottom in the Morning” is very different from the rest of the show. George Gershwin uses a large operatic choral sound with a slow beat, the feel of a lament, and numerous blue notes (a blue note, which may have originated from African-American Blues and/or Jewish liturgical music, is approximated as flattening the 3rd or 7th tones of the scale). The combination of the two references subtly links Throttlebottom’s murder with lynching, and the persecution of Jews (by the “Aryan” reference) with the persecution of African-Americans. Throttlebottom is the weakest person in the show, and the one about whom the audiences cared. The development of him as the scapegoat worked to show the inanity of attacks against vulnerable people for the problems created by the elite. Despite these powerful satirical comments, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* never focuses on a single issue, but seems, instead, to combine all the issues about which the four authors developed concerns. As a result, the satire works like Kruger; it points out all the problems in society. It fails, however, to focus attention or suggest possible directions for change.

### *Conclusion*

The Gershwins and George S. Kaufman seem to have methodically experimented with the role of political satire in musical comedy. Their shows created a foundation and tested the parameters of political satire in American musical comedy. Shortly after the Gershwins’ satires, other songwriters and authors began to experiment with similar themes

in other forms.<sup>176</sup> Plays and novels developed the ideas explicated in the Gershwins' satires. According to Helen B. Petrullo, novels of the 1930s reiterate similar themes: "Liberators and the uncritical masses who [made] possible the rise of dictatorships by responding emotionally to meaningless clichés manipulated to inflame and channel their restlessness are the common objects of attack."<sup>177</sup> *A Cool Million* by Nathanael West in 1934, *It Can't Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis in 1935, and *The Last Flower* by James Thurber in 1939 all develop this idea.

The Gershwins and Kaufman used humor to keep the climate light, even when they critiqued serious political problems. The ideas of the shows are biting, but it is difficult to make these shows work in production, in part because the humor is more slapstick and madcap than is popular today. In 1984 the influential critic Frank Rich reviewed a revival of the original version of *Strike Up the Band*. He noted both the political integrity of the piece and also commented that modern audiences would not appreciate its humor: "Its political thrust is hard edged, even by today's Broadway standards. . . . The book's acerbic point of view holds up amazingly well — it's the writing that does not. Kaufman's lines are funnier in principle than in practice."<sup>178</sup> The issue of principle versus practice is one that afflicts current productions as well as the scholarship of *Strike Up the Band*, *Of Thee I Sing*, and *Let*

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<sup>176</sup> The Gershwin shows demonstrated that political musical satires could succeed, preparing audiences for the shows and convincing producers to bring forth other shows. In addition, George S. Kaufman and producer Sam Harris were involved with many of the other shows. Irving Berlin rented *Of Thee I Sing* the Music Box, the theatre he owned, so clearly he was familiar with the show. Laurence Bergreen, his biographer, writes that Berlin "decided to mount his own satirical show, which owed much (some said too much) to the Gershwin effort" *As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 304. In his autobiography, Richard Rodgers writes of how Kaufman, who wrote the librettos for the Gershwin shows and *Face the Music*, thought the time was ripe for them [Kaufman and Moss Hart] to collaborate on the most daring political satire of them all, and they wanted Larry [Hart] and me to write the songs" *Musical Stages* (New York: Random House, 1975), 183. (This project became *I'd Rather Be Right*.)

<sup>177</sup> Helen B. Petrullo, "Clichés and Three Political Satires of the Thirties," *Satire Newsletter*: 13 (1976): 109-117.

<sup>178</sup> Frank Rich, "Theatre: A Reworking of 'Strike Up the Band!'" *The New York Times*, July 11, 1984

*'Em Eat Cake*. The scores are brilliantly fresh, but current humor has changed in tone so dramatically that modern audiences can find it difficult to appreciate the books. Situation comedy has supplanted the pun-filled antics of the Marx brothers (for whom Kaufman and Ryskind wrote several shows), and this form focuses on the entertainment in the moment rather than the development of a story.

These shows represent both the possibilities and the limits of satire in musical theatre. *Girl Crazy* focuses on traditional musical comedy subjects and presentations, but the authors imbue it with satire and problematize the tone of the entire piece. Both the 1927 *Strike Up the Band* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* explored the radical implications of satire. The former focused on two main points, and it is essentially a denouncement of war and the excesses of capitalism. Because the problem is specifically defined, there are possible solutions. *Let 'Em Eat Cake* satirizes everything, and implies that the situation is too dire for any single solution. The financial failure of *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, which had the advantage and disadvantage of following an enormously successful show, made it clear that even if the audience loves the characters and will accept some satire, the creative team cannot push it too far. In a theatre, audiences have only one chance to grasp the show. If the show is to be a popular and financial success, the authors need to make the show accessible and keep the plot and issues somewhat focused. *Of Thee I Sing* created the formula that is the most successful for the introduction of political topics; focus on a romantic lead couple, but tie their fate inextricably with the social situations of the time. Although tame compared to the other shows, it is, in a way, more effective because people actually saw it.

To a surprisingly large degree, satirical musicals have since stayed close to the structures created by the Gershwins and their collaborators, who first experimented with the combination of political satire and musical comedy. The original *Strike Up the Band* (1927) is

radical in content, but formally closest to Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas, with few dance songs and a cast tailored to fit the material, not vice-versa. When it failed after two weeks of previews in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the collaborators became much more cautious in content and moved closer to American musical comedy traditions of contemporary characters, popular music, and discrete songs. In 1929 the stock market crashed, and in 1930 Morrie Ryskind rewrote the book *Strike Up the Band*, placed the satire in a dream, and cut much of the harsh quality of the original, to develop a superficial satire. The same year as the rewrite, the Gershwins developed incidental satire in *Girl Crazy*. The enormous success of covert (and light) satire in *Of Thee I Sing* may have given them more courage; for whatever reasons in 1933 they again explored radical satire with *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. Kaufman, Ryskind, Ira Gershwin, and George Gershwin's work expanded the musical theatre vocabulary. The collaborators also went on to create other satirical shows. Sam Harris, who produced *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* produced *As Thousands Cheer* and *Face the Music*.<sup>179</sup> Kaufman wrote books for shows by Irving Berlin and Rodgers and Hart. Ira Gershwin worked with Yip Harburg, who went on to write satires through the early 1950s. In 1952 Ira Gershwin made his liberal political leanings obvious by the composition of several sets of song lyrics for Adlai Stevenson.<sup>180</sup> However, George Gershwin's tragic death at age 38 from a brain tumor seemed to set the boundaries of the form where the Gershwins established them. No one pushed the level of caustic satire past the boundaries of *Let 'Em Eat Cake*.

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<sup>179</sup> These satires will be dealt with in Chapter Two.

<sup>180</sup> My favorite of these song lyrics is from a rewrite for "It Ain't Necessarily So." "Unless I'm barmy and daft/He still has McCarthy and Taft" *Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin*, 238.

## Chapter Two

### The 1930s

As the Depression progressed, musical theatre satires continued to build on the foundation developed by the Gershwins and George S. Kaufman. Although many shows focused on stars, dances, costumes, gags, and songs, political commentary became a popular basis for plots, and incidental satire occurred in many shows. The politics of these shows usually affirmed Roosevelt's policies and rejected both the reactionary assumption that capitalism would fix itself and the radical desire to see a communist revolution. In addition to the expansion of political topics, the authors, directors, and producers continually experimented with the fusion of entertainment with politics, and they developed a variety of appeals to a wide portion of the theatre-going public. The musical theatre of the 1930s demonstrates how musicals can generate politicized and enjoyable shows.

The numerous reviews and articles of the time suggest that there was no consensus about what the genre expected. In 1938 Joseph Krutch, of the progressive *The Nation* magazine, thought the form possessed few affirmative values:

Certainly no theatrical form is so obviously decadent, so clearly afflicted with pernicious anemia, as the musical show. Ordinarily it is no longer even vulgar, and refinement has meant only the gradual elimination of one element after another until nothing is left except a collection of plain young ladies listlessly chanting deliberately casual words to affectedly casual tunes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, "A Good Beginning," *The Nation*, November 5, 1938.

The same year, an author in the *Boston Traveler* remarked on the preponderance of political content in musicals: “All revues and many musicals, during the past few seasons, have found the present administration fertile ground for satire.”<sup>2</sup>

During the 1930s, 175 musical productions were presented on Broadway, and this included sixty-eight musical comedies, thirty-two operettas, and fifty-six revues.<sup>3</sup> Although none of the operettas and only a minority of the musical comedies focused on political comedy, many of the revues included significant amounts of political satire. Both financial and artistic limitations favored shows that related to the social fabric, for these shows were original and cost less than most other shows. By the beginning of the decade, audiences became accustomed to seeing certain recognizable themes in musical comedies and revues:

Endless showgirls ascending and descending flights of stairs . . . mythical princes in mythical countries serenading mythical milkmaids . . . society life on Long Island and the pressing issue of whether Jerry or Teddy cares more for tennis than for Maisie or Nell . . . the Cinderella tale of the waif who hits the big town and eventually becomes Queen of the *Follies* . . . [and] gold-digging manhunters fleecing wealthy bachelors or vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

Audiences became complacent, and perhaps were bored with the standard plots; ticket prices and attendance fell throughout the first years of the Depression. Before the Depression the

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Eager, “Knickerbocker Holiday’ Opens,” *Boston Traveler*, September 28, 1938

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Green, *Broadway Musicals in the 1930s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 13. Those musicals included seventeen musical revues performed entirely by African-Americans and two operas. Both operas, *Porgy and Bess* and *4 Saints in 3 Acts*, expanded boundaries of the form, featured all African-American casts, and were not commercially successful. The shows featuring African-American casts negotiated a very limited cultural space, and faced numerous difficulties. Only *The Swing Mikado*, an adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*, using African-American rhythms and presented by the Federal Theatre Project, and Michael Todd’s knock-off rival, *The Hot Mikado*, were financially successful. See Allen Woll’s *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989).

top ticket price had been as high as \$6.60; it fell as low as \$1.10 during the Depression. The newly invented talking movies also replaced live theatre for many consumers most of the time. With less revenue, costs were drastically reduced. Producers cut down on expensive spectacle scenes and made heavy reductions in cast sizes. Political shows may have enjoyed an economic advantage because they rarely used spectacle and could work with smaller casts. Of course, the economic production incentive needed to be balanced by consumer demand.

The Depression helped create an audience for political shows by making political issues unavoidable. Many people preferred confrontation with America's difficulties through songs and humor. Comedians dominated the musical stage, and most satirical musicals featured known personalities to spoof political issues. "More than any other period, the Thirties belonged to the clowns."<sup>5</sup> William Gaxton and Victor Moore successfully parlayed their presidential and vice-presidential roles from *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* into numerous political satires, as Bert Lahr, Joe Cook, radio-star Ed Wynn, and the team of Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough anchored several other satirical shows. Clowns also dominated non-musical plays (the Marx brothers) and movies (Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and the Marx brothers).

There is no doubt that musical theatre in the 1930s presented many frivolous shows, but it also began to include shows that developed social and political commentary. As political satire became more common at the box office, some inconsequential and trivial shows (like *Hold Your Horses* [1933]) exploited political trappings in a formulaic and flippant manner. Despite some failures, musicals merited continued exploration for they reached a

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<sup>4</sup> Green, 13, ellipses in original.

<sup>5</sup> Green, 14.

much wider audience base than most political shows. According to Ira A. Levine in *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, “The two greatest popular successes of the leftist theatre in the Popular Front period [1936-1939] were Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Pins and Needles*.”<sup>6</sup> The more political musical theatre reflected two common and conflicting themes engendered by the Depression that were also common in much dialogue, art, and commentary throughout the country among those privileged enough not to focus exclusively on survival. Musicals developed a theme around concern for the distress of others, and musicals simultaneously demonstrated anger that the social elite were viewed as responsible for that distress.

The first theme reflected concerns about the impact of the Depression throughout the country. Frederick Lewis Allen wrote in 1940 that many members of the intelligentsia were

deeply moved by the Depression and the suffering it had caused; convinced that the economic and social system of the country had been broken beyond repair, that those who had held the chief economic power before 1929 had been proved derelict and unworthy, and that action was desperately needed to set things right; [and they were] wrung by compassion for the victims of economic unbalance.<sup>7</sup>

Musical theatre incorporated this issue earlier in the decade by recognition of corruption and later in the decade by examination of the impact that powerful people’s decisions engendered on the powerless. The anger of many economically privileged people resulted

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<sup>6</sup> Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 141.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday* (New York: Bantam, 1940, 1965), 203.

from the view that they were scapegoats, and this view started after Roosevelt's election. This anger intensified as his reelection approached in 1935 and continued until 1938, when concerns about the situation in Europe, and perhaps inertia, deflected some of the anger at Roosevelt.

Because Broadway is a commercially driven business, there is a tendency to develop shows that producers think will be successful as financial investments. However, individuals and not-for-profits strongly shaped the development of musical satires in the 1930s. One Broadway producer, Sam H. Harris, working with George S. Kaufman and a variety of composer/lyricist teams, produced a wide range of musical satires that reflected general concerns about the failure of economics and the corruption of politics, as well as a single anti-Roosevelt piece. Although individual producers and authors were able to sporadically support politically cogent shows within the entertainment-focused Broadway infrastructure, several not-for-profit producing entities (the Group Theatre, the Federal Theatre Project, the Theatre Guild, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union) worked systematically to produce politically radical musicals and non-musical plays on Broadway.

Despite the variety of economic conditions that generated the shows, authors used similar formal devices to develop political and social appeals. Many of these shows used distancing devices (like the dream sequence in the 1930 rewrite of *Strike Up the Band*) to frame the show and make the satire more palatable. Typically these devices worked to distance the commentary in superficial satire. Non-profit producers, however, created the majority of the pieces that focused on the impact of the powerful on the powerless.

In this chapter I will look first at musicals produced by Sam H. Harris, then by other commercial producers on Broadway, and finally at the work of not-for-profit organizations. Although the writing teams clearly defined the content and style, producers were essential to

the production of any show. The 1930s musicals were dominated by songwriters, but producers demarcated the boundaries. Irving Berlin's work demonstrates the range of dramaturgical methods that developed satire, and how much exterior forces shaped the collaborations: Harris produced Berlin's *Face the Music*, one of the most audacious musicals of its time. Harris and Berlin's next show, *As Thousands Cheer*, demonstrated the political vitality of the revue format, but Berlin's later musical, *Louisiana Purchase*, explored the other end of the satirical spectrum; it had significant satirical pretensions without actual commentary or satire. After brief discussions of Rodgers and Hart, and Cole Porter, who sporadically employed satire and political elements, I look at another important political figure, Kurt Weill.

Kurt Weill wrote political shows throughout his career and worked in both commercial and not-for-profit theatres of the 1930s. *Krickerbocker Holiday*, written with Maxwell Anderson and produced in a commercial Broadway production, was a surprisingly conservative satirical condemnation of Roosevelt. The most defiant shows, however, came from those producing entities most interested in politics or art: non-profit theatres. Kurt Weill's work with the Group Theatre created *Johnny Johnson*. Additionally *Parade*, *Pins and Needles*, and *The Cradle Will Rock*, came respectively out of the Theatre Guild, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and the Federal Theatre Project, so a discussion of those shows concludes this chapter.

### *Sam H. Harris*

Sam H. Harris started his career as a producer with George M. Cohan at the turn of the century, and he took many risks both in the theatre and out. He had started out as a sports agent and later lost three million dollars in stocks in 1929. Harris developed an

auspicious career as a theatre producer who nurtured long-term collaborations with playwrights and took enormous financial risks to fund projects in which he believed. Early in his producing career, he worked with George M. Cohan, and funded *Little Johnny Jones* (Cohan's first hit, which featured "Give My Regards to Broadway" and "Yankee-Doodle-Boy") by borrowing money from a bookie. Although he seemed to avoid such risky ventures later in his career, he was not afraid to lose money and continued his interest in nurturing long-term partnerships with authors. As George M. Cohan remarked in 1938:

Sam seems to know instinctively what will play and what won't. If you're directing the show, he'll give you a free hand. Then he'll come around at dress rehearsals and nine times out of ten put his finger on just what's wrong. . . . If he doesn't like something he'll say so. And he's very rarely wrong in his judgments. . . . He's a great judge of manuscripts, but he'll never tell an author how to write a play. . . . What counts the most, though, probably, is that Sam really loves the theatre and once he's sold on a play he gives it everything he's got.<sup>8</sup>

Harris' unconditional support, willingness to take risks, and belief in supporting authors rather than individual plays were crucial to his continual creation of high quality productions, especially for satirical musicals. It is imperative for political satire that the producer not censor scenes that might offend some audience members and reduce the immediate appeal of the show. *Theatre Arts* magazine emphasized his unique quality as a producer in the 1930s: "He does not believe in making authors change the script against their better judgment. He will make suggestions. He will help them as much as he can, particularly if

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<sup>8</sup> Morton Eustis, "Portrait of a Producer," *Theatre Arts*, October 1938, 751.

they are inexperienced. But he wants the dramatist to be able to say that – good or bad – the play, as presented, is his own play.”<sup>9</sup>

Harris seemed aware of the highbrow-lowbrow dichotomy that the Gershwins experienced and that became especially pronounced in Harris’ support of the Gershwin’s primary collaborator, George S. Kaufman. According to Burns Mantle of *The New York Daily News*:

Kaufman represented a type of humor and a class of production in the theatre that old-time managers insisted was only for highbrows. You could never sell it to the great majority of playgoers. Harris thought you could. Harris had decided, in fact, that the great majority, so far as theatre was concerned, had already gone over to the movies and was on its way to embracing radio. He decided to gamble on Kaufman and the quality of entertainment Kaufman represented.<sup>10</sup>

Harris’ support gave Kaufman the freedom to write and direct the shows he wanted, without the compulsion to tailor the product to a wider audience.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps part of Harris’ willingness to support political musicals came from his tendency to avoid a view of genres as prescriptive. “He avoids the middle ground and produces intelligent shows, musically and dramatically, less from an intellectual standpoint than from a rare good taste. He doesn’t care about art, art plays, and propaganda plays in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 753.

<sup>10</sup> Burns Mantle, “Sam H. Harris is Dead at 69, After Career As Play Producer,” *Daily News*, Friday, July 4, 1941, 27M.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufman would have, of course, kept audience concerns in mind. He said “Satire is what closes on Saturday Night,” and he constantly made concessions to appeal to a wider audience. However, even with Kaufman’s compromises, few producers would have gambled on his work.

themselves. He does them both, because they are mainly categorized in his mind as good musicals, dramas, comedies, and farces."<sup>12</sup> Because Harris viewed shows as good or not-good rather than as adhering to a specific genre, he may have been more likely to accept shows that breached the traditional boundaries of genres.

Together, Harris and Kaufman (either as librettist, director or both) collaborated on the Gershwins' musicals *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, on the Marx Brothers' shows, *The Cocoanuts*, and *Animal Crackers*, and on Berlin's *Face the Music* and Rodgers and Hart's *I'd Rather Be Right* (with Harris also producing *As Thousands Cheer*), which represent some of the best commercial political musical satire on Broadway during the thirties.

Harris and Kaufman created their first non-Gershwin musical in 1932, amid both theatrical instability and economic devastation. Non-profit theatres were in flux at the time—the Provincetown Players closed in 1929 and Eva LeGallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre closed in 1932, although the Group Theatre opened in 1931. Workers' theatres were an essential development in American theatre during the early 1930s, and in 1932 they added stationary performance spaces, instead of doing exclusively mobile, agitprop theatre. The League of Workers' Theatre developed in 1932 and the Theatre Union started the following year. 1932 was the worst year of the Depression in terms of economics and morale.<sup>13</sup> Even as banks constantly failed, Hoover resolutely refused to help ordinary people who were being destroyed by unemployment and poverty, and publicly he denied that there were any major problems. With Prohibition still in effect, the widespread crime associated

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<sup>12</sup> "Allene Talmey, "Sam H. Harris," *Stage*, December 1934, 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> See Watkins, 40-46. See also Allen.

with alcohol production and consumption had become accepted as normal.<sup>14</sup> In this environment, less than two months after *Of Thee I Sing* opened in New York, Harris opened *Face the Music*, with songs by Irving Berlin, a script by Moss Hart, and direction by George S. Kaufman. Harris took an enormous financial risk because he developed the show before any musical satire proved a financial success.

### Irving Berlin's Collaborations

#### *Face the Music* (1932)

*Face the Music* is a radical satire of the corruption of the police force, which—needing to hide some of their profits from Prohibition and other immensely profitable side businesses—decide to lose their ill-gotten wealth by investing in a show. The show may have been in inspiration for the movie of *The Producers* for the plots are similar. *Face the Music*, however, is far more cynical for it correlates the corruption of the producer to numerous elements in society. Reisman, *Face the Music's* fictitious producer, brags that he can lose however much money needs to disappear. Foolishly, however, he puts the show money in a bank that folds, losing all the money before the production even starts. As a result, the show needs to actually make money, so they turn it into a smut show, get the Vice Commission to raid the show, and the police to let them go. “It’ll be on the front page of

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<sup>14</sup> Roosevelt acknowledged this in his first annual message to Congress. After discussing financial crimes, “banditry, cold-blooded shooting, lynching, and kidnapping,” he demanded that the government work to stop the crime, and that the country respond with “aroused public opinion.” Roosevelt went on to detail the effects he expected the repeal of Prohibition to have on crime. “The adoption of the Twenty-first Amendment should give material aid to the elimination of those new forms of crime which came from the illegal traffic in liquor.” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt, quoted in *FDR: The Words That Reshaped America*, ed. Stamford Parker (New York: Quill, 2000) 78-79. See also Edward Behr, *Prohibition: Thirteen Years that Changed America* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997); Philip P. Mason, *Rumrunning and the Roaring Twenties: Prohibition on the Michigan-Ontario Waterway* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995); Stanley Walker, *The Night Club Era* (1933, reprint, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

every paper, and by Friday night we're sold out for six months."<sup>15</sup> The show-within-the-show parodied the commodification of sex, the often-mediocre musicals of the time, and the producers' acceptance of censorship. In the end, the show blurs the lines of news, entertainment, and criminal trials even more with Reisman getting his wish to produce his own trial from jail.

The show's satire focuses on three broad targets: the overall economic despair of the Depression, police and government corruption, and show business. The show opens with all of society decked out at the latest social hot spot:

Times are not so sweet,  
But the blue-bloods have to eat  
So the best of families meet  
At the Automat.<sup>16</sup>

Conversation focuses entirely on how difficult things are, but even in these circumstances, there are major differences between the privileged and the poor. Two socialites compare bargain shopping: "There was a time I felt I just couldn't live without Bergdorf-Goodman. But look at this. Twelve-fifty at Klein's and who knows the difference?"<sup>17</sup> The truly down-and-out, however, talk about what they can eat: "We had the goldfish for [the] entree at dinner last night, and I said goodbye to the canaries this morning. Of course, there's Aunt Tilly, but there's no meat on her."<sup>18</sup> Kit (a theatre star) insults Reisman by calling him a "son

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<sup>15</sup> Moss Hart and Irving Berlin, *Face the Music* (NYPL-PA \*ZC-87), 2-11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-4. (Underlining theirs.)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-7.

of a rich.”<sup>19</sup> All the banks have folded, and the bank presidents are in prison, out on bail, or on parole. The general despair is further exacerbated by the corruption of the police force.

The commissioner calls the force together because, “We’re facing a crisis. . . . We’ve been making a lot of money and the Reformers are out after us. If they ever open our tin boxes, what are they going to find? Money!”<sup>20</sup> Even though Prohibition and other bribes seem to be their main source of income, the police make money in numerous ways. For example, a murderer is in jail for killing his wife. The police let him in on their pool for the insurance money on the deceased wife as well as two other unsolved murders. The murderer gives them all the information they need to collect the insurance. The police and the murderer share the money on all three murders and thus satisfy all living parties. The corruption, however, is by no means limited to the police force; all politicians and government officials are implicated. At one of the numerous parties the police throw to mingle with chorus women, they meet a judge who, for bribery, has been disbarred. One woman is surprised to hear that they would remove a judge for bribery, but a policeman clarifies that “He got on the bench for bribery. . . . They finally got the judge for selling opium.”<sup>21</sup>

In *Face the Music*, theatre is the largest source of corruption, incompetence, and scandal. Through their focus on corruption in theatre, the authors could create much more derisive satire without the appearance of malice, for it is more acceptable for theatre to satirize itself than the rest of society. However, it is also clear from the mood of the show

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1-7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1-23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1-61.

that theatre is no different from everything else. The entire society is corrupt and all business involves selling oneself. There is a constant joke that “show-business is the oldest profession in the world.”<sup>22</sup> One of the cops is concerned about the commissioner’s plan; despite his steady accrual of profits from corruption and bribery, “I don’t know about show business. I wouldn’t want to get mixed up in anything I’d be ashamed of[,] if the wife and kiddies ever found out.”<sup>23</sup> The commissioner remembers “when I was fourteen years old, my father took me to one side and explained to me about the facts of show business . . . and I’ve never forgotten it.”<sup>24</sup> The connection of sex and show business becomes much more explicit with the development of the musical. The producers are delighted when the judge rules: “I give you my word as a gentleman, this is the dirtiest show I’ve ever seen.”<sup>25</sup> There is also a reference to *The Captive* and Mae West, with the general delight in theatre’s transgression of societal norms.

In addition to the correlation of theatre with sex, there are many comments that regard theatre as a frivolous, incompetent, and corrupt business. The commissioner’s wife is delighted to meet the starlet and sums up all musical comedy plots: “[She is] the one who always comes in on a beautiful white horse and she’s the poor girl who’s working in this cabaret and then she dances for this society ball and the rich man’s son falls in love with her, and then in the scene on the yacht she comes in again on a beautiful white horse.”<sup>26</sup> Theatre offers little value, for it is more expensive than the movies and you get a lot less: “They’ve

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1-24.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1-23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1-23. Ellipses theirs.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2-15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1-14. (Underline in original.)

got an awful nerve charging a dime for that show, in these times. Why at the Roxy you can get four feature pictures and a room and a bath for a nickel.”<sup>27</sup> Act Two opens with “Lousy,” which talks about how bad theatre is in general and this show in specific: “Any wonder why the theatre’s going to hell?/After looking at this show it’s easy to tell.”<sup>28</sup> The audience continually risks their money and time when they pay for any show.

Production is even more like a game of roulette. Though it is called “show business,” it is clear that any connection with a real business is entirely coincidental. One of the police officers does not think investing in a show could “take care of our problem. We’ve got too much money for one producer to lose.” The producer responds that his shows lose money: “I resent that. That’s an insult. No man can sit there and tell me he’s got more money than I can lose on a show. . . . The last Rhinestone number I had cost me a hundred seventy five thousand dollars of my own money. This one will cost three hundred thousand dollars of your money and then I may not use it.”<sup>29</sup> Although the theatre cannot compete with the banks in order to squander money, it is clearly a foolish investment.

Theatrical attendance is frivolous, and investment is dangerous, but employment horrid. Actors are sold off of pushcarts on the streets and picked up for prostitution. The only way to be cast is to know the producers. To stay in the show, the actresses are expected to escort the police every night. On top of all these hardships, the critics destroy everything. The police commissioner laments: “to think that mothers raise their children to be critics. It’s terrible.”<sup>30</sup> When Reisman produces his own investigation at the end of the show, the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1-61.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2-2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1-24— 1-25.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2-7.

world of show business is explicitly linked with political corruption, and the authors illustrate that corruption and despair penetrate all elements of society. Reisman exploits the advantages of trials and entertainment when he positions his own trial for maximum publicity: “They’ve got the greatest natural attraction in the world! . . . They’ve got something that gets on the front page of every paper in the country.”<sup>31</sup>

*Face the Music* is a tightly written, engaging show. It is also one of the most cynical of the covert satires and one of the most successful of the radical satires, bridging both categories. It is a covert satire in that show business is used as a metaphor for the corruption of society, it matched the timbre of the time beautifully, and it focused on entertainment value. It is also radical satire because it links the corruption and frivolity of show business with the corruption and frivolity of all businesses, and explicates the corruption of the government and police. There is no fantastical element or dramaturgical estrangement. The only thing that makes the show less bleak is the use of theatre as the primary target of satire, and this show-in-the-show intensified the satire of commercial theatre, which was explicitly linked with corrupt politics. *Face the Music* ran for 165 performances in 1932 (with an additional month-long run in 1933 before Roosevelt’s inauguration). It probably could not have been such a popular success at any other time. Despite the entertainment of the frivolity during the show-within-a-show, bleakness, despair, and cynicism pervade the piece, and musicals generally attract a wider audience with show that have an underlying tone of optimism.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2-8-8.

*As Thousands Cheer* (1933)

In September of 1933 much of the same team (composer and lyricist Berlin, librettist Moss Hart, and producer Sam H. Harris) created the immensely popular satirical revue *As Thousands Cheer*, which developed a much lighter mood, ran for 400 performances, and reflected the change of attitudes in 1933. The repeal of Prohibition reduced crime and most of the glorification of criminality. Roosevelt's election in 1933 brought a quick, but short-lived, recovery and Roosevelt acknowledged the difficulties instead of denying them.<sup>32</sup> He engendered acceptance and optimism. As Frederick Lewis Allen writes:

It is almost as if the people of the United States had walked backward in the Depression, holding for dear life to the customs and ideals and assumptions of the time that was gone, even while these were one by one slipping out of reach; and then, in 1933, had given up their vain effort, turned around, and walked face-forward into the new world of the nineteen-thirties.<sup>33</sup>

Although the economy picked up briefly at the beginning of Roosevelt's first term, by the autumn the economic situation was as dire as six months earlier, and a backlash against Roosevelt and the New Deal started to develop. Compared to later years of his administration, Roosevelt pursued many pro-business policies throughout his first year in office.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The first economic upturn lasted only a few months, from March until August. See Allen, 162-167.

<sup>33</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Sinæ Yesterday* (New York: Bantam, 1940, reprint 1965), 105.

<sup>34</sup> "Roosevelt's program for dealing with the Depression remained only slightly bolder than Hoover's" (McElvaine, 112). Although the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) allowed labor to organize, it also allowed business to regulate itself and promised exemption from Federal anti-trust regulation for any businesses participating. "To radical critics of the New Deal, the National Recovery Administration which implemented the [National Industrial Recovery] Act epitomised [sic] the capture of a regulatory agency by the special interests who were supposed to be regulated. . . . To those who later interpreted the New Deal as a corporate liberal effort to protect big business, the NRA represented the key attempt by large corporations to

*As Thousands Cheer* presented an upbeat look at the current headlines and the satire is primarily superficial. Berlin and Moss Hart found that many people were easy to satirize. As Berlin noted: "There are some persons, you know, who need no distortion to [create a] caricature, and the same is true of much of the world's news. . . . It is satire in itself and has only to be photographically reproduced to be the most gorgeous kind of irony."<sup>35</sup> Structured around a newspaper, with songs and sketches fitted into the various sections, the show developed humorous sketches and energetic songs. Thus the "Weather Section" presented "Heat Wave," the "Celebrity Section" featured Josephine Baker longing for "Harlem on My Mind," the rotogravure introduced the Easter Parade, and the "Real Estate Section" focused on the Rockefeller juniors giving the senior the eponymous Center.

The show did not have any overriding themes, but it did develop satirical characters and sketches. The most potent political commentary in the piece was presented sentimentally, which encouraged the audience to ignore differences between themselves and the character and to identify emotionally with the situation or emotions of another individual.<sup>36</sup> In *As Thousands Cheer*, Ethel Waters, an African-American actress, sang "Supper

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extend their hegemony by securing government support for the cartelisation of the economy. Businessmen certainly played a key role in drafting the Recovery Act and an even greater role in administering it" (Badger, 74).

The attempts to organize unions in the textile industries exemplify Roosevelt's pro-business stance. "The NRA Cotton Textile Industry Committee was headed by George Sloan, who happened to be the chief industry spokesman as well. The code set a minimum wage of \$12 per week in the South and \$13 in the North. It utterly failed to prevent more stretch-out [where workers were expected to tend more machines at once], or to stop employers from firing workers who joined the union" (Brecher, 184). By September 18, 1934, 421,000 textile workers were striking, the national guard had been called out repeatedly, 13 people had been killed, the strike leaders who controlled the relief funds had been arrested (freezing their accounts and strike relief) and Roosevelt's committee finally called for a board of "neutral" members, and further study. Although Roosevelt asked the firms to rehire the strikers, 331 plants refused to do so, and thousands were left unemployed. See Brecher, 184-192.

<sup>35</sup> Irving Berlin, quoted in Laurence Bergreen's *As Thousands Cheer: the Life of Irving Berlin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 314.

<sup>36</sup> This will be discussed at length in Chapter 3. See also, the discussion of the K.K.K. in Chapter 1.

Time” under the headline “Unknown Negro Lynched By Frenzied Mob.” This is one of the first explicit comments on racial injustice in a Broadway show. The song focuses on a woman as she tries to prepare for supper and to explain the situation to her children:

How'll I keep from crying when I bring their supper on? . . .

How'll I be thankful when they start to thank the Lord?

Lord!

Supper time: I should set the table cause it's supper time.

Somehow I'm not able cause that man of mine ain't comin home no more.<sup>37</sup>

Although Berlin and Waters explored the issue of lynching with empathy and sentiment, the more humorous political moments in the show developed light-hearted burlesque and avoided satire. Like the shows of the 1940s, this show used satire for entertainment and lighter commentary, even as it developed empathy and emotional identification for the most important political or social commentary.

#### *Louisiana Purchase* (1940)

In 1940 Irving Berlin worked on another political satire, *Louisiana Purchase*. The different approach reflected both the changed social climate and a far more timid creative and production team. Despite the fact that most of the political concerns in 1940 centered on Europe, *Louisiana Purchase* dealt with U.S. politics and business corruption in the 1930s. In 1934 the country was still suffering from a major economic downturn.<sup>38</sup> Even as industrial production picked up, employment did not keep pace because of much

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<sup>37</sup> Irving Berlin, “Supper time.” American Songbook Series (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Records, 1992), track 18.

<sup>38</sup> See Thomas E. Hall and J. David Ferguson, *The Great Depression: An International Disaster of Perverse Economic Policies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 1-15, 113-126.

laborsaving efficiency created during the economic downturn. From the end of 1933 until the end of 1934, the U.S. Senate heard testimony about the vast corruption of the economic elite on Wall Street, and how they had manipulated the market and protected their own interests at the expense of socially unconnected investors and the workers. Even as the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and specific legislation worked to prevent future abuses, a deep cynicism developed.<sup>39</sup> The abuse was outrageous and widespread. The head of Chase bank netted over six-and-a-half-million dollars from a drop in his own company's stock. The economic elite profited handsomely from insider trading and often put all of the risk on the institutions they worked for even as they kept all of the profits. They sold stock to their family members, took paid positions on other boards in exchange for the arrangement of loans, made money through illegal liquor trade, and manipulated the market for their profit at the expense of everyone else.<sup>40</sup>

The original conception for *Louisiana Purchase* revolved around Huey Long, the corrupt but populist governor and senator from Louisiana who was impeached as governor in 1929 and assassinated in 1935.<sup>41</sup> With neither Sam H. Harris nor George S. Kaufman involved with this project, much of the satirical commentary was quickly written out. The show centered on an earnest and ethical senator who comes to Louisiana to investigate local corruption. The authors frame the show and acknowledge the theatricality inherent in the

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<sup>39</sup> Some of the legislation prevented financial institutions from offering services in different market sectors, for example encouraging banking customers to invest in the stock market. It also prevented investors from buying stock "on margin," requiring investors to pay 50% of the current value of the stock in order to purchase it. As a result of massive campaign contributions, both pieces of legislation were repealed in 2000; it is too early to predict what the result will be.

<sup>40</sup> See John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash 1929* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954, 1979), 132-135, 147-167. See also Allen, 135-140.

piece, and they use framing and distancing devices developed in other superficial satires. The show opens with a lawyer who dictates a letter to the authors. He says that the show is not legal because “you can’t write a book or a play, based on characters living today.” Therefore, the lawyer insists, “you must say ‘It’s based on fiction.’”<sup>42</sup> The ensemble then does the opening production number that clearly travesties the idea that the show pretends to be fiction and simultaneously assures the audience it is fictional:

Before we start the show, we’d like to have you know  
 The characters portrayed in our musical charade  
 Have not been based on persons living or dead. . . .  
 We’ve laid the scene – in New Orleans  
 A city we’ve invented so that there would be no fuss  
 If there is such a place – it’s certainly news to us.<sup>43</sup>

Berlin explicates the class issues the show claims to address:

If you’re sons of millionaires  
 Don’t start trembling in your breeches  
 When a character declares that you’re dirty-sons-of-riches  
 Don’t go out and sue. We don’t mean you. . . .  
 It’s fiction— So don’t be temperamental.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See Alan Brinley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) and Harry T. Williams and Thomas Harry William, *Huey Long* (New York: Random House, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> Morrie Ryskind and Irving Berlin, *Louisiana Purchase* (NYPL-PA NCOF+), 1-1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2. Interestingly, this number is so similar to the opening for *Sing Out the News* that it is impossible to imagine the authors did not at least hear about it.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

Despite an opening that promises to satirize and offend, the show itself is relatively conservative. There is no doubt about the corruption in Louisiana, but it is presented as the exception that the national senator (who plans on running for president) plans to expose. “Sex Marches On” is a cute number that parodies the weekly cinema shorts “Time Marches On,” and implies that even as everything else is quickly dated, sex is still popular and a sure-fire way to entrap the honest senator. The song, however, seems to rely entirely on shock value as it celebrates a seemingly taboo subject. Occasionally the politicians are accused of being incompetent or corrupt: “There are only two kinds of politicians. There’s the crooks like you, and the fellows who aren’t smart enough to be crooks! . . . That explains both the old deal and the New Deal.”<sup>45</sup> Although this implies that Roosevelt is stupid, it also implies that he is honest: everyone before him was underhanded, and his main stupidity is in not accepting graft. Additionally the national representative is so ethical it is difficult to view the corruption as anything but local. Only two references pertain to national politics. One character mentions that “In those days it was still legal for a Republican to be President. . . . It hasn’t come up recently, but if it ever does, I don’t think the new Supreme Court would declare it constitutional.”<sup>46</sup> This is probably a reference to Roosevelt’s attempt to increase the number of judges three years earlier and to Roosevelt’s longevity in office. The show ends with the good senator unable to deliver his report because the corrupt characters put a picket line around the building where he is to present his conclusion, and labor has such a strong influence that no candidate for president can cross a picket line. Overall, it uses political references as an exotic flavor rather than as a source for commentary.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 2-5-3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1-5-6.

### *Rodgers and Hart*

Like Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart created a full-length musical satire (*I'd Rather Be Right* [1937]), and they used incidental satire in *On Your Toes* (1936), *Babes in Arms* (1937), *Too Many Girls* (1939), *Pal Joey* (1940), and *By Jupiter* (1942). Rodgers and Hart focused primarily on gender stereotyping, idealized romance, and class. *Pal Joey* did not satirize specifically, but it scoffed at idealized heterosexuality by the development of a cynical quality and the focus on the relationship between a gigolo and an older society woman. It problematized many of the common representations of women and romance. In "What is a Man" the woman questioned what made masculinity. In "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" she gave a portrayal of femininity very different from the cultural ideal. Even though she still awakens like a daisy, it is only "After one whole quart of brandy."<sup>47</sup> Sex is made more explicit. The woman thanks God she can "be oversexed again," has "ants that invaded my pants," and wants to "worship the trousers that cling to him."<sup>48</sup> The couple celebrates their "Little Den of Iniquity," with a chambermaid who is "deaf and dumb and blind," and with separate bedrooms "one for play and one for show."<sup>49</sup> Although the show does not develop political satire, it does take a contemptuous look at conventional morality.

*By Jupiter* developed the plot based on a war between the Amazons and the Greeks, and Rodgers and Hart lampooned sentimentalized representations of romance and gender stereotypes. The Amazons, with their reversal of stereotypical gender roles, parodied extreme machismo as well as extreme femininity and implied that both were socially

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

conditioned. “Ev’rything I’ve Got” spoofed traditional love songs, with a singer giving all her possessions to her lover. It starts with the cliché “I have eyes for you,” but the singer quickly explains that they are “to give you dirty looks.” She has words but they “do not come from children’s books.” As in many romantic songs, all her other charms are exclusively for the man’s ownership: “There’s a trick with a knife I’m learning to do. And ev’rything I’ve got belongs to you.”<sup>50</sup> Hart may have also used gender stereotyping to comment obliquely on sexual orientation. For example, in “Jupiter Forbid” the members of the utopian world sing

Maybe there’s a place where you’re afraid to kiss;

You could only do it if you hid.

That will never happen in a place like this.<sup>51</sup>

“Jupiter Forbid” explicitly lays out a generally unspoken assumption about satire. The song clearly describes the world the audience lives in, and refutes it.

Maybe there’s a place for just the upper half. . .

Maybe there’s a place where people never sing . . .

Where they have a sign, “Keep off the grass,” in Spring.

Not here, Jupiter forbid!<sup>52</sup>

The commentary on the general world is openly expressed. The audience knows they live in the hypothetical place and that the characters feel very sorry for people who reside there.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

The comment about “a place for just the upper half” refers to an issue that Hart previously developed in *On Your Toes* and *Babes in Arms*.

*On Your Toes* focused on the attempts of the lead character (Professor Dolan) to unite popular and elite art forms, specifically the lowbrow forms of tap dance and jazz music, and the highbrow dance of ballet. The show ends with the characters’ realization that each form enriches the other and the interactions between the two create wonderful juxtapositions and surprising harmonies. Hart satirized class issues in “Too Good For the Average Man.” The song both comments on the importance of the exploitation of the masses in order for the rich to live well, and on the ludicrous use to which the wealthy put their money.

When Russia was white, it was white for the classes  
 And black for the masses. Unfortunate asses!  
 All wealth belonged to few.  
 When England was Tudor the King and his cronies  
 Had cocktails at Tony’s. The poor had baloneys.  
 And that’s how England grew.<sup>53</sup>

The rich need the labor of the poor to live well, and they create very different moral standards for rich and for poor people:

To be caught in flagrante delicto, . . .  
 Waking in the alcoholic ward. . . .  
 [A plastic surgeon] cutting up your nose to spite your face  
 Is too good for the average man.

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<sup>53</sup> Lorenz Hart, *The Complete Lyrics of Lorenz Hart*, Robert Kimball ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 222.

Lots of kids for a poor wife is dandy. Girls of fashion can be choosy.  
 Birth control and the modus operandi  
 Are much too good for the average floozy!<sup>54</sup>

The song lists many different aspects of double standards and deals with a subject musical theatre has had the most difficulty dealing with: class (a theme later picked up by Yip Harburg in *Finian's Rainbow*).<sup>55</sup> Social norms had changed dramatically during the previous decades. Birth control and premarital sex were commonly accepted, but class often determined the accessibility of birth control and the acceptability of changing norms.<sup>56</sup>

Like *By Jupiter* and *Pal Joey*, *Babes in Arms* satirized gender issues but interwove gender with class. “The Lady is a Tramp” examines how the singer is marginalized by both issues:

Won't go to Harlem in ermine and pearls. . .  
 I go to opera and stay wide awake. . .  
 I'm all alone when I lower my lamp. . .  
 I love LaGuardia and think he's a champ.  
 That's why the lady is a tramp.<sup>57</sup>

The combination of not having money, scoffing at ostentatious elite consumption, and having liberal social attitudes made it necessary for society to deprecate the character. At the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Dyer develops the difficulty of dealing with class issues in musical theatre in “Entertainment and Utopia” reprinted in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993). Irving Berlin also included a satire of social class in the 1937 film *On The Avenue*. Perhaps the most endearing is a charming parody of the trend of slumming in “Slumming on Park Avenue” which had working class people doing to the rich what the rich do to them. “Let's go smellin', where they're dwellin'/Sniffin down our nose the way they do./We can hide behind a pair of fancy glasses/And make faces when a member of the classes passes.”

<sup>56</sup> According to *Fortune* magazine, in 1936 63% of the respondents (which were probably dominated by subscribers) believed in teaching and practicing birth control. See Allen, 105-110.

<sup>57</sup> *Complete Lyrics of Lorenz Hart*, 230-231.

same time that the singer relishes her supposedly inferior status, she mocks societal pretensions by the revelation of the inappropriateness of flaunting ermine and pearls in Harlem and only going to the opera to sleep. When Rodgers rewrote the lyrics long after Hart's death, he changed "I'm all alone when I lower my lamp" to "When I'm a granny I'll still love my gramp," which undercut the independence of the singer and emphasized domesticity. Despite the progressive attitudes about gender and class, *Babes in Arms* includes a very racist song, "All Dark People," which, complete with incorrect grammar, emphasizes that "All dark people is light on their feet."<sup>58</sup>

*Too Many Girls* develops a stereotypical representation of Native Americans, but it is much more nuanced than "All Dark People." The show revolved around very traditional romantic pairings and a college football team in New Mexico. Surprisingly, for *Too Many Girls* Hart wrote one of the only musical theatre songs about the European-American acquisition of Native American land. "Give it Back to the Indians" is done as a show-within-a-show by some of the characters who perform for an on-stage audience. The song focused on the European acquisition of control of New York City from the Native Americans (a subject made topical by the Wheeler-Howard Indian Organizations Act of 1934, which gave some of the tribal reservations land back to the tribes) and the unfeasibility of government in New York City. It seems unlikely that college students in New Mexico would be worried about the city tax, the lack of hope in Wall Street, and the changes in the social scene in New York City; the song is included for the social satire which is totally unmotivated by the script. The song is an odd mixture of a racist caricature of Native Americans with an implication that Peter Minuit's purchase of the New York would have

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 229.

been exploitive if the Native Americans had not known exactly what they were doing and been too smart to want responsibility for New York City. The city has a decayed infrastructure, pollution, no culture, and high taxes. In the song, the Indians were very intelligent to pass the problems on to someone else. In the song (as in the history books), Peter Minuit buys the city for \$26. In the song, the Native American is happy with the deal,

For he knew poor Pete was skinned.

We've tried to run the city, but the city ran away.

And now Peter Minuit, We can't continue it. . . .

Eighty-sixth Street looks like Berlin . . .

Try to jump those excavations . . .

Shakespeare doesn't get a showing when those striptease girls begin,

Yet *Tobacco Road* keeps going;/Give it back to the Indians.

Bound on the . . . East, by Long Island – smoke (coughs).

West, by New Jersey— pots of glue. . . . Chief no wanna keep!<sup>59</sup>

Lorenz Hart incorporated important incidental satire into several shows, and the presentation always kept the songs upbeat and enjoyable. It was a single element, without the gravity of a plot piece, which offered a change in atmosphere from the romance. In 1937 Rodgers and Hart did a full-length satire, which was the first to include contemporary political personages by name.

#### *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937)

Rodgers and Hart's *I'd Rather Be Right* opened in 1937 and focused on President Roosevelt. The 1936 presidential election represented the most bitterly contested

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 262.

presidential election in anyone's memory. The Republicans nominated Alfred Landon, who was as middle of the road as they could get, and the Democrats nominated Roosevelt for reelection.<sup>60</sup> Platforms were surprisingly similar, but the people Roosevelt referred to as the "malefactors of great wealth" and "economic royalists" passionately hated him; many viewed him as a demagogue and a communist.<sup>61</sup> The chairman of the Republican National Committee said Roosevelt's powers were "comparable to those possessed by Mussolini and Hitler," and the committee published a pamphlet about Roosevelt's administration called "Tories, Chiselers, Dead Cats, Witch Doctors, Bank Wreckers, Traitors."<sup>62</sup> Roosevelt faced significant opposition on the left as well as the right, for he clearly supported the capitalist system. When Huey Long suggested the obliteration of social stratification through legislation in his "Share the Wealth" campaign, Roosevelt made it clear that he wanted to keep wealth as a reward for work. He wanted an "equitable way of segregating the great fortunes owned in this country and gained through the abuse of social ethics, from those which were gleaned by inventive ingenuity or as compensation for honest toil plus good management."<sup>63</sup> Roosevelt won by a landslide because he treated the working poor and unemployed as respected citizens who, through no fault of their own, faced a difficult situation.

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<sup>60</sup> See Sean J. Savage, *Roosevelt: The Party Leader: 1932-1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 124-127.

<sup>61</sup> See McJimsey.

<sup>62</sup> Henry P. Fletcher, quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Coming of the New Deal: The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 482; pamphlet quoted in Schlesinger, 481.

<sup>63</sup> Roosevelt, quoted in Ted Morgan's *F.D.R.: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 410. See also Roosevelt's second annual report to congress reprinted in Parker. There he discussed the importance of "the profit motive" which guarantees "the right by work to earn a decent livelihood for ourselves and for our families" (82).

Despite Roosevelt's victorious landslide in 1936, he faced continual difficulties with the "nine old men" of the conservative Supreme Court that constantly ruled New Deal programs as unconstitutional. In 1936, they went so far as to rule it unconstitutional for the states to legislate labor conditions and hours.<sup>64</sup> The following year, Roosevelt suggested the expansion of the number of federal judges by the addition of a younger judge for each judge over seventy. This would have enlarged the Supreme Court to fifteen, and Roosevelt would have appointed all six new members. The plan galvanized anti-Roosevelt anger, and he lost significant political power when this plan was soundly defeated. Eventually judges were allowed to retire voluntarily at 70 with full pensions, and the Supreme Court began to allow more of the New Deal's changes.

*I'd Rather Be Right* dealt with much of the anti-Roosevelt anger, the reelection campaign, and the difficulties with the Supreme Court. It ran for 290 performances, with a libretto by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart; George M. Cohan starred as Franklin Roosevelt, and Sam H. Harris produced. Some of the satire was restrained by the star, who refused to sing occasional lines (and did not get along with the composers).<sup>65</sup> Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart wanted to add more love songs to the show because they made money from sheet music sales, a move that demonstrates how economic conditions shape shows even among the writing teams. Kaufman and Moss Hart, however, continually pruned those songs.

The show has many elements in common with superficial satires. It is framed as a dream and much of the satire is undermined in the end. There is, however, more political

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<sup>64</sup> Roosevelt derisively referred to the Supreme Court as the "nine old men" who still lived in the days of horses and buggies. The men were between 61 and 80, with 6 of them over 70.

<sup>65</sup> See Frederick Nolan. *Lorenz Hart: A Poet on Broadway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 229-233.

commentary than in a superficial satire. The plot, like many musical satires, focuses on a young man and a young woman who want to get married, and the authors expand the focus of the show so that the resolution of the social problems is necessary for the resolution of the romance. In this case they cannot get married until the man gets a promotion, which he will not get until the federal budget is balanced. Although few promotions were explicitly linked to a single political issue, at the time thousands of people could not afford to marry, as they could not move out of their parents' homes; the marriage rate fell by 30% during the Depression.<sup>66</sup>

The musical is framed within the show as the young man's dream, and it burlesques Roosevelt's attempts to balance the budget at the same time that he approved extravagant budgets for a myriad of programs that are dismissed as frivolous. The musical is presented almost as a vaudeville, with various specialty acts that wander in, perform a number, and leave. The show also acknowledges the overt theatricalism of its own presentation; the president's cabinet presents a song: "From the way we're grouped/You'd think we'd trouped/With Rubert D'Oyly Carte."<sup>67</sup> (D'Oyly Carte produced Gilbert and Sullivan's shows in England.) As the characters introduce themselves in a vaudevillian fashion, the political parameters are delineated. The Postmaster explains that his job is to give "jobs for everyone in the Democratic Party . . . I give a job for every vote, and how the votes increase."<sup>68</sup> The administration is having trouble finding jobs for everyone, but the show implies that the government is the only place people can find work, and their promise of

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<sup>66</sup> Allen, 107. According to Allen, the marriage rate went from 10.14 in 1929 to 7.87 in 1932.

<sup>67</sup> George Kaufman, Moss Hart, Lorenz Hart and Richard Rodgers, *I'd Rather Be Right* (New York: Random House, 1937), 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. James Farley, the Postmaster General, had served as Roosevelt's campaign manager.

employment is the only reason Roosevelt and the Democrats were elected. The Secretary of the Treasury behaves like a child; he spends his allowance of three hundred million dollars in one week and now wants more. The cabinet tries to think up new taxes because they cannot cut anything. One suggestion is to sell all the gold in Fort Knox (a reference to the Gold Reserve act of 1934), but the stock market crashes upon the news, so that is not an option. Another cabinet member suggests “a Government pickpocket, in plain clothes, that goes up behind a man and just quietly slips his hand into his pocket.”<sup>69</sup> The musical’s villain, the Supreme Court, vetoes this option.

Unfortunately for Roosevelt, the Supreme Court will not stand for any of Roosevelt’s suggestions because they are all angry with Roosevelt for trying to fire them (a reference to Roosevelt’s failed attempt to increase the number of justices on the Supreme Court). The Republican nominee, Landon, now works as Roosevelt’s mother’s butler, and he implies that Roosevelt won based on charisma, not policy. “It’s true I didn’t photograph well, nor did I have that smile. And I will frankly admit that I was lousy on the radio. But Mr. Roosevelt, I balanced my budget!”<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile a circus atmosphere mocks Roosevelt. The young man’s boss now sells balloons in the park and works with the PWA.<sup>71</sup> The members of the PWA explain and demonstrate what they do: “With an elaborated clattering of picks and shovels, a very small twig is picked up, transferred from one man to another, and finally deposited about ten feet

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>71</sup> The PWA, or Public Works Administration, was one of the early New Deal programs, an early version of the WPA or Works Progress Association. It differed from the WPA because it did not run the administration of projects, but provided funding for locally controlled projects. See Badger.

from where it started.”<sup>72</sup> Roosevelt asks to see the Wagner Act (a labor bill), and “two large German acrobats, fully tricked out with dumbbells, weights, etc.” appear, who turn out to be “Federal Theatre Project No. 34268.”<sup>73</sup> The young people are given numerous trinkets that do not solve their central problem that they cannot make enough money to survive. None of Roosevelt’s suggestions serve their needs: the social security cards will not be of use to them for 40 years, when they turn 65; they have no interest in the Federal Theatre Project’s performance of *Spring in Vienna*, in an acrobatic performance, or even an ice-cream cone. Finally the entertainment is framed as having a political purpose, implying that circuses keep the masses occupied. A variety show precedes Roosevelt’s request for a third term, which an advisor equated with a commercial announcement, “Give ’em entertainment first— a good band, comedy. . . . *Then* you go on with the commercial.”<sup>74</sup>

Despite relentlessly tearing Roosevelt down, the show supported Roosevelt in several ways. In the end, the script itself undercuts the satire of Roosevelt inherent in the rest of the show. First Roosevelt’s enemy, the Supreme Court, becomes completely ridiculous when it declares “the Constitution unconstitutional.”<sup>75</sup> More importantly, Roosevelt’s last speech emphasizes the importance of coming through the difficulties together as a country. He acknowledges the hardships, reminds the audience that although things are bad they have gotten better than they were, and emphasizes that they can all fix the current problems by cooperation.

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<sup>72</sup> *I’d Rather Be Right*, 86.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 111. (Emphasis in the original.)

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

There's something in this country—a sort of spirit that holds us together—that always sees us through. And we mustn't ever lose that. Just remember folks, that even though things are a little wrong right now, we've got a chance to make 'em right, because at least this is a country where you can come out and *talk* about what's wrong. And there aren't many left like that nowadays. . . . It doesn't matter whether *I'm* President or anybody else is, and it never mattered. That's not important. There's only one thing that really matters in this country, or ever will. You!<sup>76</sup>

The casting of George M. Cohan must have worked to support Roosevelt. Cohan was the original Yankee Doodle Boy, and the man most identified with patriotism on Broadway. This would have linked Roosevelt with Cohan's stage persona, supported Roosevelt's patriotism, and affected the reception of the piece.

At the end of the show, Roosevelt tells the young people, "Get married. Take your life and live it. You'll manage. People have done it before. You'll come through somehow. Listen—suppose I *don't* balance the budget? There'll be a baby born every minute just the same."<sup>77</sup> The young man then wakes up from his dream and decides they should get married. The resolution works in a way similar to *Of Thee I Sing*. It invokes the comic-satire tradition and states that politics are a mess, but they do not need to be resolved in order for young people to get married and to have children. People will somehow find a way to survive despite political and economic difficulties. At a time when the political system seemed totally dysfunctional, and the marriage rate had fallen by a third, ignoring the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 121. (Emphasis in the original.)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 122. (Emphasis in the original.)

economic and political systems may have been the most realistic and optimistic message a musical could support. Although the authors do not acknowledge this, many of the issues raised in *I'd Rather Be Right* were concerns Roosevelt had previously raised. When the Civil Works Administration (a precursor to the Works Progress Administration) was created, Roosevelt commented on his concerns about the ever-more-central role of the Federal government:

We are getting requests practically to finance the entire United States. There are individuals who want \$500 to start raising chickens, and from there up to the corporation that wants to borrow money to meet its payroll; from there on to the railroad that has to refund its bonds coming due; from there up to the municipality that says the wicked banks won't let us have any money; and from there down to the individual who says he is entitled to work. . . . There is the general feeling that it is up to the Government to take care of everybody, financially or otherwise . . . the artists, musicians, painters and brass bands.<sup>78</sup>

One would never guess from *I'd Rather Be Right* that Roosevelt implemented very moderate policies, and “attempted to find a middle road between the ideological poles” that many believe saved capitalism from a revolution.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Morgan, 409.

<sup>79</sup> Michael A. Bernstein, *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America, 1929-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 189. The discussion of revolutions was not, at the time, confined exclusively to publications and people on the left. “Bread Line,” a poem by Florence Converse, published in mainstream *The Atlantic Monthly* in January of 1932, argued that the if people got visions by fasting, they probably also got them by starving, and only one spark can “send us down destruction’s brink/It needs by one to make a star, or light a Russian samovar./One to start a funeral pyre./One to cleanse the world by fire” (Quoted in Watkins, 109). By the end of 1932 Hoover’s own Committee on Social Trends reported that “Unless there can be a more impressive integration of social skills and fusing of social purposes than is revealed by present trends . . . there can be no assurances that these alternatives with their accompaniments of violent

Interestingly because the show is ambivalent in its representation of Roosevelt, class seems to have affected its reception. As indicated by the following newspaper account, the wealthy people probably viewed it as an indictment of Roosevelt's policies even as the working class people viewed it as an exoneration of Roosevelt. Cohan, too, was clearly aware of the varied audience reactions for, according to the *New York Post*, when Sara Delano Roosevelt (Franklin Roosevelt's mother) attended the satire Cohan was concerned:

Mr. Cohan, playing F.D.R., makes an impassioned plea for a third term, and the speech, put over for all it's worth by the star, generally receives hisses from the lower floor, answered by applause from the balcony. Fearing that the dowager Mrs. Roosevelt might be disturbed by the hisses, Mr. Cohan raced through the speech at this performance and finished the scene at such breakneck speed that the audience didn't get the idea until too late. There was no hissing and no applause.<sup>80</sup>

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revolution . . . can be averted. . . . The Committee does not wish to assume an attitude of alarmist irresponsibility, but on the other hand it would be highly negligent to gloss over the stark and bitter realities of the social situation. . . . There are times when silence is not neutrality but assent" (quoted in Watkins, 146). See also T.H. Watkins, 108-156. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued that Roosevelt's challenge was "a matter of staving off violence, even (at least some so thought) revolution. Whether revolution was a real possibility or not, faith in a free system was plainly waning. Capitalism, it seemed to many, has spent its force; democracy could not rise to economic crisis" (Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958], 3). This view again became popular during the 1960s as progressive historians who were "acutely conscious of continuing racism and poverty in the 1960s . . . believed that the New Deal had merely served to sustain the hegemony of corporate capitalism. They argued that the New Deal, like Progressivism earlier and reforms of the 1960s, was not a popular movement designed to reform and curb business but a tool of the more sophisticated leaders of America's largest corporations and financial institutions. . . . Reform defused the threat of radical protest by incorporating potentially threatening groups into the system" (Badger, 3). These historians include Barton J. Bernstein, Paul Conklin, Ronald Radosh, Brad Wiley, and Howard Zinn. (See Badger, 314-315 for more on this historiography.)

<sup>80</sup> Wilella Waldorf, *New York Post*, June 9, 1938.

The disparity between the reactions of the people in the orchestra (who paid significantly more for their tickets) and the people in the balcony indicates that the show could support divergent opinions of Roosevelt.

The show is very derisive of Roosevelt; infantilizing him, it implies that his administration developed with as little forethought and coherence as a vaudeville show. Despite this satire, the show probably worked to support Roosevelt. Press coverage surrounding the show worked to Roosevelt's advantage. By doing nothing, he reinforced the fact that America was a democracy, and numerous press articles pointed out that the authors would have been killed for similar offenses in Russia, Germany, or Italy. Eleanor Roosevelt supported this view and commented that satire was healthy for the country: "The outstanding interest is that we live in a country where a play like this can be produced and acted and have a long run without any interference from the government. Thank God for democracies. . . . I would . . . fervently thank God for a nation with a sense of humor."<sup>81</sup> Ultimately Eleanor Roosevelt's point is a good one; the existence of political satire indicated the strength of the United States (in comparison to the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy). It was the only intelligent response she could make, for the suppression of satire usually gives it more power. Until the late 1940s, the United States did not censor its artists.

According to Patrick Julian, *I'd Rather Be Right* "is very much a part of the collective record that formed around the personality of President Roosevelt."<sup>82</sup> The show continually portrayed the president as spontaneous, concerned about everyone, boisterous, and tap-dancing (despite his limited physical capabilities due to polio). The silliness of the attacks in

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Patrick Julian, "Let the Orchestra Go, but Carry the Gallery: The Mythic Portrayal of FDR in *I'd Rather Be Right*," *New England Theatre Journal* 9 (1998), 65.

the show may have worked to discredit other attacks on the president. Ultimately the president's concern for the representatives of the underclass (the boy and girl) drives all of his attempts at power. He does not want it for himself, but to help others. "By making the figure of the President both extremely sympathetic in voice, movement, and deed and allowing him the opportunity to let America laugh at his recent troubles, they [the authors] were contributing to his mythical status as the protector of the common man and the leader of a free people in a dark world."<sup>83</sup> Despite the satire, the show worked to support the popular liberal president.

### *Cole Porter*

Even as political commentary interested the team of Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter's shows used it more as a gimmick to add color to fairly conservative shows, similar to the way *Louisiana Purchase* developed political material. According to the program for *The New Yorkers* (1930), it was a "sociological musical satire."<sup>84</sup> There is, however, no indication of where that satire focused. *Anything Goes* (1934) was written for Victor Moore and William Gaxton (with Ethel Merman), but surprisingly does not try use the reputations and personas developed by the actors' previous satirical work. The show focuses on various members of the social elite enroute to England. Although a real gangster hides on the boat as a priest, the innocent and romantic Danny, in an attempt to get his love to notice him, pretends to be Public-Enemy Number One. By the time the show opened, the only satire is the adulation of Danny when he pretends to be the famed criminal. The theme plays on the publicity and glamorization of Public Enemies and the federal agents known as "G-Men" who caught

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>84</sup> *New Yorkers* clipping folder, NYPL-PA.

them. They captured much publicity when they killed the bank robber Dillinger in July 1934. Given Porter's typically suave and sophisticated veneer, it is surprising that this piece of commentary is not handled with satire, but with a heavy-handed, earnest admonishment:

There's one confession I haven't heard to-night. I haven't heard anybody confess he's ashamed to know Public Enemy Number One. You're actually proud to know me, to be on the same boat with me. You've been fighting to shake my hand. You've pushed each other aside to get my autograph; to have your picture taken with me. One of you paid five hundred dollars for my handkerchief. Why? Because I'm a celebrity – what kind of celebrity? The biggest murderer in the world.<sup>85</sup>

The indignation at the glorification of celebrity seems oddly out of place within Porter's oeuvre, for Porter seemed to relish his own celebrity. *Vogue* magazine did a full-page color article called "The Most Talked-of Bauble in Town" about a cigarette case Porter presented to his wife upon the opening of a later show: "Done in diamonds, sapphires and rubies by the Duc de Verdura at Paul Flato's, it flashes the sun on one side, the moon on the other."<sup>86</sup>

In many ways *Red, Hot, and Blue*, the occasion for the most talked-of gift, epitomizes the worst elements of musical comedy satire. As the successful formula of the satirical musical was emulated by authors with no political interest in the specific show, a few satirically flavored musicals were produced that were utterly devoid of originality, ingenuity, or charm. *Red, Hot, and Blue* uses many of the same plot elements as *Of Thee I Sing*, but seems to exploit the satire only for the commercial elements that make the show timely and

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<sup>85</sup> Guy Bolton, P.G. Wodehouse, and Cole Porter, *Anything Goes* (London Version, June 14, 1935, NYPL-PA 7897), 74.

<sup>86</sup> "The Most Talked-Of Bauble in Town," *Vogue*, 2-1-37, page 73

commercial. It ignores the political basis and focuses only on the display of comely young women. The plot is centered around the search for a woman with a waffle-iron brand on her bottom. Although the White House, the Supreme Court, the warden of the prison and the police are mentioned in the plot, and it even goes so far as to take the “who/whom” controversy from *Of Thee I Sing*, the show has no satire or commentary. The ensemble of women was chosen by director George Hale, who bragged of his casting methods: “Watch me come up with the swell-looking bimbos” and cast them without seeing them sing or dance.<sup>87</sup> Despite Cole Porter’s probable interest in hearing his music well presented, he did not protest Hale’s choice for a cast: “They can’t sing . . . but who cares? Certainly not the men who come to see musical shows. ‘There are no voices in your cast,’ they’ll growl. No voices! Just try to give them a flock of song birds without faces and figures!”<sup>88</sup> The inclusion of plot elements that revolve around the Supreme Court, the corruption of the political structures through involvement with organized crime, the national debt, and excitement over a national lottery demonstrate the extent to which political elements were central to many musical comedies during the 1930s, even when the creative team created no political argument.

In 1938 Cole Porter collaborated with Bella and Samuel Spewack in another vehicle for Victor Moore and William Gaxton. *Let’s Get It To Me!*, a superficial satire, focused on Alonzo P. Goodhue, played by Victor Moore, a character who, very like his rendition of Alexander Throttlebottom, has little political interest but is forced into public office as the Russian Ambassador, by his wife who wants social standing. William Gaxton played the

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<sup>87</sup> “Ah! Watch Him Come Up With the Swell-Lookers,” *New York Post*, July 8, 1936.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

politically savvy newspaperman who tries to help Goodhue get back to his beloved Topeka, and who previously had an affair with Goodhue's wife. Unfortunately, everything Goodhue does to be recalled is greeted with delight. When he kicks a Nazi in the stomach, the British are delighted and the American Secretary of State telegrams him to "Sock him again." He then shoots a Russian counter-revolutionary, but that also gains him accolades. Eventually, he realizes the best way to be thrown out is by doing the best job he can; he suggests the countries in Europe trade soldiers to eliminate nationalities and ensure peace. He is promptly dismissed and sent back to Topeka.<sup>89</sup> The lyrics focus primarily on various romantic pairs and society life. There is a reference to the nonsense newspapers publish, and a light-hearted comparison of the USA to the USSR that implies corruption is tolerated more lightly in the USA: "Why, in Russia, if you're imprisoned/For some government bonds you stole/Or convicted because, one morning/You forgot about self-control/And bumped off your husband's relations/Why, you can't even get a parole."<sup>90</sup> The show, however, is most known for Mary Martin's Broadway debut. She sang "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," a song in which Porter emphasized a common theme of his work, the interplay between sex and money. He leaves the political commentary to other authors. Despite the political setting, Martin's minor and apolitical but avaricious character who delights in her rich, elderly beau's expensive gifts, stole the show. Cole Porter created sophisticated, witty songs, and he developed some political issues as plot elements. The failure of his shows to effectively engage in political arguments demonstrates the successes of other satirical shows. His work also indicates that the plot twists that became popular in satire during the thirties

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<sup>89</sup> Green, 170.

<sup>90</sup> Cole Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, Robert Kimball, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 174.

could be severed from political arguments; the authors that included political arguments did it consciously to engage in social and political issues of the time.

*Kurt Weill*

*Krickerbocker Holiday* (1938)

A more somber approach to political commentary is demonstrated in the formally radical, but politically reactionary satire *Krickerbocker Holiday*, by Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill. It is a straightforward play, but much more conservative in nature than any of the authors' other shows.<sup>91</sup> *Krickerbocker Holiday* combines superficial and covert satire. The show focuses on Roosevelt's administration and the extent to which the New Deal encroached on individual liberties. Similar to superficial satires, Anderson develops a framing device, the show distances the commentary, and the producers employed considerable spectacle. Despite these characteristics of superficial satire, the framing device comments on the financial difficulties of political analysis in musical theatre, and Anderson clearly intended the show to deride Roosevelt.

Like *I'd Rather Be Right*, *Louisiana Purchase*, and the 1930 *Strike Up the Band*, the show is framed within a show. In this case, the distancing device is a fictitious playwright, Washington Irving, who highlights the commercial difficulties in the production of satire and demonstrates Anderson's tendency to interweave superficial and covert satire. Irving opens the show as he struggles to cut out any issues that might offend anyone and thus limit the

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<sup>91</sup> This includes their other collaboration, *Lost in the Stars*, as well as Weill's musicals and most of Anderson's plays like *What Price Glory*. Some of Weill's other musicals are discussed in Chapter three. *Krickerbocker Holiday* could be read as an anarchist play that attacks the current head of the government, regardless of his political orientation. However, Anderson's discussion article in *The New York Times* (see below) and analogies between Stuyvesant and Franklin Roosevelt tend to focus any analysis on the anti-Roosevelt qualities.

play's commercial appeal: "I'll cut that out. No politics. I won't mention municipal graft or anything derogatory. This book has to sell."<sup>92</sup> He frames the play and appears throughout to comment on the action and converse with the lead character, Brom. The play within the musical observes an early American colony of Dutch immigrants and the city council that tries to decide whom they should hang. Most of the council members are involved with illegal activities that include the sale of alcohol and firearms to Native Americans, who are designated as non-human: a capital offense is "Killing people. Indians you can kill. But not people."<sup>93</sup> Despite this comment, the Native Americans are degraded elsewhere in the show.

Roosevelt, a new member of the council, does not understand why they need to hang someone, but the council explains that an execution will distract the people from their investigations of the council.<sup>94</sup> Roosevelt responds (with a supposedly Dutch accent written in) "Vot is it ve did so ve wouldn't vant to be investigated? . . . Honest men wouldn't be scared for investigation!"<sup>95</sup> The council hands him money and tells him to "hush."

You maybe ask a question of a fellow standing by  
 And he nefer gives a answer, and he nefer makes reply  
 But he slips a little silver and he looks you in the eye  
 And he says, "hush, hush," to you.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Maxwell Anderson (book and lyrics) and Kurt Weill, *Krickerbocker Holiday* (1938, manuscript RM 4395—NYPL-PA), 1-1.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-20.

<sup>94</sup> It is surprising that Anderson would call this character Roosevelt, for the audience would initially identify this character with the president. The author, however, wants to affiliate the governor Stuyvesant with the current president.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-8.

The council chooses to hang a young settler, Brom, for he challenged the council's authority: "Put him in jail till we find a law that will let us hang him."<sup>97</sup> After Brom accuses the council of profiting from illegal trade with Native Americans, they sentence him to death for making accusations against the city council. Stuyvesant, the governor, arrives and pardons Brom, for he is pleased with his wit and wants to exploit any people that might help him consolidate power. His speech echoes conservative caricatures of Roosevelt's policies and power:

Taxes are abolished! Except for those at present in effect and a very few others which you and I may find necessary for the accomplishment of desired reforms. From this date forth every man shall be guaranteed enough to live on -----unless it be my personal opinion that he is not worthy to live. . . . And lastly, there shall be no coercion used by the government toward any man, woman or child----except on my personal order or the order of officers delegated by myself. . . . Nothing gives me more pain than the violence[,] which I commit when I discover the least breath of opposition to my altruistic policies.<sup>98</sup>

Anderson's diatribe against fascism is clear. However, Anderson intends it not just against the fascist movements in Europe at the time, but also specifically against Roosevelt's changes with the New Deal. Anderson wrote a *Sunday Times* piece about the political message of *Knickertucker Holiday*. He is more concerned with the principle of freedom than anything else, including hunger: "Life is infinitely less important than freedom. . . . A people which has lost its freedom might better be dead, for it has no importance in the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 1-21.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 1-35— 1-36.

scheme of things except as an evil power behind the word of a dictator.”<sup>99</sup> He explicated his intention to compare Roosevelt’s administration to other fascist movements, for he saw government as inherently dangerous.

The members of a government are . . . in a business which is in continual danger of lapsing into pure gangersterism, pure terrorism and plundering, buttered over at the top by a hypocritical pretense at patriotic unselfishness. . . . A government-dominated economy . . . can have but one result, a loss of individual liberty in thought, speech and action. A guaranteed life is not free. Social security is a step toward the abrogation of the individual and his absorption into that Frankenstein which he has invented to serve him— the paternal State.<sup>100</sup>

Even before Anderson made his political intentions clear, his views were apparent to reviewers. Brooks Atkinson wrote: “At the opening of the second act Mr. Anderson takes a poke at the arbitrary economics of government by decree, which is doubtless [an] inverted comment on the New Deal.”<sup>101</sup> Liberal journalism seemed to have very mixed reviews of the play. A communist paper, the *New Masses*, found the attack on Roosevelt offensive and defended the New Deal:

I think calling the New Deal fascist is a poor sort of joke, and I consider labeling Roosevelt the American Hitler a vicious perversion. Mr. Anderson . . . has his Peter Stuyvesant paraphrase Roosevelt, even to the “my friend”—

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<sup>99</sup> Maxwell Anderson, “On Government: Being a Brief Preface to the Politics of ‘Knickerbocker Holiday,’” *New York Times*, Sunday Nov. 13, 1938.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Brooks Atkinson. “The Play,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1938

and then call in Storm Troopers. *Knickerocker Holiday* is no crude, slambang attack on progressive America. Mr. Anderson makes his points by indirection. His lyrics are suave. His jokes are disarming up to the stinger on the end.<sup>102</sup>

*Knickerocker Holiday* opened during the Popular Front period, a time when the Communist party worked to unite with liberals to fight fascism; even so, the reviewer seems surprisingly tolerant of Roosevelt's capitalist tendencies. Joseph Wood Krutch, writing for *The Nation*, expressed a very different view of the show. He appreciated its political commentary. This seems to be based on his previously mentioned assumption that musical theatre is frivolous and decadent. "[Mr. Anderson] has not only provided a satiric tale which makes sense but [he has] boldly gone back to that tradition of musical comedy which assumed that 'sophistication' was less important than liveliness."<sup>103</sup>

A number of critics compared *Knickerocker Holiday* with a perceived norm in musical theatre. There is, however, no agreement on what this norm is, which demonstrates how little consensus there is on the form. Elinor Hughes from *The Boston Herald* assumed a norm of boy meets girl and that political commentary would not necessarily be a good thing: "This is not just another boy-meets-girl romance . . . but a neat political and social commentary as well. Don't let that word— commentary— worry you, however."<sup>104</sup> *Variety* noted, "Anderson's book is more substantial than most musical plots, and his lyrics are a far cry from the 'June Moon' days, because they are literate and assist in developing plot and

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<sup>102</sup> *The New Masses*, Clipping in Kurt Weill archives, Date, author and page number missing.

<sup>103</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, "A Good Beginning," *The Nation*, November 5, 1938.

<sup>104</sup> Elinor Hughes, "'Knickerocker Holiday' Opens at the Shubert," *The Boston Herald*, September 28, 1938.

characters.”<sup>105</sup> Richard Lockridge, of the conservative *Sun*, demurred; he argued that the show lacked cohesion: “It all scatters like a charge of buckshot, hit or miss, at many targets.”<sup>106</sup>

Although the first night critics commented on the politics, the majority of the newspaper coverage focused on the special effects and the women in the chorus. The conservative *New York Herald Tribune* did not comment on the politics of the show. It did run an article called “Just in Case You’re Interested in Peter Stuyvesant,” which focused entirely on the special effects of the show, especially the stereotypical Indian attack. Unlike most political musicals that focused on the plot rather than the spectacle, *Knickerbocker Holiday* seems to have combined both politics and a lavish production. It evidently had very good effects; the climax included arrows shot on stage, smoke, Dutch cannon sounds, a glowing cyclorama with a full gauze drop four feet in front of it, and a period machine gun created by “a device which fires 22 caliber blanks into a galvanized iron bucket for sweet resonance sake.”<sup>107</sup> *Knickerbocker Holiday* ran for 168 performances; based on the newspaper coverage, the theatrical effects, dancing women, and Weill’s music were probably more important for the show’s success than the book. The production elements seemed to have upstaged the satire.

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<sup>105</sup> *Variety*, Oct. 5, 1938. “June-Moon” is a common reference to hack musical theatre writing, implying a love song which relies on cliché rhymes like June and moon.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Lockridge, *The Sun*, Oct. 20, 1938.

<sup>107</sup> “Just in Case You’re Interested in Peter Stuyvesant,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 27, 1938.

### *Not-for-Profit Producers*

Some of the most remarkable satirical musicals in the later 1930s were developed by non-traditional production entities. Four of these shows demonstrate the breadth and depth of political commentary in musical theatre: The Theatre Guild's production of *Parade* (1935), the Group Theatre's *Johnny Johnson* (1936), the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union's *Pins and Needles* (1937), and the Federal Theatre Project's *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937).

#### *Parade* (1935)

*Parade* is much more radical than any other musical satire of the 1930s because it denied any possibility of improvement in a capitalist society. It was originally written for the Theatre Union, and then the Group Theatre considered it, but the Theatre Guild finally produced it, and it ran for 40 performances. Written by ten different authors, with Jerome Moross writing all the music, it had little stylistic consistency from sketch to sketch, and overall received very poor reviews. Although I have been unable to locate a copy of the script, *New Theatre* printed some of the skits. The performance starred Jimmy Savo, a popular comic, and he seemed to have been instrumental in holding the show together. His personal ethos held tremendous appeal, and he was often compared to Charlie Chaplin. The overall style combined angry, left wing political diatribes with a sweet, understated presentation.

The show opened with anger at the priorities of governments. The first scene took place in a police station as the officers play tic-tac-toe. Murders and hold-ups do not disturb their game but hungry protestors goad them into action with full riot gear.<sup>108</sup> In "Call Out the Militia," a society woman revels in how trendy it is to be a socialist, but orders that they

“Call Out the Militia” as soon as there is any talk of implementation for social justice. In “Home of the Brave,” Americans imitate Hitler’s injunction to his people to return to their national roots and expel foreigners. They try to be as close to Native Americans as possible, but the renegade antagonist clings to his “disloyal passion for foreign foods— spaghetti, sauerkraut, and sardines.”<sup>109</sup> Throughout “The Dead Cow,” an American family lives in horrible poverty. The family’s only luxury is Hearst’s conservative *Journal*, which they use for clothes, food, and shelter. They revel in Hearst’s bravery when he goes to the Soviet Union to take pictures of the Russian poor, and in the fact that they are not like the poor people who starve in Russia. Relief workers finally bring them a cow, and their picture is taken. Unfortunately, the relief workers immediately take the cow back. They are not relief workers after all: “We’re from the *Journal*. We’re out for a picture of a starving Russian family!”<sup>110</sup> “The Last Jackass” ridicules the New Deal and the Agricultural Administration (AAA), and the idea that farmers should destroy crops to raise prices when people are hungry.

“The Tabloid Reds” mocks the representation of Communists in the media. This is the only musical theatre reference to the environmental catastrophe of the 1930s. Because of shortsighted land use in the Midwest in the 1920s, beginning in 1933 horrible dust storms hit throughout the Midwest and created the Dust Bowl that destroyed most of the land. Floods started shortly thereafter and continued through 1937. Roosevelt used WPA workers to protect the topsoil through planting trees and such, and slowly the problem diminished.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Stanley Green describes this scene in *Broadway Musicals of the 30s*—originally titled *Ring Bells! Sing Songs! Broadway Musicals of the Thirties* (New York: De Capo Press, 1971), 110.

<sup>109</sup> Frank Gabrielson and David Lesan, “The Home of the Brave,” *New Theatre* (June, 1935), 7.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> See Badger, 169-188, 342, Theodore Saloutos, “The New Deal in the Great Plains,” *Agricultural History* 48 (1969), and Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press,

“The Tabloid Reds” derided the representation of communism in American newspapers. In front of a backdrop of headlines about the horrid deeds of communists, a family of Reds continually gets their telephone orders directly from Stalin. In the past, they single-handedly bombed the Ritz, burned the Empire State building, sank the Staten Island Ferry, created the Mississippi flood, the drought in the West, and the run on the banks. Even the baby contributes, demanding explosives. The Reds get ready to kill Mrs. Morganfeller (clearly a combination of Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan) and beat Morganfeller’s child. As they beat the child, the characters sing:

Our diet is buckshot and dynamite . . .  
 We eat little children with gunpowder sauce  
 We make little bombs we love to toss . . .  
 We butcher, slaughter, lust for gore  
 Blood’s our drink and we thirst for more . . .  
 We’re those monstrous ghoulish creatures  
 That populate the Sunday features  
 Scare the kindergarten teachers  
 We’re the tabloid reds.<sup>112</sup>

The scene ends with a large explosion. By taking the caricature to its extreme, the authors tried to undercut the idea that communists are evil incarnate. It is also one of the most bitter and derisive sketches to appear on Broadway.

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1979). For a literary discussion of the Dust Bowl, see John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, Viking Press, 1939).

<sup>112</sup> Paul Peters and George Sklar, “The Tabloid Reds,” *New Theatre* (June, 1935), 5.

*Parade* is sardonic, radical satire that rejected incrementalism and essentially displayed no optimism. Some of the sketches are hilarious, but more read as overly didactic and shrill. The reviews commented on its lack of continuity. It is possible that the difficulties originated in the production by the slightly more mainstream Theatre Guild, but given that the Theatre Union and the Group Theatre both decided not to produce it, there were probably fundamental difficulties from the beginning. Whatever the reasons, the show only ran for forty performances to mostly empty houses. Despite generous discounts for workers, they did not come. *Parade* illustrates the difficulty of balancing commercial appeal and radical political comment.

The following year the composer Jerome Moross wrote an article for *New Theatre* magazine on the potential for radical musical revues. He believed that the American musical was thoroughly capitalist, tortured, backward, tawdry, and banal. However, “musical theatre attracts far wider audiences than is possible for the drama, consequently enabling a greater diffusion of anti-fascist thought.” It is also an indigenous American form, and “German musical theatre was so powerful and widespread that it was one of the first cultural activities to feel the mailed [armored] fist of Nazi rule.” Satirical musical revues “made more powerful by a clear-cut, class-conscious viewpoint, would be an invaluable agitational bulwark against fascism.”<sup>113</sup> Moross makes a strong political point, but he seems oblivious to the importance of entertainment value in commercial theatre. Audiences attend voluntarily and cover all costs in most American commercial theatre. It is difficult to convince large numbers of people to see a show that offers none of the pleasures traditionally associated with the genre. Musical comedy audiences expect to laugh with the characters, not to feel they are being

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<sup>113</sup> Jerome Moross, “New Musical Revues for Old,” *New Theatre* (October, 1936), 12.

laughed at by the creative team. This does not preclude intelligent satirical analysis, but to be commercially successful, any musical satire must view the audience as a collaborator, not as a banal mass to be educated. In many ways, *Pins and Needles* fulfilled the promise of combining a class-conscious viewpoint with musical satire. Although it was not as politically radical as *Parade*, it enjoyed immense popularity and reached tens of thousands of people.<sup>114</sup>

*Pins and Needles* (1937)

*Pins and Needles* combined numerous unrelated sketches for an upbeat revue linked by labor issues, with sketches by a number of authors and music by Harold Rome. It became the longest running show on Broadway through that time and “was one of the greatest accomplishments of the cultural front.”<sup>115</sup> Produced at the old Princess Theatre where Jerome Kern, P.G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton produced the Princess Theatre Musicals, the revue started out as a labor event and turned into a commercial success. As a revue it does not fall into any of the categories, but might be defined as playful and radical satire, for it balanced its political commentary with humor and sentiment. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union had a theatre wing, which normally did much more serious work. They were originally unwilling to consider *Pins and Needles*, which seemed too light for their tastes. The head of the theatre at ILGWU hired professional actors for a single performance exclusively for union members, in order to convince the members to produce the show.

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<sup>114</sup> Running as long as *Pins and Needles* did with an emphasis on contemporary affairs, the show constantly added and removed songs. Although many of the songs are preserved in a 60s recording, and numerous reviews and pictures give an excellent idea of this show, I have not found an extant script. The Harold Rome papers at Yale has only a few sketches that were added later in the run. A representative from the Ladies’ International Garment Workers’ Union believes there is a copy of the script at a museum in Houston, but she did not know which museum and I have been unable to find it.

<sup>115</sup> Denning, 14. *Hellzapoppin* (also opening in 1937) ran slightly longer than *Pins and Needles*, but it eschewed any traditional formats. It was “a rowdy, raucous free-for-all, a combination of vaudeville, revue, circus, chamber of horrors, and audience-participation show.” (Green, *Sing Songs/Ring Bells*, 164.)

The show was done at a Broadway theatre, and, after he saw it performed, the theatre owner wanted to produce the show with the professional cast; however, the union's theatre wing realized they wanted to do it. An all-ILGWU cast, who continued to work their regular jobs and were not paid to perform in the show, rehearsed three nights a week for a year and a half. The show originally played only on Fridays and Saturdays, and the actors' salary was dinner money. Although the producer probably planned for an audience comprised primarily of ILGWU members and friends, the show soon expanded to attract traditional audiences, and began to perform eight times a week. It eventually became a smash hit with 1,108 performances on Broadway, a second company touring all over the country, and a sequel called *Sing Out the News*. There are rumors that professional actors tried to join the ILGWU in order to try out. Eleanor Roosevelt saw it four times and arranged a command performance for the president.

Although the show did not have a through-line, both its pro-labor theme and Harold Rome's music provided continuity. Overall, the show paid homage to the lives of ordinary, working, union members, and it satirized conservatives. The show opened with the chorus getting ready on stage as they exhort each other to "Sing Me A Song of Social Significance." "Sing me of courts that aren't impartial. What's to be done with em? Tell me in rhythm."<sup>116</sup> The various fashion crazes, which seemed capable of making anything popular, were given a right-wing twist in a new dance:

Don't go left, but be polite./Move to the right . . .

Close your eyes to where you're bound

And you'll be found doing the reactionary.

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<sup>116</sup> Harold Rome, *Pins and Needles*, Columbia Records, track 1.

All the best dictators do it, millionaires keep stepping to it. . . .

You'll soon see red, doing the reactionary.<sup>117</sup>

In the show, the status quo is supported through manners in "Not Cricket to Picket."

Included in an early draft of *Sing Out the News*, it was later added into *Pins and Needles*. It may have been a reaction to *One For the Money*, which was a revue produced for the social elite in response to *Pins and Needles*. "Not Cricket to Picket" featured Emily Post, concerned about how little etiquette working-class people demonstrated. She protests a picket line and exhorts the protestors:

Go home and starve like gentlemen, not like a noisy brood

Where ladies never make a fuss, though they lack clothes and food

And money's never talked about, for that would be quite rude.<sup>118</sup>

Post becomes exceedingly upset, starts to swear at the protestors, and is finally arrested for disruption of the peace.

In *Pins and Needles* working for positive change is part of the American tradition, and change is needed. This is not a meritocracy, for young women go to college, graduate, and even get Ph.D.s, only to sell bras and girdles at Macy's.<sup>119</sup> Another number exhorts the audience to reject the status quo, because innovation is the American way. The show encourages the audience to follow the examples of such heroes as Thomas Paine, Paul Revere, and George Washington:

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., track 2. The first two lines were included in a sketch in *Sing Out the News*. There is no extant script for *Pins and Needles*. In a 1980 letter from Harold Rome to Paul H. Dedell, People's theatre, dated June 16, 1980, Rome wrote "It was a revue, consisting of songs and topical sketches. The sketches are long outdated, and to the best of my knowledge, are no longer available" (Harold Rome Papers, Yale University, MSS No. 49, Series No. IIIB, Box No. 78, Folder No. 54).

<sup>118</sup> *Pins and Needles* CD., track 7.

<sup>119</sup> This number was also included in an early draft of *Sing Out the News* and probably added to the show later.

To Washington at Valley Forge, a wise guy whispered  
 “Slow down George. Why stir up trouble for the king?” . . .  
 George just looked ahead, and to that Tory judge he said:  
 “No. When you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go.  
 You can’t stand still on freedom’s track.  
 If you don’t go forward, you go back.  
 You can’t giddy-up saying ‘wow’ and sitting on your status quo.”<sup>120</sup>

The song argues that all the great Americans have needed to resist appeals to stop their good work. Like “Not Cricket to Picket,” the song concludes that appeals to etiquette support the status quo (Paul Revere is admonished for his manners), and then it addresses the arguments against change that have been used throughout the history of this country. “When they say, ‘Let’s stand still a bit, Give up some rights, No harm in it’ Remember those are just the tricks that did not work in seventy-six.”<sup>121</sup>

*Pins and Needles* embraced entertainment for its own sake. As the *Swing Mikado* and the *Hot Mikado* were battling each other for popularity, *Pins and Needles* presented “The Red Mikado.”<sup>122</sup> Three Little Maids from School became “Three Little D.A.R.’s are we. Full to the brim with bigotry.”<sup>123</sup> They have fans that say “Made in China” in large letters, because

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<sup>120</sup> *Pins and Needles* CD., track 9.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> “The Red Mikado” was by Joseph Schrank and Harold Rome. See footnote three for more on the dueling *Mikados*.

<sup>123</sup> When *Pins and Needles* toured to Providence, the local censor, at behest of the D.A.R., demanded removal of this sketch. The *New York Post* reported in “Providence Censor Finds Harmony Boys Out of Tune” by Wilella Waldorf, *NY Post*, Oct. 23, 1940. In this article they quote this lyric, which is not included in the recording. The DAR is the Daughters of the American Revolution, a right-wing group, which had recently barred Marian Anderson, an African-American singer, from performing in a hall they owned.

the right-wing people do not support American or union-made products. Later, Ko-Ko cuts off their heads and splashes blue blood all over the stage. In the final portion of this sketch, all the society people stand around with fans that say "Made in China," as the beheaded daughters of the American Revolution, who have "lost face" as a result of their refusal to allow an African-American singer to perform in their hall, carry their heads on platters. The Mikado trend is parodied with banners advertising the "Flea Mikado," Minsky's "Strip Mikado" and the "Hollywood Mikado," and Gilbert and Sullivan picket the entire proceedings as "Unfair to Gilbert" and "Unfair to Sullivan." Like *Face the Music*, the sketch parodied theatrical trends. It also developed the idea of picketing as important even as it simultaneously spoofed it. The focus, however, was on the lampoon of conservative American aristocracy.

American xenophobia and reactionary politics were parodied in "We'd Rather Be Right" (a reference to Rodgers and Hart's show, with content that echoed the "Home of the Brave" sketch from *Parade*) where one "100% American" character is admonished for eating Russian Salad dressing and Swiss cheese.<sup>124</sup> Meanwhile, other "100% American" characters attempt to find a new slogan for the rich and experiment with "'Freedom.' There's too much of it," "Bigotted [sic] and Better," and "Rugged Individualism will Save the Starving." They finally settle on a strategy:

If you find you can't reply to

Your opponents, why don't try to . . .

If some idiot would regulate the traffic in munitions . . .

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<sup>124</sup> Annotation from back of picture: "Russian Dressing, Poor Fellow!" "His patriotic friends won't allow him to eat this un-American delicacy in a scene called 'We'd rather be right:' Swiss Cheese is Un-American" (NYPL-PA).

Call him Un-American.<sup>125</sup>

A later version of this sketch had Greybeards complaining the New Deal had turned the twenty million “decent, self-respecting, unemployed . . . rugged individuals” into “pampered weaklings by giving them jobs.” What’s more, these jobs offered few benefits to society. “They put up low cost housing and destroyed some of our most picturesque slums” and stopped dust storms, built infrastructure, insured savings deposits and created social security.<sup>126</sup> The sketch clearly tweaks the privileged and favors the workers.

Throughout the four years that *Pirs and Needles* played, war became more likely in Europe. One sketch demonstrates *Pirs and Needles*’ views and appeals: “Four Little Angels of Peace.” Author, lyricist, and composer Harold Rome developed several important current political issues, and he juxtaposed the hypocrisy of actions versus rhetoric. The use of a barbershop quartet developed the issues with humor: The world leaders sing:

There’s really no harm if we don’t disarm,  
For we’re always in close harmony. . . .  
We’ll sign any pacts saying we won’t attack . . .  
We try to keep calm when we gas and we bomb,  
Just for peace. Peace. Peace.<sup>127</sup>

Between the various harmonious choruses, each leader has a solo, and he is then shot by one of the remaining leaders. Mussolini’s solo covers some of the current political trends in Europe:

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<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Sherr, 381-382.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>127</sup> *Pirs and Needles*, track 12.

Now I know that war is a thing to abhor  
 And that peace will fill our cornucopia,  
 With love from the start/I just did my part  
 To civilize dear Ethiopia.<sup>128</sup>  
 Though you call me sadistic, imperialistic,  
 My armies require a quarry.  
 And though we may slay hordes of Spaniards each day,  
 After all that we say that we're sorry.<sup>129</sup>

Hitler acknowledges that he has “the urge for a bloody purge, and leave in my wake piles of carrion,” but “it is all for the sake of the Aryan.”<sup>130</sup> The leaders conclude in a musical harmony that emphasized the vast abyss between their actions and their words.

This song changed a number of times during the run of *Pins and Needles*. The original characters were Hitler, Mussolini, Anthony Eden (an English politician), and an unnamed Japanese statesman. After England declared war on Germany, the show dropped Eden, and the song became a trio. Following the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 and Neville Chamberlain's assented on Britain's behalf to the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia, the trio was dropped altogether because “The international situation had driven the author insane,” and he had been reduced to nursery rhymes: “Little Joe Stalin/Sat in the Kremlin/Eating a Nazi pie.”<sup>131</sup> After Russia signed a pact with Germany and invaded Eastern Poland, the trio returned as a

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<sup>128</sup> Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, and like the Spanish Civil War, Italy's invasion became an important cause in the anti-fascist movement in the United States.

<sup>129</sup> *Pins and Needles*, track 12.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Paul Clinton Sherr, *Political Satire in the American Musical Theatre of the 1930s* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1965), 392.

quintet; Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain, a Japanese leader, and Stalin then sang the revised “Five Little Angels of Peace.”<sup>132</sup>

Another sketch added by January 24, 1939, called “Britannia Waives the Rules,” implied that the various worldwide atrocities were not accidental but planned well in advance. In the sketch the “Japanese Ambassador discovers to his consternation that the apology which he had just made to the British Cabinet was for a bombing that had yet to occur.”<sup>133</sup> Later in the run, Marc Blitzstein added a song and sketch called “FTP Plowed Under” about the closing of the Federal Theatre project and the censoring of *The Cradle Will Rock*, which included the only song not by Harold Rome.

Even unions and worker’s theatre were not exempt from satire. By developing a parody of domestic melodrama, the sketch “Papa Lewis, Mama Green” focused on the AFL (American Federation of Labor) split and negotiations with CIO (Committee for Industrial Organizations, later the Congress of Industrial Organizations). As the two labor leaders fought (with Green portrayed as a woman by a man in drag) their children, labeled “labor,” hid under the table. At the first performance David Dubinsky, the real president of ILGWU, reconciled the dispute, which revealed the loyalties of the production team. Another sketch parodied what the authors considered tedious and/or pretentious workers’ theatre, specifically Brecht’s play “Mother.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Tom Prideaux, “Tailor-Made Hit of the 30s,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 4, 1978, 34-35.

<sup>133</sup>From annotation of back of picture “HE MADE A MISTAKE IN HIS SCHEDULE,” (NYPL-PA). In 1937 Japan apologized for bombing and sinking a U.S. gunboat in the harbors of China, and there were other “mistakes.” In 1939 Japan demanded Britain abandon its support of Chinese Nationalists and started a blockade against French and British ships in China.

<sup>134</sup> From annotation on back of picture: “Mother,” Brecht Play, Put on Pins and Needles” “The ILGWU Players do an expose of a left-wing play,” (Photo taken 12-15-39).

The most prominent theme of the show, however, was how workers (women especially) found everyday happiness through unions and outside of capitalist maneuverings. “The success of *Pins and Needles* lies in the fact that the eight songs at the heart of the show make up a witty, satirical, and realistic conversation about love songs, romance and working-class life.”<sup>135</sup> “One Big Union for Two” had a man propose to a woman, as he echoed worker’s language in the marriage proposal:

I’m on a campaign to make you mine.

I’ll picket you until you sign in one big union for two. . . .

Fifty million union members can’t be wrong.<sup>136</sup> . . .

No scabbing when I’m out of town. . . .

We’ll add a member, union made.<sup>137</sup>

Despite the all-male production team, the show is surprisingly focused on working-women’s issues. Bertha, “the sewing machine girl,” learned that “It’s Better with A Union Man” in a parody of nineteenth-century melodrama. This “winsome and class-conscious lass,” worked with “her sweetheart close by, while union love blossomed serene.” Unfortunately, non-union men treated women as badly as corporations treated unorganized workers:

Our villain espied her,

And paused there beside her, a non-union man with a leer. . .

Poor sweet little innocent Bertha, she did not suspect that this guy,

Contrary to all union by-laws, had six other wives on the sly.

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<sup>135</sup> Denning, 301.

<sup>136</sup> NBC banned the song for radio play until this line was changed to “Fifty million happy couples.”

<sup>137</sup> *Pins and Needles*, track 3.

While Bertha was sowing her wild oats . . .

Her true union lover was waiting at local sixteen all in vain. . . .

That non-union cad, he was thoroughly bad.

He did just what you all would suspect.<sup>138</sup>

The moral of this story is simple: “You’ll live to regret if you ever forget this motto proletarian. So always be upon your guard. Demand to see a union card.”<sup>139</sup> The union protects women’s lives in numerous ways, and song may have also parodied the expectation that unions controlled everything.

The insidious influence of advertising is treated both seriously and comically, but mostly with the impact it has on women. In “Nobody Makes A Pass At Me,” the heroine cannot understand why, despite purchasing Lux, Kellogg’s, Ovaltine, Fragrance de Amoir (which “the ads say makes men rash,”) Listerine, Barbesol, Coca-Cola, Crisco, Mazola, Ex-lax, Maybelline, Alka-Seltzer, girdles from Best (“The Times ads say they’re chic”), Ponds, Ry-Krisp, Mum, and a host of other brand name products recommended by the ads, nobody seems interested in her romantically (or sexually).

I spend my hard earned bucks on just what the ads suggest. . . .

I want attention and things I can’t mention. . . .

Just like Ivory soap, I’m 99 and 44—

100 percent pure! What can the matter be?

Nobody makes a pass at me.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., track 4.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., track 5.

In *Pins and Needles*, workers do not need to buy products. They need each other and the simple joys of a walk on “Sunday in the Park.” Despite not having any of the supposed advantages wealth brings, two workers “Have got the nerve to be in love.” Righteous anger is saved for the demand that the workers wake up: “We are the workers sold to the machine . . . Tangled in that ancient, endless chain of profit . . . Power, gain, of grab the land . . . of grab the gold.” The original Act 1 finale ended as the actors entreated the audience to “Break the chains that keep you bound/And trample to the ground/The barricades that hem you round.”<sup>141</sup> Overall, however, the authors kept the mood light, and the show succeeded because of it.

The show varied the presentation depending on the subject, but all elements were influenced by the revue format. Charles Friedman, the director, noted, “I directed in the music hall tradition where you sing directly to the people in the audience. . . . I did not direct it as an illusionistic play.”<sup>142</sup> The backdrop for the show had a surrealistic painting, with a mannequin, sewing machines, bolts of fabric, huge scissors, a smaller tape measure, and a very big roll of thread. Songs that depicted ordinary workers, like “Sunday in the Park,” were presented realistically, but songs that represented powerful organizations were given a cartoonish slant. This emphasized the earthiness and importance of daily life; at the same time, it undermined the hegemony of corporate and political institutions. The Three Little Angels of Peace each wore a halo, and fought with (and apparently over) a single cupid’s bow. (Their predecessors, “The Four Little Angels of Peace,” however, evoked a typical barbershop quartet with choir gowns, and bowler hats alternated with army hats, but

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted in Sherr, 386.

<sup>142</sup> Friedman quoted in Denning, 297.

no halos or bows.) “Papa Lewis, Mama Green” had a three dimensional set, painted to look like a pen and paper drawing, which evoked comic strips that enjoyed a budding popularity. The real table and chair were painted to look two-dimensional, and the table had three-dimensional objects on it, also painted to look like cartoon drawings. A drawn cat clung to a painted chandelier. The characters in that scene all were labeled with their character’s name, making the satire of the domestic scene clear.

*Pins and Needles* had little newspaper coverage, and relied originally on word of mouth. The regular theatre critic of Brooklyn’s *The Citizen* did not want to go, and he asked Hily Elson to review it. She later wrote about how that review was manipulated.

*The Citizen’s* regular theater critic was understandably wary of all this juvenile rapture. How could this amateur entertainment by a trade union possibly warrant such extravagant praise? And even if true, it would never do for the conservative *Citizen* to be so enthusiastic about a leftish mishmash presented by a union. It was a dilemma the critic resolved by letting stand some of my ‘safe’ adjectives in the review, but fastidiously purging it of superlatives. Also he dutifully warned the reader that the show contained ‘labor propaganda’!<sup>143</sup>

*New Theatre* said it “managed to project a charm and vitality” so well that neither theatre people nor labor leaders “had cause to be disappointed.” *Pins and Needles* is “a valuable excursion into the field of the social revue” with “some really worthwhile material. The new theatres throughout this country . . . will do well to follow the example of Labor Stage and make further experiments with the vaudeville form, a native and important theatre

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<sup>143</sup> Hily Elson, “An Encore of Social Significance,” *Public Employee Press*, Aug. 25, 1978, 15.

technique.”<sup>144</sup> Although *Pins and Needles* was originally ignored by the popular press, its success forced the theatrical community to take it seriously. The popularity of *Pins and Needles* probably derived from its optimism, playful nature, and focus on working women’s lives. Throughout the decade, audiences accepted much more political and satirical content in the musicals when it was presented in a jubilant and impish manner.

*Sing Out the News* (1938)

The success of *Pins and Needles* prompted a commercial Broadway sequel, which continued with its radical satire undercut only by a playful outlook. George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart collaborated with Charles Friedman, *Pins and Needles*’ director and Harold Rome, the lyricist, composer, and sometime librettist. Although the sequel received relatively favorable reviews, it lasted only 105 performances (a fairly modest run that probably paid back investors but failed to garner a profit). Like *Pins and Needles* and *As Thousands Cheer*, the show developed a revue format, but where the first two developed a number of issues, *Sing Out the News* focused exclusively on political issues. The opening anticipated *Louisiana Purchase*’s setting of a mythical land called New Orleans:

The events, places and characters in this musical fairy tale  
Which you are about to see/Are mythical.  
They have absolutely no basis in/Reality. . .  
Any resemblance to anything living or otherwise is an accident . . .  
The setting of our fairy tale is going to be  
A mythical spot in a mythical land, which we will call New York City.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ben Irvin, “Pins and Needles’— Labor Stage,” *New Theatre* (July, 1936), 24.

<sup>145</sup> Words and Music by Harold J. Rome, book by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. *Sing Out the News*, Opening-1. Harold Rome Papers, MSS 49, Box 65, Series No. II, Folder No. 86, # 1.

The show covered numerous subjects with humor and intelligence. Although I have been unable to find a full extant script, numerous sketches are included in Harold Rome's papers. "I Married a Republican" featured an angel who lost his wings when he agreed to work against the New Deal. "Song of the Ads" satirized the attempts of advertisers to make people relieve insecurity through consumption, and "That's What the Public Wants" mocked show business. In another sketch Hollywood has to cancel a movie about Marie Antoinette because they are scared of any revolutionary propaganda.<sup>146</sup> A mother sang her baby to sleep, telling it to "hush" or it might be arrested under noise ordinances. Other songs included "Men are Brutes," "Pity the Poor Millionaire" and "Good Little Girls (Do Not Get Hot)." The act one finale had a congressional minstrel show, which both parodied minstrel shows (and their subsequent glorification of stereotypes) and satirized the Congress. A speaker came out to introduce the performers. The minstrel show featured numerous performers with impressive skills:

[A] sterling aggregation of star performers, each and every one of them a champion vote-getter in his locality, known from coast to coast for quickness of tongue, smoothness of delivery, speed in dribbling, dodging and passing the buck; expert fence straddlers, champion wool pullers, world famous hair splitters and outstanding sabre rattlers, chest thumpers, fire eaters, flag wavers, drum beaters, rabble rousers, seed senders, crap shooters, thumb twiddlers, hog callers and pork barrelers. Yes sir, right before your eyes, ladies and gentlemen, the greatest all star cast in the United States.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Green, 166-167.

<sup>147</sup> Harold Rome Papers, "Minstrel" sketch, 1. Harold Rome Papers, MSS 49, Box 65, Series No. II, Folder No. 86.

The musical ended with a direct appeal to the audience. Rudy Vallee, Walter Winchell, a Supreme Court Judge, and a politician all came out. Pompously and monotonously, they claimed that they made the news. The cast then burst through them and argued that the stars could only make the news if the audience let them:

If you don't like the world as it is, you can change it. . . .

If you don't like the world as it is, rearrange it

Life can be fit for men, but you must make it so—

If your will is yes, who is to say no? . . .

Yours is the power, yours the task

Life must give you what you ask! . . .

You can change the wrong to right

Make your own new history

For you make the news!<sup>148</sup>

The combination of the satirization of numerous elements of society and the direct appeal to the audience to change the world is a powerful one. The reviews from the show were very positive, and the show probably would have run much longer if *Pins and Needles* had not competed with it.

The commercial weakness of *Sing Out the News* did not go unnoticed by Broadway producers and directors. After the failure of *Sing Out the News*, Joshua Logan had all the satire written out of *Swing to the Left* which became known as *Stars in Your Eyes*. Shortly thereafter, *Louisiana Purchase* became less political and *Sing Out the News*' financial failure probably prevented other projects from being written and/or produced.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 45.

*The Cradle Will Rock* (1937)

Both *Pins and Needles* and *Sing Out the News* developed playful and intelligent commentary, but Marc Blitzstein created a far more radical approach to labor issues with *The Cradle Will Rock*. Opening on June 16, 1937, only weeks after the Memorial Day Massacre where forty striking steel workers in Chicago were shot in the back with ten killed in the drive to unionize Republic Steel, *Cradle Will Rock* successfully drew on the CIO's drive to organize steelworkers that year.<sup>149</sup> Coming in the middle of the push to organize the "Little Steel" companies, *Cradle Will Rock* defied the conventional wisdom of newspapers and newsreels, which excoriated the strikers. Although the LaFollette Committee would eventually subpoena Paramount's suppressed newsreel footage of the strikers being shot in the back as they ran away from police and document the inflammatory actions of the steel industry, at the time media presented little public support for striking steel workers.<sup>150</sup>

The history of the show's cancellation and the end of the Federal Theatre Project have been well discussed, but often this discussion has assumed that *The Cradle Will Rock* was the only political musical of the 1930s.<sup>151</sup> It was a serious attempt to deal with union issues and the extent to which big business buys the support of everyone. Overall, it is a very earnest and very didactic show with almost no satire. Blitzstein develops his issues through

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<sup>149</sup> See Brecher.

<sup>150</sup> See Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 287-305; David Montgomery, *Workers Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and *The Great Depression*, vol. 3 (The History Channel, 1998).

<sup>151</sup> The Federal Theatre Project originally produced *Cradle Will Rock*, and shut the show the day of the first performance. See Joseph Gustaitis, "The Cradle that Rocked America," *American History* 34 Feb 2000, p. 16-22. Lehman Engel popularized the view that *The Cradle Will Rock* was the only important political musical of the 1930s, and it persists through recent popular culture. *Cradle Will Rock*, the recent (and relatively accurate, aside from the dates events take place) movie about the show has the Hallie Flanagan character say this outright. (See the introduction for an overview of literature.)

rage and, occasionally, through sentiment. The show effectively appealed to workers, but Blitzstein developed very little to involve audience members who were not previously involved in the subject. The theme of the show compares the town's upper-middle class –a “Liberty Committee” – unfavorably to prostitutes, in that they sell their soul to big business but prostitutes only sell their bodies. In 1934 a group of conservative, pro-Business Democrats, led by the DuPonts, set up the “American Liberty League,” and Blitzstein’s Liberty Committee was probably a reference to this group whom many Americans viewed as “pompous hypocrites” and which “was particularly important in mobilizing significant sectors of American capital against the New Deal in general and the federal labor relations machinery in particular.”<sup>152</sup> All the town’s elite has been bought out by a businessman, who ruthlessly exploits and destroys everyone else. The union organizer is the only good guy, who sarcastically explains why he is a threat:

Well I’m creepin’ along in the dark: my eyes is crafty, my pockets is bulging!  
I’m loaded, armed to the teeth— with leaflets. And am I quick on the draw!  
I come up to you . . . very slow . . . very snaky; and with one fell gesture— I  
tuck a leaflet in your hand. And then, one, two, three— There’s a riot.  
You’re the riot. I incited you.<sup>153</sup>

The press is also bought out by business:

Oh, the press, the press, the freedom of the press!  
They’ll never take away the freedom of the press!

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<sup>152</sup> See Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 489, and Denning, 127.

<sup>153</sup> Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock: An Opera* (New York: Program Publishing Company, no date, copyright 1938, no page numbers), scene 7.

We must be free to say whatever's on our chest. . .

For whichever side will pay the best.<sup>154</sup>

The most interesting comment in the piece, however, is the Foreman's realization that all the people who have sold out to the business man are, in a way, victims as well: "You're caught there, boys; you're stuck like a sandwich between the top crowd pressin' down and the bottom crowd comin' up!"<sup>155</sup>

*The Cradle Will Rock* is an interesting show, but it is hardly the only, or even the most important, musical commentary of the 1930s. Its reputation is based primarily on the extraordinary events that surrounded its premiere. The appeals in *The Cradle Will Rock* are based on outrage and rousing songs. Although the title song is stirring and a few other songs are entertaining, the characters are primarily caricatures and there is no dramaturgical device to engage audiences into the story. Blitzstein clearly cared a great deal about the events, but he did not have the intellectual or emotional distance to engage the audience through empathetic characters or humor. Northrop Frye, in his consideration of "The Nature of Satire," argues that, "For effective attack we must reach some kind of impersonal level."<sup>156</sup> Like Yip Harburg's *Flahooley* in 1950, Blitzstein fails to fully engage the audience through the dramaturgical techniques other creative teams explored. Although the piece created a remarkable moment, it does not have the satirical sophistication that other musicals of the time developed.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., scene 4.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., scene 10.

<sup>156</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Nature of Satire," *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, 14, reprinted in *Satire: Theory and Practice*, Charles A. Allen & George D. Stephens, ed. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc. 1962), 19.

*Johnny Johnson* (1936)

*Johnny Johnson*, the most unusual musical of the decade; it both compels and challenges audiences. Under the guidance of Cheryl Crawford, the Group Theatre developed the script and score for *Johnny Johnson* with Paul Green writing the book and lyrics and Kurt Weill writing the music. Green's show is structured into three acts, each with a very different approach and style. Green described each act as a different genre, and he knew the difficulty of combining them in one show: "The first act is a comedy, the second a tragedy and the third a satire. That sounds crazy and maybe I can't get away with it, but that is what I have tried to write."<sup>157</sup> Although the second act has strong expressionistic undertones, the satire in the third act is carefully focused but presented covertly within the framing device of a lunatic asylum. The show focuses on Johnny Johnson, a sort of everyman, who attempts to live ethically in a society that glorifies war. Like George S. Kaufman's initial analysis of *Strike Up the Band*, Paul Green wanted music for "Without music there could be no war. . . . Music has always been an integral part of fighting."<sup>158</sup> The choice to make both of these shows musicals rested on the belief that the shows would be artistically stronger as musicals.

The first act is very earnest. The show opens with the entire town out to celebrate Johnny's newly created monument to peace, moments before war is declared. Like *Strike Up the Band*'s Jim and Joan, Johnny is against the war and Minny Belle, his sweetheart, is in favor of the war. When Johnny says he cannot fight in the war Minny says, "Then we're not

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<sup>157</sup> Newsweek, November 28, 1936, page 19. Clippings file, NYPL-PA.

<sup>158</sup> Paul Green, quoted in *Newsweek*, November 28, 1936, 19.

engaged, we're not. I take it all back."<sup>159</sup> Once President Wilson announces that this is a war to end war, Johnny enlists. A scene satirizes the army as Johnny attempts to enlist. "[In] a series of vaudeville blackouts, he is soon befuddling the Army psychological examiners while they are trying to catechize him; enraging the drill sergeant who will not realize that Johnny is left-handed; unintentionally stealing the captain's girl."<sup>160</sup> At the same time, his rival for Minny espouses support for the war and simultaneously fakes an illness so that he does not need to enlist.

In the second act, Johnny attempts to kill a German sniper who is shooting through a gash made in the heart of a statue of Jesus. He ends up talking with the sniper, who is named Johann (German for Johnny). Johann is sixteen years old and hates the war as much as Johnny. They decide that they will both talk to their fellow soldiers and try to convince them to shoot in the air instead of at each other. Johnny is shot and put into a hospital. Upon recovery Johnny sneaks into a meeting of the allied commanders, where each one tries to outbid the others with how many casualties they can offer for the next battle. Johnny makes an impassioned plea for peace, which they ignore. He then opens a canister of laughing gas. They agree to peace and Johnny makes a hasty retreat. The effect of the gas quickly dissipates and Johnny is arrested as war is reinstated. The war is shown through flashes, which are preceded by biblical references that support peace. The seventh flash portrays "A young German praying at the foot of the black wooden statue of Christ. He rises to meet an American who enters with drawn bayonet. They fight and the German is run through. An exploding shell kills the American. The statue totters and falls with a

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<sup>159</sup> Johnny Johnson, 1-2-23.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-7-50.

crash.”<sup>161</sup> Johnny finds Johann’s body and mourns his death and the entire futile war: “Two hundred thousand dead, five hundred thousand dead, a million dead.— And they have had their way, Johann. And all for what? And why? What for? . . . And they killed you. I saw it happen. One of my own squad did it.”<sup>162</sup> Johnny is placed in an insane asylum, presumably to protect society from his dangerous ideas. All of the inmates mimic politicians, and Minny Belle, now married to Johnny’s romantic rival, seems truly upset at his condition.

Act three takes place ten years later and develops a decidedly different approach. Green creates a covert satire. Minny and her husband tour the asylum where Johnny is incarcerated. Johnny has been diagnosed with a rare mental disturbance that the doctor likens to one that afflicted Jesus, “peace monomania.” Johnny debates various political issues with his fellow inmates.<sup>163</sup> He portrays President Wilson and the other inmates depict various figures, satirizing politics and the emphasis on abstract theory rather than on the realities of people’s lives. They eventually ratify a “League of World Republics,” clearly a reference to Wilson’s desire for the United States to join the League of Nations. The scene satirizes politicians through a constant emphasis on parliamentary rules and through equating political personages with mentally disturbed inmates. By itself it is relatively innocuous but the overall impact of the show is a radical political argument. Johnny is to be released the next week, even though he does not want to be. He feels at home in the asylum, and, perhaps for that reason, he is forced to go.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 2-7-51.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 2-8-52.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 3-2-19.

The final scene takes place much later. Johnny is 45 or 50, but looks much older, and he sells toys on the street. Minny's son gives Johnny a nickel to buy a toy soldier, but Johnny will not sell war-related toys. The boy tells him to keep the nickel anyway. His dad, who avoided service by his bogus illness, is the mayor, and the son is going to be a soldier in the current war. "Daddy says that we're in for a terrible war and all the people have got to be ready to keep the enemy from destroying us."<sup>164</sup> The show ends on a somewhat upbeat note as Johnny walks out of the town. "He begins whistling his song again—a little more clearly now, a little more bravely."<sup>165</sup> Despite the convoluted priorities of society, Johnny's strength allows him to live by his values.

Green's idealism runs through the show. There is a sense that, despite the insanity of politics and the difficulty of survival in this world, if people can keep their own integrity, they have an inner reserve of strength and beauty to draw upon. This strength endures even if they do not change the world. The satire is used for very specific purposes and only for those moments. It is confined to the political subjects: the army recruiters, the allied commanders, and the inmates' satire of politics. The story of the everyday people is told with earnest idealism. Only power and hypocrisy are ridiculed.

Based on the photos and reviews, the direction seems to have reflected the varying styles of the acts. The first act was staged in a conventionally realistic manner. The second act had an expressionistic, nightmarish quality. In the scene with Johann, there is a disintegrating archway, and a fence is painted to look like an incarnated nightmare. The statue of Jesus had a huge, violent gash where his heart should have been, and a gun was

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 3-2-25.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 3-2-26.

pushed through the gash. The third act developed a quality reminiscent of cartoons for the debate society, with a large drawn picture of Woodrow Wilson framed with flags.<sup>166</sup> It is important to note that the actors of the Group Theatre were very disappointed in the production because they did not feel supported by the directors or designers, and the Group Theatre disbanded shortly thereafter. It is entirely possible that if the Group Theatre had created a stronger production, the show would have had a much longer run. The actors make it clear that “It’s no secret that Group morale on every front reached its all-time low during the final stages of *Johnny Johnson*.”<sup>167</sup> Although this could be true of any show, *Johnny Johnson* seems to have suffered from an unplanned production.

The initial round of reviews emphasized that even though it was an important show, it was also flawed. As Brooks Atkinson wrote:

It is part fantasy, part musical satire, part symbolic poetry in the common interests of peace; and also one is compelled to add, part good and part bad, since new forms cannot be created overnight. There are many interludes in Mr. Green’s work when both the satire and the idealism wither away to

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<sup>166</sup> Wilson was President of the United States during World War I and tried to keep the U.S. out of war; after the war he worked tirelessly (although in vain) at both his goals—to have a fair and liberal war settlement and to convince the United States to join the League of Nations. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1920.

<sup>167</sup> See “Report of the Actors’ Committee To The Directors of the Group, December, 1936, by Stella Adler, Roman Bohnen, Morris Carnovsky, Elia Kazan,” 11. This document goes through everything that the actors believed was wrong with *Johnny Johnson* in particular and The Group Theatre in general, focusing mostly on the lack of planning on the part of the creative team. Although the document stated that developing *Johnny Johnson* was one of the best experiences of the Group, the production team failed abysmally. The Group Theatre was not planning to produce the show until right before it was cast. With 11 weeks of rehearsal, blocking was not given until the eighth week, and then it was not specific. Costumes were thrown together at the end. The sets were changed at the last minute, and the set designer was over-committed to other projects. Lee Strasberg read a newspaper during the meetings with the set designer. Harold Clurman talked about abstract ideas and Cheryl Crawford took over because she was only one willing to deal with details.

restless emptiness. . . . [*Johnny Johnson* is a] sincere and generally exalting attempt to put on the stage an imaginative portrait of recent history.<sup>168</sup>

The authors worked assiduously to balance the different moods, and the result was not always successful. The different styles bothered a great many critics. According to Krutch in *The Nation*, “Every now and then the mood is broken, every now and then the author of the text seems to lose his sense of style, and to write a speech or a scene too realistic on the one hand or too near burlesque on the other really to harmonize with the dominant manner, which is poised at some definite point between the two.”<sup>169</sup> The show has beautiful moments that almost everyone immediately appreciated, but the overall effect disappointed most of the critics. Richard Lockridge said, “A troubled evening managed to prove once more that this cause [peace] is one deserving of better advocates that the theater seems able to provide.”<sup>170</sup>

Although the show can be disappointing at first, many of the images and ideas, especially of Act Two, are haunting. The similarities between the American Johnny and the German Johann, who are both caught in a war that they do not believe in and cannot seem to stop, and the gashing out the heart of Jesus to hide a gun are particularly resonant images. Interestingly, many critics of the time seemed to be moved by the show. *The Literary Digest*, commented on the phenomenon: “Rarely do critics ever go back to take a second look at a slated production, even when invited. Curiously, by last week most of the fourteen First Line critics had gone back to ‘Johnny Johnson’ voluntarily, most of them had written second

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<sup>168</sup> Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times*, November 20, 1936.

<sup>169</sup> Clippings, Kurt Weill foundation, *The Nation*, Joseph Wood Krutch, page 676 (date not mentioned, but probably 1936).

<sup>170</sup> Richard Lockridge, *The New York Sun*, 11-20-36.

reports, confessing themselves ‘haunted’ by certain aspects of the play.”<sup>171</sup> Overall, the later reviews seemed to appreciate the careful amalgamation of the various elements more than the first string of critics.

There are times when we are led to think that only serious intentions can be light without boredom; or shall we say at least flexible. You make a mistake about this “Johnny Johnson” of the Group Theatre if you say that songs and dances are added to a play that might otherwise lack ginger or padding. You begin at the wrong end. The piece is built of dialogue, movement, scene, music all together. It is a promising— and needed— example of theatre that passes from one to the other of these with equal ease.<sup>172</sup>

*Johnny Johnson* used music and varying approaches for a very serious and earnest show, and it demonstrates many of the different qualities and styles explored during the 1930s.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout the decade librettists, lyricists, and composers of musical theatre satirized the economy, governmental corruption, Roosevelt, and big business. They also glorified the lives of common people and the importance of affirming individual liberty. As a whole, the shows affirmed liberal democracy with a social safety net. Musical theatre supported Roosevelt and the middle ground on which he trod. In general musical theatre rejected both a Communist revolution and a capitalist system that might fix itself at some undefined point, at the cost of massive unemployment, hunger, homelessness and despair.

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<sup>171</sup> *The Literary Digest*, January 2, 1937, page 23.

<sup>172</sup> Stark Young, *The New Republic*, December 9, 1936, 179.

The authors continually grappled with ways of presenting political commentary that did not alienate their audience. The framing devices, seen in *I'd Rather Be Right*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, and *Louisiana Purchase* (as well as the 1930 rewrite of *Strike Up the Band*), were one way of distancing the satire to make the audience more comfortable. The use of theatre and newspapers as the primary satirical target also blunted the impact of several shows. The songs, however, provided the best way to blend of social commentary and upbeat entertainment. As Morgan Himmelstein noted: "Because its pro-union message was so entertaining, *Pins and Needles* was more successful as propaganda . . . [and] demonstrated that liberal ideas could be conveyed more successfully if the author did not beat or brainwash the spectator into submission."<sup>173</sup>

In order to influence anyone a show had to be seen. Without an audience, a show is powerless. Although creative teams can experiment with boundaries, when they are writing for the commercial stage they must be aware of what commercial theatre audience will actually pay to see. Even not-for-profit organizations cannot continually produce shows that do not have audiences.<sup>174</sup> While this can be viewed as a capitulation to the economic concerns, business' demands demarcate the boundaries of theatre in the United States. The upbeat shows that balanced social commentary with entertainment were invariably more successful with the public than the shows that displayed unflinching loyalty to any political doctrine. Musicals are expensive to produce, and artists need to be aware of what the market will support. Some of our most important shows came by ignoring commercial

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<sup>173</sup> Morgan Y. Himmelstein, *Drama Was A Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre In New York, 1929-1941* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 84.

<sup>174</sup> Non profits are very aware of their ratio of earned income to unearned income. Few foundations will support theatre that does not have some public support, evidenced by ticket sales. Musicals are too large and too expensive to be professionally produced without a popular audience.

demands, but artists need to be conscious of popular demands even when they choose to ignore them. Throughout the 1930s, artists balanced creative, commercial, and political concerns, and were able to reach a large audience with progressive political ideas.

## Chapter Three

### Satire, Commentary, and Integrated Musical Theatre During the 1940s and 1950s

Rodgers and Hammerstein have such an influential place in the history of musicals that it is nearly impossible to discuss that history without including them. Many musical theatre historians have constructed a narrative that resembles a Darwinist evolution, one which traces musical theatre development towards the structures they deemed as the most advanced. They invariably hail the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein as the beginning of the “mature” or “integrated” musical. Rodgers and Hammerstein were important to the development of the form, but their importance has been skewed.<sup>1</sup> Their work both reflected and

created a vogue for musical naturalism which, on a par with the dramatic naturalism of [Tennessee] Williams and [Arthur] Miller, insisted on psychological credibility, and was most successful in moving “logically” from spoken dialogue, through heightened recitative, to song and dance as a gradual opening out of emotional potential.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that Rodgers and Hammerstein were extremely effective, popular, and influential. *Oklabama!* served as a catalyst for a number of specific changes in the form and function of musicals.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Overview of the Literature in the Introduction for a full discussion of the historiography.

<sup>2</sup> David Hirst, “The American Musical and the American Dream: from ‘Show Boat’ to Sondheim,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 1 (Feb 85), 26.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals created new models for shows that were less politically acerbic. Musicals still dealt with some of the old issues (political figures, authority, labor and unions, and current political issues) and still used many of the same forms (satirical songs, romance that is interrupted by social concerns, and fantastical worlds that are related to but separate from the present). Yet as the dominant element of politically involved audience appeal, empathy and sentimental entreaties replaced satirical and intellectual analysis. Sentimental appeals effectively create a cathartic release, and probably for this reason these shows captivate a much broader audience. In terms of political issues, however, these shows tend to individualize social issues, which allows a purely emotional response and encourages complacency.

*Oklahoma!* is often noted for "integrating" music, story, and dancing into a seamless whole and for focusing on a serious subject. Yet previous shows had already developed all the formal elements that were present in *Oklahoma!*, and its subject is no more serious than a number of earlier shows. Its innovation came from the mood of the show, and the conditions that surrounded it. It is not true, however, that before *Oklahoma!* "the good shows were more entertaining than but not much different from the poor ones. They were *all* concoctions, pranks, swindles."<sup>3</sup> Not all musicals before 1943 were pointless, vapid star vehicles, just as not all musicals were brilliant, seamless masterworks after 1943. Nor were the conventions defined by *Oklahoma!* undoubtedly superior to the musical formats and stylings beforehand. They reflect a vogue for naturalism's conventions and they appeal to a wider audience.

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<sup>3</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Morning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7. Emphasis in original.

Rodgers and Hammerstein garnered success and praise in part because of the introduction of the cast album, which was a pivotal factor for musicals to gain a wider audience. Rodgers and Hammerstein also helped create a wider audience through a focus on idealized rural settings in past times (rather than contemporary urban settings) and through a change in mood. These changes in emphasis suited the increasingly suburban, prosperous audiences. Broadway slowly recovered from the Depression and the loss of regular audience members to movies; after World War II fewer shows were produced, and those that were produced ran much longer. The increasing length of runs meant individual musicals enjoyed a much larger budget, and collaborators could afford to spend more time on each show because they were paid a percentage of the box office. Increasingly, authors embedded political commentary within empathetic/sentimental captivation, rather than through satirical comments or intellectual appeals.

The shows discussed in this chapter include several musicals that experiment with political commentary developed through empathetic appeals. *Street Scene*, *South Pacific*, *Miss Liberty*, and *Last in the Stars* were all produced during the beginning of the Cold War (1947-1949), and they grounded their commentary in sentimental invocations. After the end of the Korean War (1953), more overtly political musicals, such as *The Pajama Game* and *Candide*, were produced on Broadway. This return to overtly political musicals reflected both the diminution of the Red Scare and the increasing prosperity of the fifties. However, only *Candide* and the works of Yip Harburg developed full-scale satirical satires during this time.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of musicals during the forties and fifties were set in rural environments,

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<sup>4</sup> The next chapter focuses on the works of Harburg.

other countries, or in the past.<sup>5</sup> This chapter focuses on the kinds of appeals, settings, and interactions with contemporaneous political events typical of shows throughout these two decades.

Although *Candide* employed many of the traditions of musical satire, most of the musicals discussed in this chapter tended to make their entreaties through sentimental and empathetic appeals, which depend on the viewer to feel sympathy for a victim and thereby work to change the situation. Although this allowed racism to be addressed, it tended to personalize larger societal conditions and focus on the good will of economically privileged white people to ameliorate systematic injustices. Racism and class injustices were thus construed as the acts and views of individuals rather than as the result of historical and economic conditions.

The start of World War II ended the Depression and created very different priorities for the country, audiences, and the writers of musical theatre. During the war, there was no room in professional theatre for dissent or protest. Musicals focused on patriotism in a range of forms, especially in 1942 when Broadway featured *Of V We Sing* (the V stood for Victory), Irving Berlin's paean to the armed forces *This Is the Army*, and the liberal Harold Rome's *Let Freedom Sing* all played on Broadway. The following year, *Oklahoma!* celebrated America as it commemorated pioneers and the development of community that it defined as necessary to become part of the United States. The year after *Oklahoma!*, *Bloomer Girl* (1944) looked at how the United States developed into a true democracy through the inclusion of

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<sup>5</sup> Leonard Bernstein is a notable exception, for he continually placed shows in New York (*Wonderful Town*, *On the Town*, and *West Side Story*). *Street Scene*, a 1947 remake of a 1929 play by Elmer Rice, also took place in New York, but even it was distanced from the city through virtue of its placement in a lowerclass neighborhood in Brooklyn. This trend continued until 1970 when Stephen Sondheim's *Company* featured a background montage of pictures of New York while a pulsating city rhythm punctuated a production concept rooted firmly in New York, returning the emphasis to an urban environment.

women and people of color.<sup>6</sup> After World War II, the country entered a more prosperous time, but the society became far more conservative. Ethan Mordden argues the opposite, saying the musical stage “suffers an artistic setback in the financially oppressed and therefore conservative 1930s,” but the theatre and society during the 30s were, in fact, far more progressive politically than at any other time before the late 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

### Location, Location, Location

During and after World War II, musicals shifted from urban and contemporary shows to shows with rural settings that were removed from the suburban and urban theatregoing audience. This shift in location reflected a shift in mood from sophisticated and clever to simple and earnest, and a shift from intellectual and humorous appeals to emotional and ardent appeals. From the time of the Princess Theatre musicals (beginning in 1914), most musicals focused on contemporary, urban or suburban, young, upper-middle class characters — in other words the people who attended the theatre. Whereas operettas usually centered on royalty and romance in far-off times and places, musical theatre preferred the sophistication, self-awareness, and rhythms of a city. George Gershwin self-consciously employed New York as a metaphor for the diverse musical antecedents of his work: “New York is a meeting-place, a rendezvous of the nations. I’d like to catch the rhythms of these interfusing peoples, to show them clashing and blending.”<sup>8</sup> Ira Gershwin’s

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<sup>6</sup> I will analyze *Bloomer Girl* with Yip Harburg’s other musicals in the following chapter.

<sup>7</sup> Mordden, *Beautiful Morning*, 270. Mordden has not yet published his book on the 1930s, and offers no support for this contention.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Rosenberg, 265.

working title for “Fascinating Rhythm” was “Syncopated City,” and a later alternative lyric emphasized the connection of rhythm and urban life with New York city:

That Manhattan rhythm . . .  
The taxi horns and planes up above . . .  
Broadway and its chatter/ To music day and night  
And to subway clatter . . . Fascinating Rhythm  
The rhythm of Old New York Town.<sup>9</sup>

“45 minutes from Broadway” to “Way out West on West End Avenue” demarcates the geographic boundaries of many shows. A singer may have “Left my Mademoiselle in New Rochelle” and plan to “go to Coney, and eat baloney,” but the “Manhattan Madness” is the true “Lullaby of Broadway.” From “Putting on the Ritz” to “Slumming on Park Avenue,” “When Love Beckoned (In Fifty-Second Street)” the singer longs for “Harlem [which] is on My Mind.” Comden and Green summed it up best in 1945, “New York, New York— a helluva town.” Before *Oklahoma!*, when a show did leave the city, as in *Girl Crazy*, the protagonist imported the culture from New York, sang of the joys of “The Roxy Music Hall,” or implored others to “Give My Regards to Broadway.” Later writers have used New York songs to invoke an earlier time. Sondheim’s pastiche “Broadway Baby” from *Follies* and *Annie’s* “NYC” both invoke the time between the wars with songs that celebrate New York. So extensive are the paeans to New York that there is a book dedicated to them: *New York: Songs of the City*.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the commemoration of New York is not exclusive to musical theatre before 1943, but paeans to the city make up a notable theme in these shows.

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<sup>9</sup> Ira Gershwin, *The Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 49.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Groce, *New York: Songs of the City* (New York: Watson Guptill Publications, 1999).

The change in location also reflected a change in music. The rhythm that pervades musical theatre in the 20s and 30s is the rhythm of black, Jewish, and Christian New York.<sup>11</sup> It is ragtime combined with vocal stylings reminiscent of Jewish cantors with back-up from the Christian choral tradition. Blue notes, syncopation, and ragging marked this music as a vital expression of a polyglot culture. The Gershwins connected the rhythm of the diverse cultures in the city with the strength of the United States:

It's like our nation/A conglomeration

It isn't any one thing.

Somehow you can't confine it

And no one could define it.

It's just a rhythm that you sing.<sup>12</sup>

The amalgamation of sound, songs, and constant pulsating rhythm owed its beat to the city. That city was New York because musicals were intended primarily for a New York audience. Even when Broadway set the standards for popular songs (and many of the best popular songs came from Broadway), the shows were not intended for an audience seventy years—or even seven years—later. Musicals were of the moment. They developed contemporary themes and related to characters similar to the people in the audience. Touring productions of shows were limited and the only element that would consistently extend farther than New York or last longer than the season was the hit songs.

After the United States entered World War II, musical theatre began to rely less on a rhythm-driven song with a single voice juxtaposed against a jazzy background, which

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<sup>11</sup> See Steven Robert Chicurel, *George Gershwin's Songbook: Influences of Jewish Music, Ragtime, and Jazz* (D.M.A. diss., University Of Kentucky, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> *Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin*, 49.

reflected the African-American and Jewish musical traditions, and more on soaring melodies and harmonic blending, which drew more closely from Christian choral music. Rodgers and Hammerstein emphasized emotional music, less political subject matter, a historical and geographical removal, and a sentimental development. As their product was distributed throughout the country, it gained far more popularity than the New York-centered musicals ever enjoyed.

The broader audience of this very conservative time embraced the change of ambiance in musical theatre. As Richard Dyer discusses in "Entertainment and Utopia," movie musicals develop specific solutions to the needs of the audience. Although Dyer's argument applies to stage musicals as well, in general it is much more relevant to the post-*Oklahoma!* shows. Dyer argues that in musicals the need for a better world is not developed by confronting the problems of the current one or with specific recommendations for change. Musical usually skip over that step for social progress and develop "what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized."<sup>13</sup> The needs that musicals meet are real frustrations that are created by society: Dyer identifies common problems as social tensions, inadequacies, and absences or scarcities (poverty, social stratification), exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation. "The categories of the sensibility point to gaps or inadequacies in capitalism, but only those gaps or inadequacies that capitalism proposes itself to deal with."<sup>14</sup> Thus both the problems and the solutions are strictly defined.

One would expect that as the economy improved with the war, entertainment for privileged people would stop concerning itself with economic problems. However, at this

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 1977, reprinted in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 273.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

moment the musical and other forms of entertainment began to define what was considered a real need and what issues were absent from the entire discussion. The only needs that are validated are those that capitalism would supposedly alleviate. "Entertainment provides alternatives *to* capitalism which will be provided *by* capitalism."<sup>15</sup> Musical theatre began to do this by distancing the shows from the audiences. They focused on emotional identification and removed capital as an issue. The shows were devoid of contemporary social markers. The less political musicals of the twenties and thirties were far more likely to feature conspicuous consumption than the less political musicals of the forties and fifties. Rather the later shows focused on Dyer's categories of community, intensity (excitement), transparency (open, spontaneous communication), and energy.<sup>16</sup> Abundance is present more as the absence of wants or needs than as immense wealth. Removing conspicuous consumption from the stage also removed the issue of social stratification. In almost all these shows, everyone has enough material possessions not to worry about basic needs, and only a few western characters have more than they need.<sup>17</sup> Capital is fairly distributed, and capitalism is a given that permeates the society, almost like air in that it is necessary and benign but nearly invisible and certainly not worthy of discussion.

This is not to say that all the pre-*Oklahoma!* musicals developed brilliant class analysis or automatically deconstructed the status quo. Beginning in the 1940s, however, musicals are more likely to develop shows and plots that have invisible social and economic conditions. Ironically, given the distancing by geography and time, it is also more likely that

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 279. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 277-278.

<sup>17</sup> Conspicuous consumption becomes tied in with representations of Asian and Middle-Eastern characters. For example, the King in *The King and I*, and all the characters in *Kismet*.

a middle-class audience would relate to the characters. The twenties and thirties shows were more likely to focus on members of the social elite who were aware that they were privileged. Beginning with *Oklahoma!*, characters like maids nearly disappeared from the musical stage because the characters were assumed to be “universal” and “normal.” A standard was assumed for all characters, and that standard worked to validate the status quo and to limit the discussion of social problems to a specific ground that was relatively safe for the capitalist culture.

### *Oklahoma!* (1943)

*Oklahoma!* has become a cornerstone of musical theatre history. The popular success of *Oklahoma!* and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s subsequent work fundamentally changed various elements of musical theatre. However, most of the scholarship around musical theatre has described how *Oklahoma!* integrated musicals, not the subjects, mood, and financial changes that accompanied the show. In order to understand how musicals changed during and after World War II, *Oklahoma!* must be looked at, not as the first “mature” musical, but through an analysis of what it looked at, how it made its appeals, and how the public encountered the show.

*Oklahoma!* focused on a sentimentalized and remote subject matter and featured idealized middle-class characters of a rustic past. A clear product of the war, the show features simply good people that could have been the audiences’ grandparents. These people (within the context of the show) founded our country, and established the tenets that gave the audience the freedom and the responsibility to keep it free. The plot concerns whether Curley, a young, self-assured man of the community, or Jud, a “bullet-colored,

growly,”<sup>18</sup> nomadic, hired hand will take Laurie to the dance. It is a simple show, and it focuses on community and romance. At the same time that the musical emphasizes community, it develops the importance of the expulsion of outsiders who threaten the community, even as it allows certain people who are different to assimilate. The Persian/Jewish Ali is worthy enough of inclusion for the community to incorporate, but the unredeemable Jud is killed by Curley. The community then exonerates Curley so that he can immediately marry Laurie, instead of waiting until a weekend is over and a judge returns to work. In addition to allowing Ali to assimilate, the plot also requires the community to overcome artificial barriers that divide them: the farmer and the cowmen have to be friends in order to preserve the strength of the whole against the outsider. *Oklahoma!* emphasizes the need to join with the enemies of our enemies and to expel those people unable to be assimilated in the country; it implies that some tolerance of selected minorities will increase the strength of the society as it faces the outside threat of war. As Andrea Most notes in her extended discussion: “To depict a less exclusive society, *Oklahoma!* makes a sacrificial scapegoat of [Jud,] a racialized other, who refuses to perform in socially acceptable genres and whose death cleanses the community of darkness.”<sup>19</sup> The implication is that this process of exclusion, inclusion, and self-sacrifice must also continue in order to assure the future of this country.

*Oklahoma!*'s underlying rhythm is not the pulsating tattoo of the city, but the meandering sounds of nature:

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!*, 1943, in *6 Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: Modern Library, 1953), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Most, “‘We Know We Belong to the Land’: The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*” *PMLA* 113, January, 1998, 87.

There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow. . . .  
All the sounds of the earth are like music.  
The breeze is so busy it don't miss a tree  
But an ol' weepin' willow is laughin' at me!  
Oh, what a beautiful mornin'.<sup>20</sup>

Later, when Curley tries to convince Laurie to come to the dance, nature again defines the rhythm of the song and the characters:

Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry . . .  
Cats and dogs'll dance in the heather,  
Birds and frogs'll sing all together and the toads will hop!  
The wind'll whistle as we rattle along, The cows'll moo in the clover  
The river will ripple out a whispered song,  
And whisper it over and over. . . .  
Just when I'm thinkin' all the earth is still,  
A lark'll wake up in the meadow.<sup>21</sup>

The ethos that permeates *Oklahoma!* is the importance of coming together with nature. It is having time to “sit and talk and watch a hawk makin' lazy circles in the sky,” while

The wind comes sweepin' down the plain  
And the wavin' wheat, can sure smell sweet  
When the wind comes right behind the rain<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Oklahoma!*, 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

Nature is what drives humanity to connect, and nature is presumed correct. The city is a presence in “Everything’s Up To Date in Kansas City,” but the city is a place of passing, irrelevant fads. “Went and built a skyscraper seven stories high – About as high as a buildin’ orta grow.”<sup>23</sup> Not only is the city irrelevant, but it is also framed as growing like nature. The audience knows that a building can go much higher, that everything is not up to date, but it really does not matter whether the urbanites in the show are on top of the latest trends. The show implicitly connects nature with the land and explicitly connects nature, the land, and the people living on the land with the United States:

They couldn’t pick a better time to start in life! . . .

Soon be livin’ in a brand-new state!

Brand-new state! Gonna treat you great! . . .

We know we belong to the land.

And the land we belong to is grand.

And when we say Yo, Hi-Yip-Hi-Oh-Ee-Ay

We’re only sayin’ you’re doing fine Oklahoma!

Oklahoma! O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A, Oklahoma!<sup>24</sup>

Oklahoma is the land, and the land is grand by virtue of its people and its inclusion as one of the United States. Just as the capitalist peddler Ali’s acceptance in the community benefits everyone, America draws strength by incorporating all people in all states who subscribe to certain values and by joining them together to fight outside threats.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

But why “Oklahoma” rather than a “Missitucky” like *Firmin’s Rainbow*, or the original title “Away We Go?” On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the United States officially entered WWII. The first battleship to sink in the attack bore the name. Extolling the name of the sunken battleship subtly linked the show to the war and exalted the country. *Oklahoma!* reflected the budding optimism prevalent in 1943: “In the final analysis it was the humanity of *Oklahoma!* which triumphed: its ability to place into song and dance the faith of people in their own survival and to capture in sets and speech their universal aspirations for a better world just ahead.”<sup>25</sup> Despite the loss of the battleship, the land is grand and the U. S. will prevail because it is connected with nature, supports the community, accepts those people who can be assimilated, and rejects those who would hurt any member of its community.

*Oklahoma!* appealed to a much larger audience than any musical before it, and it became one of the first pieces of middlebrow culture developed after World War II that employed supposedly “universal” forms and values. The shift in tone from wry, witty, satiric, and urbane to earnest, empathetic, sentimental, and bucolic is an important reason for the increasing popularity of musical theatre. As John Fiske notes, the degree of distancing and participation in entertainment helps to place it with either working class or “middle class” tastes.<sup>26</sup> Theatre in this country has discouraged direct participation since the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> However, *Oklahoma!* negotiates different kinds of distance to appeal to a broad spectrum. Although Rodgers and Hammerstein (and most

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy P. Donovan, “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’: The Musical, *Oklahoma!* and the Popular Mind in 1943,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 8 (1974), 486.

<sup>26</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1989), 138-139.

<sup>27</sup> See Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

shows from *Oklahoma!* to *Company* [1970]) place the shows in a setting removed from the audience (by time, geography, and culture), they remove the self-aware veneer of many previous shows. This allows the supposedly generic audience to “identify” with the socially generic characters and, in many cases, experience an emotional catharsis as the characters’ lives develop. Audiences no longer needed to think about the characters and plots because they could navigate the entire production through emotions. Just as the city is seen as artificial and ephemeral, so feelings are privileged over thoughts, which allows the audience to experience the musicals in a completely different way.

This change in manner and distance is not the only reason for *Oklahoma!*’s success. Although the shift from intellectual to emotional appeals and from urban to rural-based shows probably allowed a much larger audience of non-urban dwellers to enjoy the show and appealed to them in a more accessible way, the biggest reason that *Oklahoma!* holds the place it does is that it benefited from the first successful cast album.<sup>28</sup> Six disks with a total of twelve songs comprised the original cast album for *Oklahoma!*. An additional volume of two disks with three songs was released in 1945. The second volume included the darker songs: “Lonely Room,” and “It’s a Scandal” as well as the long “The Farmer and the Cowman.” Cast albums became enormously profitable. The original album cost \$5.85 in 1943. By 1948 the album sold half a million copies. After Decca reissued the album on the Long Play (LP) format, total sales rose to two and a half million. By 1968 the total revenue from album sales for *Oklahoma!* exceeded fifteen million dollars.<sup>29</sup> By 1948 *Oklahoma!* had

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<sup>28</sup> Although it is usually ignored because it was neither a financial nor a popular success, the cast of *Cradle Will Rock* made the first cast album.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Murrets, *Million Selling Records from 1900s to the 1980s* (New York: Arco Publishing, Inc., 1984), 56. See also Robert Benevy, “Oh, What A Beautiful Decade,” *Sunday Mirror Magazine*, March 29, 1953; *N.Y. Tribune*, Mar 31, 1948; “\$4,000,000 Snared by ‘Oklahoma!’ Sale of Record Albums,” *Variety*, April 24, 1948; Frederick Nolan, *The Sound of Their Music*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1978; and numerous undated press

sold two million pieces of sheet music; since individual pieces of sheet music sold for only 25 cents, the total revenue from sheet music probably came to only \$500,000. By the show's fifth-year anniversary (and only two months before it closed), Broadway ticket sales accounted for \$5,442,614, and ticket sales from the touring company amounted to \$4,862,139. However, because of the enormous operating costs, the producers probably only netted around \$600,000 dollars from the Broadway production. Cast albums at \$4 million came close to matching revenue from the touring company and, because of the cost savings from automation, far less expenses, but sheet music accounted for revenue equaling only ten percent of the gross from the tour.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to shifting the balance of the extra-theatrical profits from sheet music sales to record sales, the cast albums made several additional changes to the popular perception of musical theatre. First, the score of the show became accessible to a much wider range of people, both geographically and economically. The album cost more than a ticket to the show, but the album could be listened to repeatedly, and many people could hear it. In addition, theatre generally costs much more than the ticket price alone:

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releases from the Theatre Guild, especially "Five Years for "Oklahoma!," probably from the week of March 31, 1948, filed at NYPL-PA, Clippings, MWEZ/+/n.c./10,708A.

<sup>30</sup> These comparisons are very rough, and some may have been exaggerated for the sake of press releases. During Christmas week of 1943 the Broadway company paid weekly operating expenses of \$15,317.19 and the touring company (playing in Chicago) paid weekly operating expenses of \$14,465.30. (Note that these budgets included Christmas gifts, so regular expenses could have been lower.) The Shuberts estimated the show needed \$18,000 a week of income to break even (which was raised to \$20,000 by 1947). (The Shuberts owned the St. James theatre where *Oklahoma!* played. Owners are paid a percentage of the gross and have the right to close down any show that does not meet that sales goal for even a week. They tried to shut down *Oklahoma!* in 1947, but relented when the Theatre Guild bought out seats to meet the minimum of the exit clause contract.) Therefore, in the five years and eight weeks that *Oklahoma!* played on Broadway, assuming average expenses of \$18,000 over the five years, total running costs would have exceeded 4.8 million dollars, leaving around \$600,000 net profit from the Broadway production alone. See Max Wilk, *OK! The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), and *Variety* clippings. The tour certainly made a profit, but I have been unable to calculate that amount. Additionally, according to my math, cast albums garnered closer to three million than four million dollars, but that does not account for sales of the supplement.

transportation is a required expense; coat check, a meal beforehand, a drink at intermission, and a souvenir can easily double the cost.

Cast albums also gave people all over the country the same chance to hear the shows. Although Broadway set the standards for popular music, it tended to use a verse to link a song to the show and then have a chorus that did not relate specifically to the characters. Before *Oklahoma!*, popular standards were not specific to the character. Cast albums allowed the score to be widely heard as a whole, which gave it an identity as its own entity rather than as unrelated hit songs.

By the negation of geographic barriers within the nation and the reduction of economic ones, the cast album made American musical theatre much more accessible and important to America. Traditionally musical theatre appealed to the younger upper class, and upper middle class audiences in New York. Working class audiences were more likely to patronize the much less expensive movies, and upper class audiences tended to support the opera. Just as *Oklahoma!* dissolves the distinctions among different kinds of white characters as they come together to eject the bullet-colored threat, so Rodgers and Hammerstein began to dissolve those distinctions among economically and geographically divided white audiences as one entertainment worked to bring many together. People from a wide range of classes and with a variety of viewpoints became interested, and the shows began to last longer and tour more extensively than previous musicals.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The trend towards longer shows was evidenced a hundred years earlier with *The Black Crook*. Spectacle costs a lot of money to create, and those costs have to be amortized over a longer run. However, beginning with *Oklahoma!*, successful runs needed to be measured in terms of years, rather than months.

### After the War

Just as World War II affected the development and reception of *Oklahoma!* and *Bloomer Girl*, so the musicals that came after *Oklahoma!* developed in a changed terrain. From 1947 to 1949, Broadway authors tried numerous experiments in interweaving political and social elements. *Low Life*, *Allegro*, *Street Scene*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *South Pacific*, *Miss Liberty*, and *Lost in the Stars* all experimented with various approaches and potentials for an increasingly conservative and prosperous audience.

In the years following the Second World War, the United States gained far more prosperity for more people than in its previous history.<sup>32</sup> The income distribution meant that the very wealthy profited the most. In 1955, the top 5% received 18.2% of all income, compared to 3.3% for the bottom 20% of the population. However, these percentages stayed relatively stable from 1947 to 1955, so working people did see their income rise in proportion to their original salary.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, the country became far more conservative. Although women entered the work force en masse with societal approbation during the war, as soon as the soldiers returned women were expected to give up their jobs and return to the domestic sphere. Although Truman had advocated and won a "Fair Deal" that focused on education

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<sup>32</sup> The per capita Gross National Product went from \$934 in 1941 to \$1,518 in 1944, an increase of 63% in three years. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington D.C.: Department of Congress and Bureau of the Census, 1976), 225.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 292. From 1939 to 1945 white male workers' salaries jumped from \$1,419 to \$4,458. Non-white males salaries went from \$639 to \$2,381, white women from \$863 to \$2,870 and non-white women from \$327 to \$1,637. For men, the median income in 1955 reached \$3,354 while women were at only \$1,116. The salary breakdowns for 1955 are as such: 7.9% of the men had no income; 18.2% of all working men made less than \$1,000; 12.8% made between \$1,000 and \$2,000, 13.2% under \$3,000, 16.5% under \$4,000, 15.8% under \$5,000, 20.8% made between \$5,000 and \$10,000 and 2.9% made over \$10,000. Women made much less, with 50.7% having no income. Of the working women, 47.3% made under \$1,000, 20.6% made less than \$2,000, 15.8% made less than \$3,000, 10.7% less than \$4,000, 4.6% made between \$4,000 and \$6,000, while only 1.1% made over \$6,000, (*Historical Statistics*, 298).

(notably the G.I. Bill), raising the minimum wage (from 40 cents to 75 cents an hour in 1949), housing for poor people, and strengthening Social Security, the country became more conservative as the Cold War progressed.<sup>34</sup>

Joseph McCarthy successfully parlayed the fear of communism into an attack on liberalism. Beginning in 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee jailed suspected communists who refused to cooperate. Between 1947 and 1952, 6.6 million people were investigated in the U.S. for communist views, and thousands of people, especially entertainers, teachers, and union workers, were “blacklisted” and unable to find work.<sup>35</sup> Although McCarthy is the best known of the anti-communist demagogues, he capitalized and exaggerated the pervading interest of the time; he did not create it.

The anti-communism, of course, developed out of fear, fear that communism would take over the world and probably fear of annihilation by atomic warfare. As war became the centerpiece of the American economy, atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs made the possible repercussions of war literally the end of human life on earth. Opposition came mostly from the left (which was mostly discredited by the red-scare), from pacifists (who were ridiculed), and scientists (who were generally ignored). The debate was so tightly confined that General James Gavin defined differences between conservatives and liberals as follows: Conservatives believed the best approach was to develop atomic weapons with the “largest yield possible’ to smash the enemy in a single blow,” whereas liberals “preferred the idea of small tactical nuclear weapons, literally tens of thousands of them, to be scattered by

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<sup>34</sup> See Miller and Nowak, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. ed., *The Almanac of American History* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993). By 1948 the Cold War dominated the nation; Czechoslovakia became communist, with China following the next year, and the Soviet Union testing its first atomic bomb. In addition, in 1948, the Soviets blockaded Berlin, and the United States began prosecuting suspected communists at an accelerated rate.

<sup>35</sup> Miller and Nowak, 26.

all the armed services.”<sup>36</sup> His entire debate centered on how best to annihilate the enemy; mainstream media acknowledged few alternatives.

In general, the United States turned to materialism, sectarian religion, and conformity to deal with the militarization of its culture. The suburbs, cars, and television dominated the American landscape as the cities were left to the poor.<sup>37</sup> Society tended to blame anyone who experienced difficulty adjusting. The pressure to conform divided Americans against each other. Women were belittled to such an extent that they made up less of the college population than in the twenties or thirties, were paid very poorly, and created relatively little protest.<sup>38</sup> Whereas men and women were divided by sexist psychology and societal roles, African-Americans and other minorities were forcibly excluded by segregated schools, transportation, drinking fountains, restaurants, blood banks, living communities, and nearly everything else. It was only after Soviet officials started to point out the racism in United States during the late 40s that changes began to happen, and then only very slowly.

Theatre enjoyed a unique social place in that it catered to an economically privileged group, and it simultaneously took advantage of the most political options of any of the forms of performance. Undoubtedly, the average playgoers benefited from significant

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>37</sup> Sixty-three percent of the American population officially joined churches (and a much higher percentage went to church regularly); and by the end of the 1950s there were over fifty million television sets in the country. Levittown (a massive suburban housing development in Long Island and followed by a similar one in Pennsylvania with a focus on identical houses on nearly identical streets) indicated the move towards the suburbs and the value placed on conformity.

<sup>38</sup> Despite working a third of the jobs in the country, women were ludicrously paid; a woman with a college degree earned about 80% as much as a man with only a high school diploma. This discrepancy of income was justified by sexist hyperbole based in Freudianism, which argued that women wouldn't want to be well paid because it would make them less womanly. "In 1959, median income for a white male with only a high-school diploma was \$4,429, far higher than that of the white female college graduate, \$3,758." *The Fifties*, 163. See Miller and Nowak's "The Happy Home Corporation and Baby Factory" for further discussion.

discretionary income, and probably most, in terms of income, were in the top 10%.<sup>39</sup>

Because theatre worked within a small geographic base and benefited from numerous individual producers with few non-theatrical interests, there was no effective way to force producers to respond to reactionary paranoia. The blacklist destroyed any liberal political commentary in Hollywood. Television censored itself through the production code. It provided entertainment that would primarily fulfill sponsors' interests, and it played numerous pre-1948 movies that reiterated the stereotyping of women and minorities. Theatre, however, portrayed the first criticisms about McCarthyism, racism, and class stratification.

New York theatre audiences were probably completely white, but such segregation went unnoticed.<sup>40</sup> They were also dominated by regular theatregoers who lived in the area.<sup>41</sup> The John Golden office believed that the majority of playgoers lived in the suburbs,

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<sup>39</sup> Specific statistics relating to the average income of theatregoers are unavailable, but some general guidelines can be deduced. If one assumes an average attendance of 14 times a year (slightly under the 14.63 of the 1942 study), ticket prices of \$4.80, as they were in 1949, with the average playgoer purchasing two tickets, and no other costs (like parking or train-fare, souvenirs, or a meal), this person would be spending \$134.40 a year on theatre tickets. In 1950 only families who made over \$3,000 exceeded that amount on all recreation, and only families who made over \$7,500 spent twice that amount on recreation (which our hypothetical playgoer probably did, purchasing books, concert tickets, flowers, magazines, televisions, and a myriad of other items classified by the census as "recreation"). Because only 9.6% of the families headed by a white person and 1.9% of families headed by a person of color made over \$7,000 a year, we can assume that the top 10% of the economic ladder made up most regular theatregoers.

<sup>40</sup> In 1957 *Variety* ran an article titled "Louisville Anticipating 'Ultimate' Integration of Races in Its Theatres" (Oct 9, 1957). The article mentioned that integration in the theatres was probably inevitable, but the author did not think it would happen for at least a generation. The fact that *Variety* mentioned that Louisville was "progressive in the language of the integration advocates," and made no mention that things were different elsewhere, indicates that segregation was common for audiences of theatres throughout the country.

<sup>41</sup> According to the *New York Times*, which reported on a 1942 study for The New York Theatre Program Corporation (the company that owned *Playbill*), "5 percent of the immense population of New York City and the suburbs . . . buy 85 per cent of the tickets sold. . . . Most of them [regular theatregoers] go more than once, and the largest single percentage in the breakdown goes between six and ten times. The next largest goes eleven to twenty times. At the extremes, equally small numbers of people go once or fifty times. To make it a little more complicated, every thousand theatregoers went to the theatre 14,629 times, so the average theatregoer packs himself off to the theatre 14.63 times a year." "Who is the Audience? A Brief Note on That Important Theatre Property, the Buying Public." *New York Times*, Feb 8, 1942.

Manhattan, and Brooklyn.<sup>42</sup> Live theatre was not, however a significant economic factor and that lack of influence is reflected in its limited audiences and lack of social power.<sup>43</sup>

Although the business of theatre (including opera) never recovered from the stock market crash of 1929 and the advent of talking movies, theatre income grew at a relatively quick rate during the 1950s.<sup>44</sup>

To further complicate the situation, musical theatre's emphasis on longer-running shows meant that the creative teams needed to appeal to a wider economic and geographic base to continually attract an audience for a long period. Musical theatre was in flux, moving from a business model based on numerous shows with a smaller regular audience to a model based on fewer shows each with a greater following. Authors and producers worked to include both the traditional regular theatre-going elite and the newer middle class occasional participants, but the lower-income families were not a factor.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The John Golden assumptions were based on mailing postcards for theatregoers and tracking where they were mailed. An older study for The New York Theatre Program Corporation confirmed this, finding in 1935 that 85.9% of theatregoers lived in New York City and Suburbs while only 14.1% came from outside the New York Area. Daniel Starch Survey of *The Playbill* made for The New York Theatre Program Corporation, 1935, 21.

<sup>43</sup> According to *Variety* the national amount allocated to theatre, opera, concerts, and "etc." in 1956 was \$252 million, about one-third the amounts spent fixing televisions, slightly more than half the amount spent on horse and dog-track bets, about one-fifth the amount spent on movie tickets (1.3 billion), and slightly more than ten percent of the 2.4 billion spent on purchasing televisions, radios and musical instruments. *Variety*, July 24, 1957.

<sup>44</sup> *Historical Statistics*, 401. In 1927 theatregoers spent 195 million dollars; in 1953 they spent \$197 million dollars, though this was real dollars, not adjusted for inflation, and inflation more than doubled in the time period. Theatre income grew by \$23 million a year for the next three years. The growth rate then slowed, but continued to average around \$20 million a year.

<sup>45</sup> Financially stable audiences in the middle-class or upper class comprised all paying theatre audiences. Families who made less than \$3,000 a year spent \$45 or less on recreation, and that included 39.4% of all families headed by a white person and 76.9% of all families headed by a non-white person. Few families would spend one-quarter of their entire annual recreation budget for a night at the theatre, so it is safe to assume that working class ticket buyers were statistically insignificant.

Looking at the musicals of the late 1940s and the 1950s, however, a surprising number of social and economic issues are raised for this relatively privileged and comfortable demographic group. *Street Scene*, *Love Life*, *Miss Liberty*, *The Pajama Game*, and *Finian's Rainbow* break with convention and deal with issues of class, poverty, or material want. *South Pacific*, *Lost in the Stars*, *Bloomer Girl*, and *Finian's Rainbow* explore racism. *Candide* satirizes conformity and officially sanctioned, enforced idealism. *Bloomer Girl* was the only musical to focus on the importance of women's rights, but musical theatre was more likely than television or movies to have stronger women characters. Issues ranging from unionization to McCarthyism are also explored in depth.

### *Street Scene* (1947), *Allegro* (1947), and *Love Life* (1948)

During 1947 and 1948 three musicals that eschewed the traditional satirical forms attempted to deal with the interrelations between society and families. In 1947 *Street Scene* (a musicalization of Elmer Rice's 1929 play) looked at the interrelations between society and romance. Later that year Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* developed some of the same themes, which were further developed by *Love Life* the following year with an entirely different format. Of the three, *Street Scene* is the most formally conventional. It is almost a fusion of operatic and naturalistic styles, in that it follows some Aristotelian precepts— it is set in a single location during a 24-hour period, with characters portrayed in a “realistic” manner, and is, in many ways, the tragedy of a man's excessive pride. *Street Scene* is one of the few Broadway musicals ever written by an interracial team, with Elmer Rice writing the book, Langston Hughes the lyrics, and Kurt Weill the music. It is also the only musical examined in this chapter that takes place in contemporary New York, but it distances itself from the conventional urban setting by featuring a tenement building in an outer borough,

and lower-income characters. The audience is encouraged to like some of the characters, and political points are implicitly drawn, but not explicitly detailed. The authors seem to avoid sentimental or satirical development; they develop the show as an opera and rely on the format to appeal to audiences. With the exception of a socialist named Kaplan who comments on the actions as a neighbor within a realistic framework, the appeals are based in character identification, but the sentiment is carefully controlled to create a veneer that distances the audience.

Overall the play confines itself to the domestic lives of the people in the building. Mr. and Mrs. Maurrant have an unhappy marriage, initially caused by his unwillingness to treat her as an equal. His arrogance alienates the neighbors as well as his family, and she is having an affair. Their daughter Rose is in love with Sam, the son of Kaplan. A family is being evicted. Kaplan's comments upon the action of the piece to the characters create an interesting tension between astute political commentary and characters that do not want to hear it. For example, Mr. Maurrant is very rough with his children at a time when men were expected to dominate their families. Kaplan tries to get him to stop and comments both on his behavior and the social structure of a family: "Because you have power over your child you think it gives you the right to impose upon him by force your own standards of morality."<sup>46</sup> Mr. Maurrant is understandably reluctant to hear Kaplan's concerns: "Lay off that stuff, I'm tellin' you, I'm runnin' my own family, the way I want to run it." Kaplan further develops the idea that the treatment of child rearing is linked to political structuring:

It is the philosophy w'ich results in imperialism and war and de exploitation  
of the verkers by the kepitalist klasses. It is the besis of our whole rotten

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<sup>46</sup> Elmer Rice (book), Langston Hughes (lyrics), Kurt Weill (Music), *Street Scene*, produced New York 1947, NYPL-PA, RM 47, 1-19.

social and economic system. . . . Upstairs a woman wit three children can't pay de rent and our bourgeoisie laws gives to the landlord de right to toin her in de street.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from Kaplan's comments, there is relatively little overt political commentary, but social comments are woven throughout the piece. Neighbors are upset by Marrant's anti-immigrant tirades and other characters comment, "It's nothing wrong to be a foreigner, Mr. Marrant. Many good people are foreigners. . . . Looka Eetalian. Looka Christoforo Colombo! Esa fers' man discov' America — es Eetalian, jussa like me."<sup>48</sup> By linking Columbus to immigrants, the bigotry of European Americans against immigrants in America is uncovered as preposterous. However, the intellectual argument is subordinate to the emotional one: the xenophobia is only made wrong through the pain that chauvinism causes people.

In the end of the show, Mr. Marrant kills Mrs. Marrant, which leaves his children with little hope. Rose starts to leave and Sam protests her going, pleading, "There's no hope for us unless we love each other, unless I belong to you and you belong to me." Rose cannot agree:

It's love that I want/ More than anything in the world  
But loving and belonging — they're not the same  
Look at my father, my poor mother,/If she had belonged to herself  
If he had belonged to himself/It never would have happened.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1-21.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2-2-41.

Throughout *Street Scene* the authors make a very sophisticated, emotionally supported argument that family life mirrors the power structures inherent in society; the implication is that changing the way power is used in families will affect how power can be used in society.<sup>50</sup>

*Street Scene* avoids both emotional fulfillment and a cathartic release. The murders are presented to the audience in a way that avoids any emotional catharsis. This works because neither Mrs. Maurrant nor her lover is a major character, and because their murder seems petty and random. Additionally, the murders happen behind a curtain. Most importantly, Rose does not react emotionally. She appears to go numb, but her response prevents the audience from that release. As a result, the musical works to create a sense of uneasiness in the situation, but it is not directed towards a single target.

As a play *Street Scene* made some points (specifically about anti-Semitism in the United States) much more explicit. Following the Holocaust, it would probably have been very difficult to portray the casual anti-Semitism that permeates the play and is never resolved. Suiting the much more conservative atmosphere of the fifties and the dramaturgical necessity of cutting book scenes to make time for songs, the musical is subtler and spends less time on the political discussions. However, Kaplan is a more likeable character in the musical, and his connection of family rearing with capitalist exploitation of the workers is more politically sophisticated than his unfocused Marxist commentary in the original. Not nearly as popular as the original (the play ran for 601 performances, compared to 148 for the musical), it nevertheless developed a sophisticated though anomalous political argument.

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<sup>50</sup> This sophisticated argument is an early antecedent to works like Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

Like *Street Scene*, *Allegro* and *Love Life* focused on the domestic lives of a family and the way each family mirrored society. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* follows Joe Taylor Jr. from his birth, through his unhappy marriage, and his decision to finally leave his cheating and ambitious wife and take the job he really wants. Unusually, there is a chorus modeled on Greek tragedies that comments on the action and delineates scenes. However, the primary focus of the play is sentimental as the chorus continually urges Joe to take one step forward in his life. Even as Rodgers and Hammerstein moved beyond societal expectations in their acknowledgment of the necessity of divorce in some situations, the show is relatively supportive of the status quo.

*Love Life* was an extraordinary theatrical event that has been almost completely forgotten because the show does not have a cast album.<sup>51</sup> Cheryl Crawford, a producer like Sam H. Harris who continually nurtured important projects, brought together Alan J. Lerner and Kurt Weill to write the show.<sup>52</sup> Elia Kazan directed it, and Boris Aronson designed the sets. Crawford billed *Love Life* as a musical "vaudeville," and it is similar to *Allegro* in that both follow domestic scenes over a long period. Whereas *Allegro* used a chorus, in *Love Life* different vaudeville acts comment on the action as "in-ones" between the book scenes.<sup>53</sup> *Love Life* focuses on a central concept, the impact of the economy structure on family life. In many ways, it is the first of the "concept" musicals, which I will discuss further in the last

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<sup>51</sup> *Love Life* played during a strike in the recording industry that prevented an original cast recording.

<sup>52</sup> Alan J. Lerner would later work with Frederic Lowe to write a number of popular musicals including *My Fair Lady*, *Brigadoon*, and *Carousel*.

<sup>53</sup> "In-Ones" are used in almost all musicals of the time to facilitate set changes. In a traditional proscenium theatre, legs are hung to side entrances. "In-One" refers to an actor making an entrance in the gap behind the first set of legs or (if there is one) behind the proscenium arch. For an "In-One," a backdrop is hung just behind the first set of legs, which allows the actors to entertain the audience while the set is changed behind them. They tend to be smaller scenes with just a few characters. For example, in *My Fair Lady* Freddie

chapter. To develop its theme, the show uses many different kinds of appeals – including radical satire, parody, irony, and sentiment. The musical follows Sam and Susan Cooper's marriage. It begins in 1791 and chronicles the developments as the ageless couple moves from 1821 through 1857, 1890, 1920, and finally the present of 1948. As the country develops into an economy based increasingly in capitalism, Sam and Susan's marriage falls apart. The show starts with a self-proclaimed bad magician who cuts Susan in half, levitates Sam, and leaves both of them in their predicament.

The vaudeville acts include a child act that tells how mother is a nervous wreck as the mother performs on a trapeze, a Madrigal song about an alcoholic performed on the radio, and "Punch and Judy Get a Divorce," which focuses on the financial issues involved in divorce. The final scene takes place as a minstrel show (without blackface) that encourages the couple to solve their problems by avoiding them. If they run into the world of illusion, through astrology, cynicism, materialism, or fantastical idealism, they will not have to deal with each other.<sup>54</sup> By the end, Susan and Sam realize the only way to come back together is if they dare the tightrope act. As they carefully balance on a tight rope and try to meet each other half way, the curtain falls.

*Love Life* negotiates a very narrow social space at a time when individuals were blamed if they encountered problems in society. This tendency was so extreme that society focused on the need for individuals to prepare for atomic warfare with gas masks and bomb shelters, which switched the responsibility from society to the individual. Women who were

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Einsford Hill sings "On the Street Where You Live" in front of a backdrop with a stoop rolled in from the wings, while the full set is changed behind the backdrop.

<sup>54</sup> The show never acknowledged the inherent racism in minstrelsy. The authors seem interested in it as a formal device rather than as a historical phenomenon. In the seventies, *Pippin* also explored the desire to escape into illusion, with the hero encouraged to join the vaudevillians and then set himself on fire to avoid being ordinary.

not happy as homemakers (or even those that did not have satisfying sexual relationships with their husbands) were at fault because they did not want to be feminine enough, while men who felt unsatisfied at work were blamed for their ambition and their inability to work as team players. During this time, Americans increasingly bought self-help books as the way to improve themselves while maintaining conformity to the status quo.<sup>55</sup> At a time when people who experienced trouble were assumed to be the problem, *Love Life* looks at the underlying economic issues. It balances a very progressive look at how capitalism hurts working people with a relatively reactionary view that women should not work. The criticism of women's rights may have been one of the few ways to successfully comment on the underlying material and social conditions during McCarthy's term in the U.S. Senate. It is, however, possible to read the show as equally critical of men's and women's options in an industrialized economy.

Susan's physical division at the beginning of the show mirrors society's conception of the division of women's roles: "I'm almost used to it by now. . . . Split in two and severed in the middle? I'm half homemaker, half breadwinner, half mother, half provider."<sup>56</sup> The show satirizes the women's movement as Sam, completely oblivious, relaxes from a several-month-long work trip while the children are left to fend for themselves until eleven at night. *Love Life* did acknowledge, however, that women already accomplished a full day of work in the home. Additionally, the concern about women working outside the home is channeled into anger at capitalism for forcing women to work, and the show implies that men are so drained from work that someone has to give them emotional support. But when both

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<sup>55</sup> See Miller and Nowak.

<sup>56</sup> Alan J. Lerner (lyrics), Kurt Weill (music), *Love Life: A Musical Vaudeville*, 1948, NYPL-PA, RM 8302, 1-1-3.

people have such miserable jobs neither can support the other. The show does not explicitly explore the fact that Sam has been forlorn in all of his jobs after he stopped working at home, but it does present that as a fact. Sam has to pretend to be all things to all clients in order to survive in his twentieth-century jobs, and after the divorce he is miserable without Susan and the children.

A cut song called “The Locker Room” satirizes the machismo of all men’s clubs, where “all he has to do is lie.” One man is polite to his wife in private, and acknowledges the unrealistic demands placed on women: “They shouldn’t ask you to swing an eighty pound hammer. Don’t they realize you’re a woman? . . . Maybe there’s a sixty pounder you can use.” The men prove themselves when they are rude to their wives and brag about their prostitutes. Sam’s lawyer argues, “You’ve got to be a realist. . . . You’ve got to think of your wife as your mortal enemy.” He wants Sam to fight Susan for every penny because “You’re going to have a lot of expense,” but refuses to reveal his fee. The men continue to brag:

When as a cave man you are cavin’ over . . .

Where can you come and be a Casanova? To the locker room.

We’re the sexiest men you can find. But all of it’s here in the mind. . . .

Boy are we great with women we have bought.

We’re the sexiest men we can know.

We pay them to act like it’s so.<sup>57</sup>

In his dissertation on Kurt Weill’s Post-War Musicals, David Michael Kilroy argues that despite this cut, the score continued to critique both men and women’s attitudes that ignored the importance of cooperation. “The satire of both ‘Women’s Club Blues’ and ‘This is the

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<sup>57</sup> *Love Life*, recorded by NYU in conjunction with the Kurt Weill foundation. Private collection.

Life' effectively states that personal independence and individual freedom are only beginning moves to the greater goal of mutual interdependency."<sup>58</sup> The show is far more critical of the underlying system than of any single character's behavior within that system.

The second "in-one" is a song called "Progress." The A section glorifies capitalism, but the B section interrupts it with the pains of the rat race ending in futility.<sup>59</sup> However, the A portion forcefully interrupts the B portion. This tension between the two sections mirrors the tension between the official view of capitalism and the way many working class people perceive it. The political view of the show could be summed up by an African-American quartet performed midway through the first act:

Man and woman you got to admire.  
They conquered coal and they conquered fire. . . .  
But there's one thing that beats them;  
That they just can't subdue; . . .  
[Which] is Economics! . . .  
Now Sarah and her husband they were doin' okay;  
For Sarah had an ev'nin' job and he worked all day.  
Now that's good economics; . . . But awful bad for love!  
Economics are rough on love!  
Economics are tough on love!<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> David Michael Kilroy, *Kurt Weill on Broadway: the Postwar Years (1945-1950)* (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard, 1992), 278.

<sup>59</sup> See footnote forty-three in chapter one for a discussion off AABA formats.

<sup>60</sup> *Love Life*, 1-5-33.

Throughout *Love Life* the vaudeville sketches comment on the book scenes, and this highlights how industrialization and capitalism have changed American life. Few of the sketches are specific in their satire, but their political comments are clearly connected to the scenes that follow each one. Susan and Sam's lives are clearly supposed to mirror changes in American society. However, like *The Pajama Game*, the overall effect is to use entertainment as the primary appeal for political commentary.

Like *Street Scene*, *Love Life* avoids any cathartic release or emotional fulfillment. After the magician's act, the show draws the audience into a feeling of easy complacency by focusing on a familiar subject in a rural setting during the past. This easy-going mood is interrupted with the "Progress" song. In the next scene, Susan and Sam say good-bye to each other. The tremendous weight of Sam's farewell affects the entire scene; it turns out Sam is no longer working in the home but now needs to take a job in the factory. By the next book scene, he is completely miserable in the factory and now works for the railroad. His job takes him away for months on end. By this point if audience members do identify with either character, they are probably aware of the social issues that frame their lives. The authors never permit the audience to relax in the book scenes after Sam leaves home.

The political effectiveness of concept shows is probably more influenced by the conclusion than by anything else. *Love Life* developed a new way to end a musical, and this ending has become very popular in numerous concept musicals. In *Love Life* the show ends with the characters aware of the difficulty with maintaining the status quo, and they are willing to attempt a change. This has become a relatively common trope in musicals since *Company*, for it allows the author to give audience a cathartic release without resolving the

issues.<sup>61</sup> *Love Life* denies the audience the emotionally cathartic pleasure of many later shows with similar endings, however, by framing everything within a distancing device, in this case a minstrel show and circus. By representing their personal difficulties as tightrope walkers who attempt to meet halfway, the show automatically breaks any audience identification. Audience members would probably debate whether Susan and Sam were able to get back together, but the final focus is on how they ended up in that untenable position.

Elia Kazan's direction and Boris Aronson's sets mirrored the script in that the book scenes were staged in a realistic manner and the vaudeville scenes accentuated the style of each in-one. In the "Punch and Judy" ballet, the actors' physical posture mirrored marionette puppets that were held at a few points (their elbows, shoulders, head) and were angular in their movements. The judge presided over the scene from an elongated podium, and both he and the podium imparted an expressionistic, almost (but not quite) nightmarish quality. Numerous couples came to be divorced, and the judge hit them over their heads with their divorce papers. Choreographer Michael Kidd described a scene from the ballet:

[It featured] a very romantic woman who danced on toe to get the idea that she was . . . the balletic idea of aesthetic aerial removal from life. Her husband was a very pedestrian man that followed behind wiping his nose all the time. And a daughter in between, a young daughter who came in skipping a rope. . . . She went from one parent to the other, the rope became

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<sup>61</sup> This has been used in a number of other later musicals, including *Company*, *Follies*, *Pippin*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and Michael John LaChuisa's *Wild Party*, which all focus on characters who are unhappy, coming to the realization that they want to make changes in their lives. The shows do allow an emotional catharsis, when a character breaks down her/his facade and acknowledges difficulties, but all end with the character beginning to change. It differs from a musical comedy ending that focused on a marriage; these shows focus on how to begin personal and/or relational growth. It is probably less effective politically because it tends to focus on the personal rather than the political, but it is a way to channel energy without denying the audience one of the pleasures they expect in the theatre.

twisted around her and they were both tugging at her, but she was in the middle and the judge leaned over, whacked them over the head with the divorce, and they went off.<sup>62</sup>

Crawford seems to have ensured that all elements worked to accentuate the satire. Even the costumes were described as “a wonderful riot of color and satire.”<sup>63</sup>

The reviewers expressed contradictory opinions. Many, like critic Robert Coleman, supported it as “a great achievement because it manages to be constantly entertaining while making its points.”<sup>64</sup> Richard Watts Jr. thought that *Love Life* demonstrated that “the American popular musical play currently has more imagination and creative spirit than the American drama.”<sup>65</sup> Brooks Atkinson expressed the less common view that it was “joyless . . . An intellectual idea about showmanship gone wrong.”<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, only Lee Newton from the *New York Daily Worker* criticized *Love Life*'s political statements. Newton picked up on the underlying sexism and argued “all of Mr. Lerner's main points . . . [are] strictly from MGM and MC— Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and male Chauvinism.”<sup>67</sup>

The show negotiated its cultural moment by its focuses on women's rights and the industrial revolution, and by never mentioning capitalism, which seems to be the author's real target. Although the show played into the misogynistic attitude of the time, it was far

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<sup>62</sup> An Oral History Interview with Michael Kidd, conducted for the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music by Peggy Meyer Sherry, Los Angeles, 1991, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Watts Jr. “A Smash Musical Hit Called ‘Love Life,’” *New York Post*, Oct. 9, 1948.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Coleman, “‘Love Life’ at 46<sup>th</sup> St. Is a Star-Spangled Hit” *New York Mirror*, Oct. 8, 1948.

<sup>65</sup> Watts Jr.

<sup>66</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “At the Theatre” *New York Times* Oct. 8, 1948.

<sup>67</sup> Lee Newton, “‘Love Life’, A Musical Hit with A Typical M-G-M Moral” *New York Daily Worker*, Oct. 12, 1948.

more complex than Newton perceived. It was produced by a woman, and women designed costumes and lights. While the critics perceived “The Women’s Club Blues” as a satire, it now plays as relatively straightforward: “A woman ought to have the right to be a doctor. A doctor has to know about the facts of life. And that you never learn about when you’re a wife.” When one woman wants to be a traveling salesman, a cohort responds, “I bet that now and then the farmer has a son,” which parodied *Bloomer Girl’s* “Farmer’s Daughter” three years earlier and satirized the assumption that women wouldn’t enjoy benefits of men’s roles.<sup>68</sup> Overall, the show presented a very complex and enjoyable critique of the impact of industrial revolution on American lives.

### *South Pacific* (1949)

The year after *Love Life*, Rodgers and Hammerstein developed what is perhaps the best known of the political musicals produced during the forties and fifties: *South Pacific*. After *Oklahoma!*, Harburg, Harold Arlen, Fred Saidy, and Sig Herzig used many of the conventions developed by Rodgers and Hammerstein in *Bloomer Girl*. Harburg, Arlen, and Saidy’s next show, *Finian’s Rainbow*, combined some of the Rodgers and Hammerstein’s method of integrating songs and a rural setting with satirical elements to comment on racism and economic stratification. *Finian’s Rainbow* deeply moved Hammerstein; he even sent Harburg a telegram saying “Dear Yip, I love you. Will you marry me?”<sup>69</sup> *Finian’s Rainbow* demonstrated to Hammerstein, a devoted liberal who wrote speeches for Adlai Stevenson, how politics and musical theatre could be combined; in his next show he did just that.

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<sup>68</sup> “Women’s Club Blues” performed on NYU recording of *Love Life*

<sup>69</sup> Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993), 269.

*South Pacific* is different from the previous popular Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals because it has a relatively contemporary setting. It is not a satirical musical; instead, it develops its political commentary through sentimental appeals. Produced in 1949, it is set during the Second World War, on the Polynesian Islands in the South Pacific. The show focuses on Nellie, a young American nurse, and her romance with Emile, an older Frenchman. The widower Emile has two mixed-race children from his marriage to a Polynesian woman. Nellie rejects Emile because he was married to a woman of another race, who died before the musical began. As the play progresses, she reevaluates her priorities and finally agrees to the marriage. Meanwhile, the subplot involves an upper class American lieutenant, Cable, and his attraction to Liat, a native woman. Despite the fact that they have a passionate affair, he cannot bring himself to marry her because she is not white. Before he dies, he realizes how racism is carefully cultivated.

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,  
You've got to be taught from year to year,  
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear—  
You've got to be carefully taught! . . .  
You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
Before you are six or seven or eight,  
To hate all the people your relatives hate—  
You've got to be carefully taught!<sup>70</sup>

*South Pacific* uses erotic and romantic pulls to develop its characters; the study of racism comes entirely out of the character's romantic entanglements. Immediately after Lieutenant

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<sup>70</sup> Oscar Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 1949, in *Six Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* (New York: A Modern Library Book, 1955) 346-347.

Cable and Liat consummate their affair, he sings the passionate “Younger than Springtime,” which implies that sexual attraction can overcome culture and race. Cable only begins to reevaluate his racism after he sees Nellie’s rejection of a man for a previous interracial marriage. However, Cable dies before he is able to act upon his newfound views. Combined with the death of Emile’s wife, this removes interracial relationships from the stage. The Polynesian Liat is thus relegated to the role of concubine, which is far less threatening to the status quo.

Like many of the satirical musicals, *South Pacific*’s plot and political commentary come entirely out of the interactions of romantic couples who are separated by social concerns. However, there is a crucial difference: whereas society needed to be changed in satirical musicals, the individuals need to change in *South Pacific*. Although the overt political message of *South Pacific* is a liberal comment on the evils of racism, it releases the audience from any uneasiness about race through the emotional fulfillment of the end and the underlying assumptions regarding American superiority. The show bases its political appeal on the assumption that race is merely an external function, and it implies that culture will inevitably move toward American values and capitalism. All good people are treated as being the same (ultimately American) under their exterior cultural ornaments. Andrea Most makes a very interesting argument that, in addition to reinforcing racism, *South Pacific* privileges European values with the opera-singing Emile overshadowing the American musical-theatre singing Nellie. However, Most does not deal with the fact that the relationship can only be completed once Emile has whole-heartedly endorsed American political involvement in the region by working for the U.S. Army against Japan and returning dressed in American battle

fatigues.<sup>71</sup> Opera may overshadow musical theatre, but American values dominate the show. As a result, the show embodies a compromise many liberals made at the time: it disavowed communism and embraced capitalism, in exchange for the political capital to attempt to negotiate domestic issues. In this case, the United States' imperialism is accepted, but domestic racism is criticized. Hammerstein probably did not consciously develop this quid pro quo, but he would have been aware of the political and cultural limits of the period.

The show supports the idea that America's military intervention in Asia is natural and beneficial to all involved. Opening on Broadway at the same time that China became communist and a year before the outbreak of the Korean War, the show reflected and reinforced attitudes about American involvement in the South Pacific. As Bruce McConachie notes in "The Oriental Musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein," their musicals prepared "spectators to accept U.S. intervention into Southeast Asia as responsible, benevolent, and necessary."<sup>72</sup> *South Pacific* (as well as *Flower Drum Song* and *The King and I*) both mirrored and shaped popular attitudes about Asia. According to McConachie, "They may have been more specifically influential in 'Americanizing' Asian cultures, naturalizing imperialist economics, reducing countries in Southeast Asia to dominoes, urging their rapid modernization, and, when that failed, justifying the use of force to save them from Communist 'others.'"<sup>73</sup> *South Pacific* naturalized American military involvement to "save" Asian nations from themselves.

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce Kirlé develops this argument in *Cultural Collaborations*, his forthcoming dissertation.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, "The 'Oriental' Musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the U.S. War in Southeast Asia," *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994), 396.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

At a time when communism in Asia was perceived as a threat to Americans, the character of Bloody Mary, who works as a vendor, demonstrates how American-based capitalism is supposedly beneficial to all the natives. Interestingly, Bloody Mary and Ali Hakim have several commonalities: both are outsiders who interact with the American community through the sale of exotic trinkets. Ali Hakim sells Persian garters, “the Elixir of Egypt” smelling salts, and Parisian pictures; likewise Bloody Mary markets shrunken human heads and boar’s tooth bracelets. Neither one fulfills any urgent need through sales, but the embrace of capitalism seems a crucial factor for inclusion in the community. In *South Pacific* the entire community on Bali Hai gains through Bloody Mary’s business that sells their items to Americans; they now have a choice in jobs and will not work in the lower-paid ones anymore. Trade with Americans is imperative to the improvement in their way of life. Thus American involvement in the preservation of capitalism (and open markets) is presented as indispensable to the native communities.

*South Pacific* demonstrates the nebulous political implications of the Rodgers and Hammerstein-style musicals. Despite the aforementioned difficulties, they can successfully engage with individual domestic issues and may be quite politically effective in reflecting and reinforcing a more progressive domestic agenda. *South Pacific*’s progressive domestic political stance made it incredibly controversial; after playing in Atlanta, the Georgia State Legislature considered a law to ban any entertainment with “an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow.”<sup>74</sup> *South Pacific* was one of the pieces that helped shift acceptable discrimination in this country away from race (and toward class). By incorporating its political stance into a song, it extended its influence through the cast recording. No doubt, hundreds of thousands

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Hugh Fordin, *Getting To Know Him: A Biography of Oscar Hammerstein* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1977), 270.

of people listened to the cast album and probably became more aware of racism as a negative trait. Despite its progressive and courageous analysis of race issues, however, *South Pacific's* embrace of an American-centered worldview reinforced many of the imperialist policies of the time.

*South Pacific* develops a single progressive issue (racism) in a formally conservative show. Throughout the forties and fifties (and even through the seventies), writers continued to use satiric and political elements in musicals. Increasingly, however, satire was relegated to a single song or scene. Nevertheless collaborators continued to use satire to comment on various elements of society.

### *Miss Liberty* (1949)

*Miss Liberty* is essentially an anomaly. With music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and direction by George S. Kaufman's collaborator Moss Hart, it has many of the elements of a superficial satire of the thirties, but it develops the issue of class to create a covert satire during a reactionary time. The show focuses on a newspaper war in New York at the time when the Statue of Liberty was installed and uses a period plot and production elements to remove the setting from the playgoers. The plot deals with Horace, a young photographer recently fired from *The Herald*, who goes to France to find the model who posed for the Statue of Liberty. The sculptor, however, looks down on Americans and plays a joke by letting Monique, a young homeless woman, pose for the photographer's picture. *The Herald* brings her to America just as the head of *The World* realizes the mistake and thus embarrasses *The Herald*. *The Herald's* owner arranges to have her deported and the photographer jailed, but the people protest and she is allowed to stay in America.

What is surprising about *Miss Liberty*, and what sets it apart from a superficial satire, is that the issue of social class is developed throughout the show. Produced for an audience that probably considered themselves the middle-class of a classless society, the show develops very specific class issues. The musical opens with class as the primary focus.

According to the stage directions

The Opening Chorus emphasizes the feud between two giants of Journalism, Joseph Pulitzer and James Gordon Bennett and their newspapers *The New York World* and *The Herald*. Some newsboys are hawking *The Herald* – some *The World*. It is obvious that the former has more appeal to the bankers and brokers – the latter to the masses. It is Republicans versus Democrats – Fifth Avenue versus Avenue “A” – the Union League Club versus Tammany Hall. Obviously, far more copies of *The World* are being sold than of *The Herald*.<sup>75</sup>

*The Herald* readers comment, “I like the Herald filled with stock market news/ Smart social items and conservative views.”<sup>76</sup> It is surprising that in 1949, as HUAC gained further power and America became increasingly fearful of communism and any language related to the New Deal or class issues, this relatively light show should choose to frame its musical comedy with obvious class consciousness.

Placing most of the action and the class comments in France distances some of the class commentary. Monique and her grandmother (“The Countess”) live under bridges in France and move from bridge to bridge as the police chase them out. The Countess ignores

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<sup>75</sup> Robert E. Sherwood (book), Irving Berlin (music & lyrics), Moss Hart (direction), *Miss Liberty*, Produced 1949, Libretto at NYPL-PA, RM # 4262.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-1-3.

a policeman's irrelevant demands that she leave and challenges him, "You don't frighten me, I was being arrested before you were born," which lends a legitimacy to resisting authority. Despite the Parisians' expectations that all Americans are rich, Horace makes it clear that he is penniless and unemployed. Although the poor Americans are somewhat better off than the poor Parisians, the class issues are clearly applicable in both countries. When Monique and the Countess are being deported from America, they have to wait in a filthy area before getting on the ship. The officer notes, "This is where they come in, lady, and this is where they go out – except when they are traveling first class."

In addition to the comments on newspapers' demarcation of social class and the choice to side with the working-class paper and interests, *Miss Liberty* also comments on the manipulation of the system by the popular as well as the elite paper. Pulitzer ran a campaign that raised enough money to build a pedestal for the statue, and he uses this to generate exposure for his paper. Horace is frustrated by the entire mechanism that turns people's convictions into publicity: "A lot of people, all over the country, contribute their money for something because they believe in it. – They feel emotional about it. And then it turns out to be nothing but a promotion stunt for a newspaper. The next thing you know, they'll be selling advertising space on it."<sup>77</sup> Throughout the show, the authors also link money with political pull.

There is relatively little satire in the show, except when the plot travels to France. There are countless comments on the French exploitation of American gullibility. The lyric of "Only For Americans" is surprisingly racy and links sex with consumption, an unusual device during a time censored by the strict guidelines of the production code. (Many of the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 1-1-17. Emphasis in original.

lines in the undated script at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts that was supposedly used for the original production were crossed out and tamer lines were handwritten above the typed lyrics.)

A Momarte (sic) Lady drops her hanky and slyly winks her eye  
That's only for a Yankee the Frenchman wouldn't buy . . .  
The little holes for peeping through to see what naughty people do  
The bed on which the king made love, which there are several dozens of . . .  
The naked shows and gigolos . . . They're only for Americans.<sup>78</sup>

Despite the distancing devices the authors use to remove class issues from the American characters, the show ends with Monique receiving permission to stay in America, and she quotes the poem on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

At a time when limits and quotas were being placed on immigration this show made a statement about the importance of an open immigration policy and the realities of class issues in the United States' history. *Miss Liberty* uses many of the older traditions but in an understated way. Even during the politically timid Eisenhower era, several other shows made bolder statements.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 1-4-46 – 1-4-49.

*Lost in the Stars* (1949)

Some of the most interesting work regarding the development of forms during this time came from Kurt Weill and his collaborators. In addition to his work with Brecht, after Weill immigrated to the United States he collaborated with a number of lyricists and composed for numerous shows that include *Johnny Johnson*, *Krickerbocker Holiday*, *Street Scene*, and *Love Life*. Throughout his entire career, Weill consistently pushed the boundaries of the form. His and Ira Gershwin's *Lady in the Dark* chronicles a professional woman as she goes through psychoanalysis, develops a sense of self, and explores her underlying fears. All of the musical numbers are developed as sung-through scenes and they take place in her dreams. The only exception is a song she cannot remember from her childhood that she finally is able to sing at the end, which signifies that her emotional unconscious can now inform her intellectual consciousness. *One Touch of Venus* is a lighter musical about the goddess of love coming to earth. She tries to fall in love as she deals with the absurd conventions of Americans.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and moving of the political and sentimental musicals is *Lost in the Stars* by Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill, based on *Cry, The Beloved Country*. Weill and Anderson had wanted to do a show about race issues since the late 1930s when they started a project called *Aeneas Africanus* that later became *Ulysses Africanus*. *Lost in the Stars* eventually came to Broadway as the United States began to confront racism in 1948. The nascent civil rights movement won its first victories beginning in 1946 with a series of Supreme Court decisions that supposedly ended segregated higher education and interstate transportation. At the same time a few African-Americans, like Jackie Robinson, began to advance in society, but it would take far more than symbolic but isolated achievements to actually sustain any widespread change. The entire country became embroiled as African-

Americans (and a few sympathetic white supporters) began to demand rights as citizens, but the civil rights movement had not yet developed into an organized political force.

As in *Firmin's Rainbow*, *Lost in the Stars* uses several different dramatic forms to make different appeals and points. While *Firmin's Rainbow* is set in the United States, *Lost in the Stars* takes place in South Africa and is very evocative of opera, with some sung-through scenes, significant choral work, and attenuated solo lines. The show developed further connotations with the "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess*, for it focused on black characters, was directed by Rouben Mamoulian, who directed *Porgy and Bess*, and starred Todd Duncan who originated the part of Porgy. *Lost in the Stars*, however, used fewer musical elements from jazz and syncopation and developed a more classical sound. The original recording features voices with heavy vibrato, which further emphasizes an operatic style. Setting it outside the United States mitigated some of the radical satire and sentimental appeals, and the setting allowed the authors to develop the argument more fully. It has strong empathetic appeal with its leading character, satire of the current power structure, and a chorus that comments on the action.

The musical focuses on two fathers: Stephen is a black "umfundisi" or minister for St. Mark's Church, near Ndotsheni, Natal, South Africa; James Jarvis is a white Afrikaner in the same area. Although James abhors any connection with black people, his son Arthur is a liberal judge in Johannesburg who treats black people with dignity and considers some of them friends (especially Stephen). Stephen goes to Johannesburg, attempting to find his son, Absalom, who has not written for over a year. Even as Stephen is looking for him, Absalom, his cousin Matthew, and Matthew's associates kill Arthur. Absalom tells the truth, and is sentenced to die and the other men lie and are allowed to go free. Stephen begs James to intercede and James refuses. The day before Absalom's execution Stephen steps down as

the minister of his parish because, as a murderer's father, he would hurt the future development of the parish and because he no longer has certainty of faith.

When I began to serve my God and my church I had a sure faith that the God of our world ordered things well for men. I had a sure faith that though there was good and evil I knew what was good, and God was it— and that men were better in their hearts for choosing good and not evil. Something has shaken this in me. I am not sure of my faith. I am lost. I am not sure now. I am not sure that we are not all lost. And a leader should not be lost. He should know the way.<sup>79</sup>

The following morning James joins Stephen as he awaits the hour of Absalom's execution. Having overheard Stephen's resignation, he realized that "of all the men who live near this great valley you are the one I would want for a friend."<sup>80</sup> Stephen decides to stay in the parish and then the clock strikes. Stephen buries his head in his hands and James puts his arms around him as the chorus sings.

The show combines many techniques. Stephen's character and the community of the church are earnest, pure, and innocent. Whenever the show follows these characters, the mood is straightforward and heartfelt. At the same time, however, there is a chorus that comments on the conditions that surround the characters. As in the satirical shows, this chorus pulls the narrative back from focusing too closely on the characters' lives; it simultaneously identifies the societal constructions that affect the characters. The distancing Weill and Anderson achieve is a Brechtian alienation, in that it forces the audience to

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<sup>79</sup> Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill, *Lost in the Stars*, 1949, in *Great Musicals of the American Theatre Volume 2*, ed. Stanley Richards (Radnor, PA: Chilton, 1976), 224.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

connect the emotional issues of the plot with the underlying social conditions. The musical opens with the leader of the chorus who sings of a beautiful road and hills in nature. The announcer interrupts the singer and asks what the areas below the glorified hills are like. The lower hills “cannot hold the rain and mist; the streams run dry in the clove. Too many cattle feed on the grass . . . . The great red hills stand desolate and the earth has torn away like flesh.” The answerer notes, “Wherever the hills have broken down and the red clay shows through, there poor people live and dig ever more desperately into the failing earth.”<sup>81</sup> When Stephen and Arthur get on the train the chorus sings “Black man go to Johannesburg — Go, go, never come back. . . . White man go to Johannesburg, He come back, he come back.”<sup>82</sup> Thus the chorus puts the individual plot into a larger social context.

It is not until the action moves to Johannesburg that satire is introduced. The placement of satire in the city and emotional/sentimental appeals in the country mirrors the common trends for musical theatre, with shows set in an urban environment having more sophistication, self-awareness, and satire whereas shows in rural environments tend to develop through empathy and sentimentality. The first group of people the audience meets in the city is the political league headed by Stephen’s brother John. John is primarily concerned with ensuring that he gets ahead within the current system rather than changing the situation for anyone else. He is cynical and worldly, and he believes sincerity and naïveté are dangerous to survival: “We won’t get equal suffrage, we won’t get social equality, we won’t get any kind of equality — but those of us who are quick in the head will get along. That’s the way it is everywhere, for whites and for Zulus. Use your head and you can live.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 176

Try to reform the world and somebody steals your mealies.”<sup>83</sup> After the boys kill Arthur, John will do anything to get his son out and pins all the blame on his nephew Absalom to ensure his own son’s welfare.

When the action moves to the younger generation of Absalom, Matthew (John’s son), and the criminals they hang out with, the mood changes from cynical to satirical. The younger people put on a skit that parodies the court; they try a woman for selling vegetables without a license. Matthew plays the judge who is drunk and incompetent; he gives them all ludicrous sentences as they mock him. The satire of the legal system ends with Matthew’s statement that defines justice in that society. It is clear that “justice” is defined by white society: “We all got justice! Justice is when the black man digs and the white man carries the briefcase! Justice is when the black woman cooks and the white woman has breakfast in bed! If you want anything extra – you pay for it!” One of the cohorts offers him money and he retorts “What! Me, sir? A judge, sir? Take money, sir? – Yes sir!”<sup>84</sup>

Matthew is clearly the leader of the group; he plans their crime and he mocks Absalom’s resistance to the robbery and then to bringing a gun to the robbery. In desperation, Absalom finally agrees to join in the robbery. Ironically, Arthur is chosen as the target because of his idealism. “He never locks his doors, day or night. . . . He’s got some theory. He says, ‘If anybody wants what I’ve got he can come in and take it.’”<sup>85</sup> Unbridled idealism cannot work in an unjust society.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 190.

After his son's murder, James is distraught and meets with Arthur's friend and colleague Eland. James is upset that his last moment with Arthur was fighting over Arthur's insistence on retaining black friends. "The irony of it, that an advocate of Negro equality should have been killed by a Negro. There's only one course with them — a strong hand and a firm policy. They understand nothing but discipline, respect nothing else. . . . What would he have said about a crime like this?" Eland responds, "He would have said, 'They live in such poverty and fear. They see no way out of their poverty or their fear and they grow desperate.'"<sup>86</sup> Understandable after the death of his son, James looks only at specific actions and stereotypes all members of a demographic group; Arthur and Eland are able to expand their vision to include societal factors, and they encourage the audience to do so as well.

The play shows the limits of empathy as the basis for political change because each group is unable to move beyond its emotions to truly understand the other group as long as society creates artificial divisions. The white people are scared of the black people, just as the black people are scared of the white people, but that emotional commonality changes nothing. A Negro quartet sings:

Who can be content when he dares not raise his voice? . . .  
For fear of the whip, the guard, the loss of his house?  
For fear of the mines, and the prison  
And the cell from which there is no return?  
Yes, we fear them, though we are many and they are few.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 198-199.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 200-201.

Meanwhile, the white chorus articulates their fears:

Who can lie peacefully abed when the dark without the window is troubled

By those who hate you for what you are and what you do? . . .

Men are not safe in the streets, not safe in their houses. . . .

There are brutal murders. . . Fear of the many by the few.<sup>88</sup>

Although both groups of singers have the same feeling of fear, and that commonality is developed, the conditions that lead to their fears are not negated. Identifying their emotions does not lead to a cathartic release or the emotional fulfillment of friendship that overcomes racism; empathy cannot move the characters beyond their societal conditioning. Both groups continue in their fear, unable in that society to overcome it or change the underlying conditions.

At the same time, the only redemption in the play is made through James and Stephen's developing friendship and the work that Arthur and Stephen previously accomplished. Individuals do profit from their cynicism, but *Lost in the Stars* implies that the way to change society is through small steps based on simple, earnest understanding, rather than through the clever and cynical plotting of individuals to move ahead always at the expense of other people.

Premiering at the beginning of the civil rights movement in 1949, the show bravely highlights the destructive effects of apartheid and racism. Like *South Pacific*, it probably worked to make people more aware of overt racism. *Lost in the Stars* may have helped some audience members move from an intellectual belief that racism was wrong to actually being more comfortable with integration.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 201.

*Lost in the Stars* is not set in the United States. In the Northern states, racism was usually placed elsewhere. Just as Nellie Forbush in *South Pacific* comes from Little Rock, Arkansas (a generation before the Governor called out the state militia and shut schools to prevent integration), racism is never acknowledged by the New York-based authors or audience as something that happens in New York. Despite the segregated society in the United States (officially in the South, unofficially in the North), there is no point at which sly comparisons are made between South Africa and the United States. In order to look at racism in the late forties, the situation needed to be made as different as possible from the United States' racial and economic conditions.

### **Eisenhower, Prosperity, and Conservatism**

Despite the plethora of political musicals between 1947 and 1949, relatively few shows explored politics during the 1950s. After the election of Eisenhower in 1952, the mood of the country changed. A time of prosperity and security developed. On the political front the initial calming of communist concerns caused by the resolution of the Korean War, the death of Stalin, the censure of McCarthy, and the Geneva summit all helped assuage the intensity of the Cold War. Overall, the social trends that began earlier continued and intensified. Urban flight and suburban sprawl became increasingly pronounced and expected, as the materialistic bent of the time became even more common.

Television became a much stronger influence; in 1951 *I Love Lucy* premiered and became the first TV show to attract 10 million viewers. As television became increasingly popular, so too consumption and debt increased, and the emphasis on conformity continued. By 1952 *I Love Lucy* entertained 34 million viewers, and it epitomized domestic

gender roles and the societal expectations of conformity and material consumption.<sup>89</sup> The tremendously talented Lucille Ball played the subservient and incompetent wife to the inconsequential Desi Arnaz's controlling husband, who often controlled her through appeals to social norms and promises of material objects.

### *Pajama Game* (1954)

In contrast to Lucille Ball's submissive female character, Babe from the covert satire *The Pajama Game* is strong willed and politically active. Babe is a representative of her labor union, and the show focuses on union negotiations in a pajama factory. Unlike most other political shows of this time, *The Pajama Game* focused on contemporary, working-class union members, in an unnamed but all-American town. Following World War II, unions and workers pushed hard to further employee protections and wages. After the war and before the passage of the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act in June of 1947, numerous workers went on strike to demand better wages.<sup>90</sup> The reactionary Taft-Hartley Act allowed owners to sue unions and members if a strike was deemed unfair in the courts; as a result, it severely restricted union activity. Nevertheless, unions worked to guarantee many people a living

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<sup>89</sup> *The Fifties*, 365.

<sup>90</sup> During 1946, 10.5 percent of all employees went on strike, indicating that the working class wanted to be included in America's prosperous economy. There were 116 million employee days idle, with 1.43% of all private, non-farm working hours spent on strike and the average strike lasting far longer than ever before or after at 25.2 days (*Historical Statistics*, 179). In 1945 there were 4,750 work stoppages and man-days idle, involving 3.4 million employees, compared to only 2,869 work stoppages and man-days idle involving 840,000 workers in 1942. In 1946 4,600,000 employees went on strike in 4,985 work stoppages and man-days idle. See *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington D.C.: Department of Congress and Bureau of the Census, 1976), 179. In 1946 Western Electric telephone mechanics, United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers, United Steelworkers Union, Railroad Trainmen and Locomotive Engineers all went out on strike. By comparison, despite the fact that the Taft-Hartley act didn't pass until June 23, in 1947, less than half as many workers went on strike with only 2,170,000 workers striking in the entire year with a total of 3,693 incidents. The percent of time spent on strikes fell by over two-thirds for private, non-farm workers from 1.43% in 1946 to .41% in 1947. See *Historical Statistics* and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. ed., *The Almanac of American History*, 514.

wage and safe working conditions. Although the senate had censured McCarthy and the country displayed less fear of communism by 1954, it is still surprising that *The Pajama Game* worked to celebrate unions. Like *Pins and Needles*, it uses a veneer of self-aware delight in entertainment to appeal to the audience. In the show, the union demands a seven-and-a-half cent raise. The factory superintendent falls in love with one of the heads of the union. She warns him that “there’s something going to come between us . . . That contract[,] lover . . . that’s important. . . . I don’t know why the Union’s so important to me . . . but it is. . . . I guess you got to be on a team. And that’s why no matter what’s with us . . . I’m going to be fighting for my side and fighting hard.”<sup>91</sup> As in so many political musicals, the lead couple cannot come together until the societal issue that separates them is resolved.

As the tensions develop between management and labor, they are personalized by the parallel tensions between the romantic leads. The satire comes primarily from the narrator of the show, Hines, a “time-study man” for the factory. He opens the show and sets the ambiance for the interweaving of political issues with entertainment: “This is a very serious drama. It’s kind of a problem play. It’s about Capital and Labor. . . . I wouldn’t bother to make such a point of all this except later on if you happen to see a lot of naked women being chased through the woods, I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”<sup>92</sup> *The Pajama Game* relishes fighting for the union and simultaneously keeping the show light, playful, and self-reflectively aware of delighting in musical comedy conventions.

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<sup>91</sup> George Abbott and Richard Bissell (book), Richard Adler and Jerry Ross (music and lyrics), *The Pajama Game*, Produced 1954, Libretto at NYPL-PA, RM # 272, 1-6-49 — 1-6-50. (All ellipses except first are in original libretto.)

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-1-1.

The factory theme runs throughout the show and punctuates their work life with the demand to “Hurry Up!”

Hurry Up,                    Can't Waste Time  
Hurry Up,                    When you're racing with the clock . . .  
Hurry Up,                    And the second hand doesn't understand  
Hurry Up,                    That your back may break and your fingers ache  
Hurry Up,                    And your constitution isn't made of rock . . .  
Hurry Up,                    It's a losing race when you're racing with the clock . . .  
Racing, racing, racing, racing, racing, racing  
Racing with the clock!<sup>93</sup>

The upbeat tempo of the song keeps the demands of the characters' jobs from overpowering the audience.

The manager of the factory is Hasler, a corrupt and vicious boss who continually hassles the employees. Despite the record business and profits, he repeatedly ignores the workers' demands for the salary increase that everyone else in the industry has earned. At the company picnic, he shields his commands in language that mirrors the demands of extreme patriotism of the time, and he disavows his prosperity as a means to deny the workers any share in it:

We're all members of a great industry. To that industry we owe our lives and our daily bread. In return, we must recognize the stern obligations placed upon us in these terrible times of economic upheaval and governmental chaos. I can never remember a time when competition was so ruthless,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 1-2-4— 1-2-6.

dealers so cantankerous, costs [so] outrageous, and profit margins sunk so low. My good friends, pajamas are at the crossroads; whether we go onto greater triumphs lies in you; whether your company can weather the storm of rising costs is a grave question. I thank you.<sup>94</sup>

Hasler continues his language of the extreme right by branding both buyers (who demand that orders be filled on time) and workers “Damned communists!”<sup>95</sup>

Hines takes the rigid observance to use time efficiently to a satirical extreme. Throughout the show he is yelling at people: “Hurry Up,” “Can’t Waste Time,” and “Tempus fugit.” Towards the end of the show, he continues his discussion of how to save time, and describes the logical result of applying factory principles to life:

I live my life by the tick tick tock of the clock . . .  
At breakfast time I grab a bowl  
And in the bowl I drop an egg, and add some juice  
A poor excuse for what I crave  
And then I add some oatmeal too  
And it comes out tasting just like glue  
But think of the time I save!<sup>96</sup>

He sleeps in his clothes, shaves in bed, and plans to count seconds till the day he dies. Furthermore, he will dig his grave before then “cause when St. Peter calls my name, I know I’ll get there just the same, but think of the time I’ll save.”<sup>97</sup> The point, made with humor, is

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 1-5-33.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 2-4-15, 2-4-18.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 2-3-12— 2-3-13.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 2-3-13.

that the constant demands to mechanize labor and command workers to save every possible second severely compromises the quality of their lives.

The plot resolves when the superintendent discovers that the absentee board of directors had already allocated a raise that Hasler pocketed for himself. The conclusion is an odd compromise that blames the primary problems on middle management but solves only the immediate problem. This may have quelled concerns among the economic elite attending the show, for the owners are absolved from having short-changed the workers, but they are not entirely blameless. The owners are completely absent and the corrupt Hasler stays as the manager of the plant; the owners are not selfish, but they are totally negligent.

*The Pajama Game* developed concerns of the working class. As the song “Seven and a Half Cents” demonstrates, it may not seem like a lot to most people “but give it to me every hour, forty hours every week, that’s enough for me to be living like a king.”<sup>98</sup> The song starts out with the workers planning to save up for very sensible items like a washing machine, carpeting, and a second-hand car. As the song progresses, however, the list of items the workers wish to buy with their raise becomes increasingly frivolous. As in “Come and Get it Day” from *Finian’s Rainbow*, the workers quickly become engrossed in purchasing items that they do not need, like a scrabble board with letters made of gold, and the opportunity to become a sultan in the Taj Mahal.<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, however, their final request in a list of ludicrous items is to possess their own pajama factory and employ the boss. The inclusion of factory ownership as the summation of an ever-increasing list of products, of

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 2-3-38.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 2-9-39— 2-9-40.

which no person would need sole possession, highlights the issue that the factory is owned by a single person instead of by the workers.

*Pajama Game* is an upbeat and playful show, in the covert, comic-satire tradition. In many ways, however, it is surprisingly bold in its embrace of workers. Setting the musical in a present-day factory with characters who are likeable, funny, intelligent, and working-class is a unique combination. The show allows the audience to enjoy an emotional completion and dissipates some of the energy because the audience leaves after a resolution. The musical, however, is unabashedly pro-union, and the only veneer to distance the pro-union stance from direct political appeal is the characters' self-aware delight that they are in a musical comedy. It is not the real world; it is funnier, more tuneful, and snappier, but there is no other attempt to distance the show from the audience.

### *Candide* (1956)

One of the most unusual musicals of the 1950s is *Candide*, a show that draws on the more relaxed atmosphere that prevailed after Eisenhower took office and before the Russians launched Sputnik. As in the Voltaire novel of the same name, its eponymous hero journeys from a belief that he lives in “the best of all possible worlds” to a realization he has been a fool, and the best he can do is “build our house and chop our wood, and make our garden grow.”<sup>100</sup> The musical takes place in Voltaire’s France, which has remarkable similarities with America of the 1950s. Although these coincidences are never mentioned, they are relatively obvious. *Candide* works as a radical satire, explicates a number of disparate issues, and leaves the audience to draw the conclusion.

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<sup>100</sup> Lillian Hellman (book) Leonard Bernstein (music), Richard Wilbur (lyrics), other lyrics by John Latouche, Dorothy Parker, *Candide*, a musical based on Voltaire, Produced 1956, Mimeograph of original production NYPL-PA, RM # 561, 1-1-4, 2-3-11.

Pangloss, *Candide's* original teacher who optimistically glosses over everything and sounds remarkably similar to many of the politicians, self-help books, preachers, and advertisers during the McCarthy anti-Communist era, teaches *Candide*, his fiancée Cunegonde, and Cunegonde's brother Maximillian. Pangloss' central lesson is that, no matter what, they live in the best of all possible worlds. Appearing during Norman Vincent Peale's massive middle-class popularity directly after the publication of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Pangloss echoes Peale. Both urge their followers to trust authority and accept that the individual must conform to society, for the worlds of both Westphalia and the United States were presumably perfect.

*Candide* wants his adopted father to stop fighting because, in what is probably a comment on the United States' involvement in the Korean War and support of other various anti-Communist crusades including a CIA-supported invasion in Guatemala, "There must be no more battles for . . . any of us. . . . We won. But half of Westphalia is in ruins, and we lost more men. . . . We've been fighting all our lives, but I'm not sure we even know why we fight."<sup>101</sup> Pangloss responds that fighting is necessary to their identity and even their existence: "You fight for honor. Without honor there can be no life . . . and without life there could be no death. Therefore in order to die one has to be born – and that is why you've been fighting."<sup>102</sup> As for concerns about peace, Pangloss understands those, but believes everything has its place in this best of all possible worlds:

A massacre's the best of recreations.

It's healthy exercise for King and when it ends it always brings

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-1-3.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

Polite negotiations and peace between the nations.

Peace is charming, it gives the scholar leisure for

His history of the latest war;

It gives us time for farming, and gradual re-arming.<sup>103</sup>

All society is defined by war and designed to support war. Even the time of peace is demarcated by the celebration of previous wars and the preparation for future battles.

The parallels with current society are further developed later in the show. Candide meets a man named Martin who is Pangloss' opposite. Martin believes they live in the "the worst of all possible worlds, and if it wasn't we would make it so."<sup>104</sup> Martin seems reminiscent of the beat writers and the alienation present in many of the contemporaneous novels. Candide later protests that there must be as much good as evil, and Martin questions whether that can be true in a society like the United States in the 1950s:

A world where men march across continents to kill each other without even asking why? Where the scientist strives to prolong life and at the same minute invents weapons to wipe it out? Where children are taught the rules of charity and kindness until they grow to the age where they would be considered insane if they put the rules into practice? Where half the world starves and the other half diets?<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 1-1-5.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 1-4-12.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2-1a-2.

Pangloss represents the voice of authority and contrived optimism; Martin represents the outsider, and total pessimism; the show is essentially *Candide's* journey to find a place between the two extremes.

Pangloss makes it clear that *Candide* should accept his words as the truth of authority and avoid working issues out for himself: "Doubt is a word like death, my son. When man begins to doubt he begins to think for himself and thus ignores the teachings of philosophy and upsets his stomach."<sup>106</sup> *Candide* quickly learns the horrors of going against society. In Lisbon the authorities have declared, "We have found the true cause of earthquakes. Witches and wizards have moved among you."<sup>107</sup> A trial sequence follows that mocks the McCarthy hearings just a few years after they ended.

*Candide* was produced in 1956, after McCarthy's death, but still a time of extreme anti-Communist fears in America. Questionable evidence, guilt by association, and anonymous accusers dominated the communist hunts. "The U. S. Immigration services, in an attempt to prove an alien was a communist, had a witness testify that the alien preferred soccer to football. 'What an insult to this country,' added the witness."<sup>108</sup> Merely believing in the ideas of Marx and Lenin was enough to convict defendants and sentence them to prison. During this time hundreds of people were blacklisted in Hollywood, 2600 people fired by the federal government, and nationwide employees of industries ranging from General Electric to local school districts were fired for being communists, or suspected communists, or friends of suspected communists. So extreme were the concerns that

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2-10.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2-11.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Miller and Nowak, 22.

Charles Bohlen (Eisenhower's nominee as Ambassador to the Soviet Union) was questioned for his close ties to former presidents Roosevelt and Truman. *The Selected Works of Thomas Jefferson* (edited by Philip Foner) and *The Children's Hour* by *Candide's* librettist Lillian Hellman were among numerous books removed from international State Department libraries because McCarthy thought the authors were communists. *Life* magazine featured both Hellman and Bernstein in 1949 with 48 other luminaries, including Albert Einstein, Dorothy Parker, Arthur Miller, Langston Hughes, Aaron Copland, Clifford Odets, and Charlie Chaplin. The article, however, did not celebrate these artists' talents, but admonished them for being "Dupes and Fellow Travelers [who] Dress Up Communist Fronts."<sup>109</sup> The trial sequence in Lisbon clearly satirized anti-Communist paranoia. The parallels include the charges that these people cause earthquakes (or revolutions) and the demands that suspects name names or be killed (or fired, prevented from finding future work, and possibly imprisoned).

In *Candide's* trial sequence, the defense lawyer is paid by the inquisitors, and he helps them conduct trials. The first man is brought before the inquisitors and they immediately sentence him to death. The lawyer objects, "We must observe certain legal, civil and moral laws as written into the code of western liberalism. It won't take long." He and the inquisitors ask the crowd "Shall we let the sinner go or try him?" "Is the culprit innocent or guilty?" "Shall we pardon him or hang him?" The crowd yells "Try Him" "Guilty," and "Hang Him."<sup>110</sup> Hellman's crowd blurs any distinction between juries and lynch mobs. The

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<sup>109</sup> *Life Magazine*, April 14, 1949.

<sup>110</sup> *Candide*, 1-2-12.

“legal, civil and moral laws” based in “western liberalism” are a veneer to hide the brutality of power, but they do not control or infringe upon that power.

The next suspect, however, realizes that he can escape death, and chooses to admit his gullibility: “Great judges, I can see now that I was a tool and a fool. I was poor, I was lonely.” The judges ask for the names of his associates, and he protests, “Though I honor this court/ And approve of its aims, I must draw the line/ At the naming of names.” The judges cough, and he gives in. He names fifteen associates (including Mother and Father) before he is sentenced to ten years in prison. The judges then continue to sentence other people to death.<sup>111</sup> As soon as the executions are over, an earthquake destroys the city, which demonstrates the futility of persecuting people inside the society for fears of outside threats.

*Candide* is laced with other satirical jibes at society. For example, two noblemen try to seduce Cunegonde when she sees people begging for food outside the door. She comments, “The sight of hungry people makes me sad.” The Marquis, ever concerned about her pain, orders a footman, “Have the beggars arrested.” Cunegonde is grateful for his kindness and thanks him for his solution to the problem for “It makes me so sad to see hungry men.”<sup>112</sup> During the fifties, urban flight resulted in the most segregated society in American history with regard to race and class. Throughout the 1950s, one and a half million homes were built each year, almost entirely in the suburbs. As white people left urban areas for the homogenous suburbs, African-Americans were streaming out of the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 1-2-13.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 1-3-6.

south and into the cities.<sup>113</sup> With a collapsing tax base, the cities became financially unstable and increasingly poor; ironically, the problem of the middle class flight from the cities and the resulting collapse of their financial base was often blamed on the arrival of economically disadvantaged blacks. Cunegonde reacts as many privileged people did at the time; it is the confrontation with poverty that makes her sad, not the poverty itself. Many people found comfort and avoided unpleasantness by increased exclusion.

*Candide* is a fantasy. Characters die and appear several scenes later. Candide himself takes an air-balloon to a perfect land and returns only for his idealized love of Cunegonde. Surprisingly, the conclusion comes only when the characters recognize the fairytale as an artificial construction. They are then able to start building a little home for themselves out of the ruins of their lives. It is the only moment after the overture that the music develops sincerely, through lyrical lines and lush harmonies. It alludes to the fact that Americans needed to stop their involvement in international affairs (which consisted mostly of economic imperialism and virulent anti-Communism), recognize that they are not and will never be perfect, and tend to their own concerns. They need to stop searching outside themselves for a magic product or idealized way of life:

You've been a fool and so have I . . .

Let us try before we die/To make some sense of life.

We're neither pure nor sweet nor good;

We'll marry even so

We'll build our house, and chop our wood

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<sup>113</sup> According to U.S. Census reports, in 1940 6,253,588 African-Americans lived in urban areas. By 1950 that number rose by a third to 9,392,688. In 1960 (not including the new states of Alaska and Hawaii) it again increased by a third to 13,781,264. During the same time, the rural population decreased by 1,533,077 to 5,058,853. *Historical Statistics*, 12.

And make our garden grow.<sup>114</sup>

*Candide* ultimately implies that the characters (and society) need to accept human imperfection, stop their interference with other people, and focus on the smaller concerns of how to live with integrity.

The musical develops both radical satire and parody, distancing itself from the audience in several ways. The show does not follow the logic of humanity (with dead characters continually reappearing), and develops taboo subjects (this includes a song where Pangloss glorifies the syphilis from which he is dying). Bernstein wrote music that is overtly theatrical and almost operatic at times. Cunegonde's elaborate coloraturas, extended sung recitative sequences, choral repetition of solo lyrics, and overblown orchestrations all work to prevent any emotional or sentimental identification. "Make Our Garden Grow" allows the audience a sense of completion, but it is so different from the rest of the evening that the emotional fulfillment would have been minimal. In fact, the style throughout the show seems closer to a cartoon than a traditional musical. At the same time, the parallels with the political and social movements of the time are explicit and obvious.

### Incidental Satire and Politically Themed Musicals

*Candide*'s composer Leonard Bernstein went on to create several other projects with political commentary, and all of these took place in New York. *Trouble in Tahiti* includes a suburban housewife who complains about "a terrible, awful movie." The song satirizes current films complete with Orientalist subplots. *Wonderful Town* follows two young women and their move to New York. One song, "What a Waste," deals with young artists who move to New York and waste their talent and lives to do menial labor. "One Hundred Easy

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<sup>114</sup> *Candide*, 2-3-11.

Way (To Lose a Man)” parodies advice columns of the time and satirizes the sexist, helpless, feminine role that society expected of women. The way to lose a man is to be self-confident, intelligent, or physically fit. Any knowledge about baseball, mechanics, grammar, or swimming is sure to drive a man off, but being a simpering, helpless, flighty woman will land you a husband. Women have to pretend to be helpless for men. *On the Town* pokes fun at intellectuals (who lose control) and various other New York types.

The most interesting piece of Leonard Bernstein’s further satire is a scene from his collaboration with the young lyricist Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story*. The musical updates *Romeo and Juliet* and focuses on racial tensions in New York’s West Side between Puerto Ricans and Italians. Most of the commentary is based on a strong emotional and sentimental foundation. After the rumble in the second act that results in several murders, the Italian gang cools off, and they deride societal expectations and explanations in “Officer Krupke.”

In “Officer Krupke,” Sondheim and Bernstein satirized the common conceptions that surrounded one of the pressing social concerns of the time. During the 1950s, the issue of juvenile delinquency became a national concern. The publication of Benjamin Fine’s book *1,000,000 Delinquents* gives a sense of the perception that the problem was ubiquitous and out of control. Young people found few socially sanctioned methods to challenge the system or even to exceed its limitations. Schools and employers wanted students and employees who would support the status quo, rather than question it, or even excel in it. In “Officer Krupke,” the young delinquents travel from the policeman, to a judge, to an analyst, to a social worker, to jail. The root causes of poverty are made clear; these boys were unwanted children with delinquent parents and few escape routes. As each professional passes the kids through the system and the boys display every greater delight in

their societal transgressions, the entire penal structure is characterized as incompetent and foolish. Simultaneously, the Jets mock conformity to the social status quo: “They say go earn a buck/Like be a soda jerker/Which means like be a schmuck.”<sup>115</sup> The only options are open rebellion or a dead-end job.

Despite several very intelligent satires, the political timidity of the 1950s runs through most pieces. Lerner and Loewe managed to take the always-political George Bernard Shaw and turn his *Pygmalion* into a fairy tale in *My Fair Lady*. Bock and Harnick developed two musicals that they based in political themes but which were ultimately conservative. Both *Fiorello!* (1959) and *Tenderloin* (1960) centered on an earnest politician or preacher attempting to deal with political corruption in a by-gone time. Both of them have very clever songs that detail the inherent corruption. “Little Tin Box” deals with mobsters who explain that they became millionaires at blue-collar jobs when they skipped lunches, saved bottles, or quit smoking. They subsequently put that money in “A Little Tin Box.” “How the Money Changes Hands” details how prostitutes pay off policemen who then pay off judicial and political figures, which ensures the smooth operation of the brothel. Both shows focus on how the hero wins a major triumph after a defeat (a lost election or a faked scandal), and both shows imply that even if New York (and probably the country) used to be very corrupt, things are much better now.

In 1937 Rodgers and Hart’s *I’d Rather Be Right* dealt with the current president in a sarcastic style, cutting him down as hopelessly foolish and overbearing. More than two decades later, Bock and Harnick portray LaGuardia (who was Roosevelt’s contemporary and no longer in office) as a man who works with angels. Their only criticism of LaGuardia is

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<sup>115</sup> Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), Arthur Laurents (book), Leonard Bernstein (music), *West Side Story*, 1956, in *Ten Great Musicals of the American Theatre* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1973), 401.

that he single-mindedly worked for good and often asked his employees and wife to make sacrifices of time. *Tenderloin* is interesting in that the prostitutes have much snappier songs than the good guys, the good guys have a really hard time in resisting their wares, and the Madame is redeemed through marrying a religious crusader. Despite the acknowledgment that prostitution might be fun, the plot clearly supports political reform. As in *Fiorello!*, *Tenderloin* implies that political corruption is an issue of the past.

From the time of *Oklahoma!* until the 1960s when rock and roll supplanted Tin Pan Alley as the generator of hits, musical theatre enjoyed a privileged place with cultural approbation, popular appeal, and more financial resources per show than ever before. Broadway also worked to develop a new business model; it generated less money (adjusted for inflation) than during the 20s, fewer shows were produced, shows were expected to run much longer, and hit shows each generated far more income. Because of the organization of Broadway at the time (with numerous individual producers and no corporate entities), and probably also because of its cultural appeal and limited geographic and class barriers, theatre was not targeted by McCarthyism the way movies were. Nevertheless, musical theatre reflected the political timidity of the time. Although Broadway took a lead in presenting a less racist view during the late 40s, the overall political commentary of Broadway during these two decades was very conservative.

## Chapter Four

### Yip Harburg and Musical Protests

Songs are the pulse of a nation's heart. . . . The lyricist, like any artist, cannot be neutral. [A lyricist] should be committed to the side of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

~Yip Harburg

E. Y. "Yip" Harburg started work as a lyricist during the 1930s and consciously developed politically effective songs and shows. Harburg is one of the most successful satirists in musical theatre because he was able to combine satire with the popular sentimental musicals, succeeding commercially in conservative social periods. Harburg's lyrics are

so often cited as models by later generations of Broadway lyricists that he might be considered the most influential of all the masters. This is because he was one of the first to write lyrics to character and managed to combine our best lyric-writing traditions: the wit of [Lorenz] Hart and [Cole] Porter, the warmth of [Oscar] Hammerstein, the directness of [Irving] Berlin, the spirits of Ira Gershwin.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to writing well-crafted lyrics, Harburg "has become the motivating force behind each production of which he is a party. Usually it is Harburg who first gets the idea and then

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<sup>1</sup> Yip Harburg quoted in Harold Meyerson & Ernie Harburg's *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979) 61.

finds collaborators he believes will be best suited to a particular project.”<sup>3</sup> Despite these achievements, Harburg’s work has been relatively unknown both because he is “accused of injecting too much social consciousness in his plays,” and because he worked with numerous composers while musical theatre history tends to favor steady teams.<sup>4</sup>

Harburg’s theatrical work as a lyricist, librettist, director, and conceiver of projects combined with his theoretical discussions illuminate both potentials and pitfalls of political content in musical theatre. Harburg continually tested different ways of creating political appeals, demonstrating the impact a single artist can exert on the form. He proved that “the original, heedless, satiric *and political* show, musical comedy in its purest and most irreverent state,” could be successfully adapted to follow the Rodgers and Hammerstein model “provided one set one’s tale in fantasy.”<sup>5</sup> Harburg succeeded and failed spectacularly. The commercial success of *Finian’s Rainbow* at the beginning of the Cold War and the House of Un-American Activities Committee hearings proves that satire handled with whimsy and joy can be commercially successful in the most difficult times. Three years later Harburg developed *Flahooley*, which demarcated the limits of satire based in fury.

Throughout his life, Harburg experimented with how much and what kinds of political content were feasible in musicals. His work develops covert and radical satire and sentimental appeals. His political work on Broadway spans nearly the entire period of satirical shows, from the empathetic “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?” in 1932 to *The Happiest Girl in the World* in 1961. Harburg successfully wrote for Hollywood (including *The*

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy: The Story of the American Musical Stage as Told Through the Careers of its Foremost Composers and Lyricists* (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1960), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 147. Emphasis in original.

*Wizard of Oz*) until he was blacklisted, and he experimented with poetry. Finally, he wrote and spoke about his conception of the interplay between songs and political movements.

Harburg first gained notice with “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?,” which was featured in *Americana*, a 1932 revue. It became a rallying point in the 1932 election and is given prominent mention in Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, a book that rarely deals with songs.<sup>6</sup> Most of his other songs in the 1930s worked through intellectual and comedic appeal. The year after *Oklahoma!*, Harburg experimented with many of its formalistic elements in *Bloomer Girl*. Harburg’s show, however, combines dramaturgic approaches of Rodgers and Hammerstein with 1930s satires. He develops the characters sentimentally and pulls the focal point of the action away from the main couple to include the social activities of the time. His next major show, *Finian’s Rainbow*, effectively combines both satirical and sentimental traditions; politically it is the strongest of the commercially successful political musicals on Broadway during the forties or the fifties. Again, Harburg employs elements of the satirical musicals to appeal through comedy and intellect and simultaneously uses the tools of sentimental musicals to appeal through emotional empathy. Harburg’s next show, *Flahooley*, was a financial failure and demonstrates some of the limitations of the form. Like the 1927 *Strike Up the Band*, it is an uncompromising analysis of many social issues at the time, but the book is unable to successfully focus on specific issues. This made it very difficult for the audience to find an immediate connection with the show. Harburg continued working throughout the fifties and sixties, but he never again achieved the synthesis of political commentary and popular appeal.

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<sup>6</sup> I have been unable to locate a libretto for this revue.

### *Biography*

Yip Harburg (1896-1981) grew up in New York. A child of Jewish, working-class immigrants, he came from a very strong leftist tradition. He attended CCNY's special high school program that combined both high school and college. Students were seated alphabetically by last name, and he became close friends with the boy who sat right before him, Ira Gershwin. When Harburg became enamoured of the verse of W.S. Gilbert, Ira Gershwin introduced him to Arthur Sullivan's musical settings and the theatrical context. They published light verse for their school paper under the column heading "Yip and Gersh." Whereas Gershwin went into lyric writing after a few temporary jobs, Harburg was from a poor family and went into business. The collapse of his business, however, forced him to reevaluate his career; he finally followed his dream of writing lyrics, and Ira Gershwin became his mentor.

After Harburg's early success with "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" (music by Jay Gorney), Harburg collaborated on numerous other shows throughout the thirties, but he possessed relatively little stature and the political commentary was usually cut before the shows opened. For example, Harburg conceived the plot for *Hooney for What!*, which is about a scientist who discovers a gas so deadly it would kill all of humanity. He will not share the recipe and spies from all over the world descend on the town and attempt to steal the specifications for the gas. Many of the political ideas were cut during the out-of-town preview process; the show starred comedian Ed Wynn and finally ultimately focused on screwball comedy and conventional musical extravaganza elements. The producers extensively curtailed the political comments. For example, Yip Harburg and (the then unknown choreographer) Agnes DeMille conceived "Under the Shade of the New Apple Tree" to feature the women choreographed with their backs to the audience. They would

turn around at the very end to reveal that all the women were dressed in gas masks. The masks were cut, and, according to performer Dorothy Bird, the number became a “harem” number:

It baffled me to hear that under the costume, we would be wearing only the briefest, flesh-colored, net G-string-type panty, and no brassiere. . . . The dresser for the show casually remarked to me, ‘This dance has been chosen as a display case for the harem. It’s a long-standing tradition, you know.’ I did not know then what she was talking about. I had no idea just how revealing the costume would be under the lights.<sup>7</sup>

According to Bird, only Agnes DeMille and Vincent Minnelli, the director who previously worked with the Shuberts on *At Home Abroad*, *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*, and *The Show Is On*, seemed to take the social comment seriously.<sup>8</sup>

The whimsy of *Hooray for What!* gained Harburg and Arlen their next project, the 1939 MGM adaptation of Frank L. Baum’s classic children’s novel, *The Wizard of Oz*. Although the movie is now known as a classic and successful film, it received relatively little commercial success until its broadcast on television. At the time, *Gone with the Wind* completely overshadowed *The Wizard of Oz*. Nevertheless *The Wizard of Oz* gave Harburg and Arlen more artistic power. They wrote a successful song for the Marx brothers (“Lydia, the Tattooed Lady”), the movie musical *Cabin in the Sky*, and various songs for shows and films. Their next full show, *Bloomer Girl*, opened during World War II (1944) and ran for 654 performances. Harburg then wrote the immensely popular *Finian’s Rainbow* (with Burton

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<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Bird and Joyce Greenberg “A Bird’s-Eye View of *Hooray for What!*” *The Passing Show Shubert Review of the Shubert Archives* 18: 1, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Lane), which ran for 745 performances and was made into a movie directed by Francis Ford Copola with Fred Astaire and Petula Clark.

After *Finnian's Rainbow*, Harburg went to Hollywood again. By 1950 the blacklist had begun to make a huge impact on who could work in Hollywood and on how people viewed political causes. Most liberal Jewish people involved with the film industry were prevented from working unless they “named names” – or turned in other people who were suspected of communism or liberal political action. Those people could then not work until they named additional colleagues. Harburg was no exception. While he was working on a musical version of *Huckleberry Finn*, Harburg was blacklisted. He refused to cooperate with HUAC. Thus, he could no longer work in Hollywood. Even if the communist-hunts had been merited, people like Harburg should never have been included; he never joined the communist party, and no one ever named him as a communist. Later, when Harburg attempted to get himself off the blacklist in 1955, he met with Roy Brewer of the American Legion. The American Legion charged, among other things, that the song called “Happiness Is a Thing Called Joe” was a paean to Joseph Stalin. With lyrics like “He’ll kiss me an’ it’s Christmas ev’rywhere” this seems rather farfetched.<sup>9</sup> It is more likely that they were simply punishing Harburg for his outspoken liberal views. Harburg refused to write an article vilifying the communists and his name remained on the blacklist.

Unable to work in Hollywood, Harburg expressed his intellectual view of McCarthyism and his personal rage at having been blacklisted in *Flahooley*, a radical musical satire. *Flahooley* lampooned the underpinnings of economic capitalism, the red scare and the witch hunts, the commercialization of Christmas, the consumerization and conformity of

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Meyerson, 180.

childhood through toys and peer pressure, atomic power, Orientalism, and a number of other issues. The show encompasses a charming and playful score, but the book, in all its various incarnations, is difficult to stage. *Jamaica*, Harburg's next project, originally started out as a show for Harry Belafonte called *Pigeon Island*. It focused on the cultural changes to the Caribbean way of life when an American hires Caribbeans to produce commodities for the United States. When Belafonte underwent surgery before the show started production, Lena Horne agreed to do the show, most of the political commentary was cut, and it became primarily a vehicle for her. In *The Happiest Girl in the World* (1961), Harburg worked with the songs of Jacques Offenbach, a nineteenth century composer. He updated Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to comment on 1960s American foreign policy. The show is an odd hybrid of old Greek comedy, nineteenth century comic opera, and American musical comedy. "It manages to be at once about eight years ahead of its time thematically and eighty years behind it in style and music."<sup>10</sup> His last Broadway musical, *Darling of the Day* (1968), focused on a painter who pretends to be his butler to eschew sycophantic and superficial admirers. It is a love story with relatively little political content. Harburg continued writing until his death from a heart attack in 1981. He lectured on politics and musical theatre and helped form the Tisch program for songwriters at NYU, the first academic program to nurture songwriters in musical theatre. Throughout his life, he promoted numerous progressive political causes.

### *Forms and Themes*

On numerous occasions, Harburg specified that his primary interest was in combining music and politics. His conscious interweaving of political and emotional

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<sup>10</sup> Meyerson and Harburg, 316.

arguments in songs and shows influenced many songwriters and influenced the development of the genre. As previously noted, the songs before Rodgers and Hammerstein generally made their political comments through intellectual and comedic arguments, whereas after *Oklahoma!* writers employed sentimental appeals that developed emotional specificity. The shows in the forties and fifties tended to avoid political and intellectual arguments. Harburg worked to combine both approaches. Even in his early work like “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?” his songs are sung by specific characters who suffer real emotions from specific social conditions.

Harburg dealt with numerous issues in his work. Some of the common themes include political rights for disenfranchised people (especially civil rights and women’s rights), capitalism and economic justice, and (after McCarthyism started) political witch-hunts. In addition to developing a wide range of issues, he also combined various kinds of approaches. He managed to synthesize sentimental and emotional appeals with satirical and intellectual comments. Inherent in Harburg’s work is a tension about how to make political arguments effective. His approaches vary from pounding out a social message, to teasing out a political idea, to laughing at social conditions. Harburg knew he needed to use humor to make his points. As he noted in an interview with Studs Terkel,

That’s the most subtle way of getting an idea across. The subtle way is through what Churchill called “the soft under-belly of the soul.” And naturally, that kind of subliminal and subtle thing, doesn’t arouse people, doesn’t make them angry; it makes them listen; it makes them laugh and it makes them swallow the gilded and sugared pill.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Yip Harburg and Studs Terkel Interview, 1979. Transcript NYPL-PA; Harburg Papers, \*T-Mss 1990-002 Box 24, folder 14.

Throughout his career, Harburg worked to incorporate his political views into a popular format, and until the ascendancy of Rock and Roll, which he did not understand or appreciate, he usually succeeded.

Occasionally Harburg tends towards the preachy. In 1972 he wrote parodies of songs from *Finnian's Rainbow* for a fundraiser for George McGovern, the Democratic presidential candidate for 1972, at the Palace Theatre in New York. For this very specialized audience he wrote several caustic songs, focusing on Nixon's policies of "Screw the People." An early poem written included the lines "We must win this war, sez Nixon/For I can't lose face . . . So millions of faces/Of cheap Asian races/Can worship it from their grave."<sup>12</sup> His rewrite of "Look to the Rainbow" demonstrates Harburg's range. The original song, with its sweeping melodic line and optimistic lyrics, pulled a general audience into a world where ideals and optimism are valued and created a place for the political argument based in idealism that follows. The rewrite for McGovern is very intelligent but also cynical. It probably would alienate anyone who did not already agree with the point of view expressed, but such people would rarely pay money to attend a McGovern fundraiser. Harburg developed the skills to create a wide range of appeals, from emotional empathy to unsoftened invective:

"Look To The Rainbow"

(Original)

On the day I was born,

"Dickey's Red Rainbow"

(McGovern fundraiser)

On the day he was born

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<sup>12</sup> Yip Harburg, Notes for the McGovern show at the Palace Theatre, 1972; Performed Oct 29, 1972, New York Palace Theatre; handwritten notes filed in Harburg Papers at NYPL-PA; \*T-Mss 1990-002 Box 5, folder 5.

<sup>13</sup> Yip Harburg and Fred Saily, *Finnian's Rainbow* (New York: Random House, 1947), 27-28.

Said my father, said he,	Dickey drooled from his bib
“I’ve an elegant legacy	Said I’m a runnin’ for president
Waitin’ for ye.	Right from this crib
’Tis a rhyme for your lips,	So he looked at his mommy
And a song for your heart	And quick bugged her phone
To sing it whenever	Cried Mommy’s a commie
The world falls apart.”	And called for Roy Cohn . . .
Look, look, look to the rainbow,	Red, red, Dickey’s red rainbow
Follow it over the hill and stream	Hung over the nation
Look, look, look to the rainbow	And brought home the dead
Follow the fellow	Crime – drugs, thrived with inflation
Who follows a dream . . .	While Dickey saved
Follow the fellow, follow the fellow	The world of the Reds . . .
Follow the fellow	Who could follow a fellow
Who follows a dream <sup>13</sup>	Much fouler than this? <sup>14</sup>

The parody was appropriate for that audience, but a comparison with the original demonstrates Harburg’s skill in appealing to a larger audience.

The most common theme in Harburg’s work is the issue of social and economic justice. This began in his first hit and continued through his political work until the end of his life. In “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?,” which premiered one month before the Hoover/Roosevelt election, Harburg dealt with the issue by assuming an empathetic response on the part of the audience, but he simultaneously made it clear that the argument

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<sup>14</sup> McGovern show notes.

did not rely exclusively on empathy; a sense of justice developed the appeal just as well. The singer of the song presents a history of a sort of “Everyman” of the American working class before the Depression. He bought into the myth of the American dream. He helped build the country and win the war:

They used to tell me/I was building a dream . . .  
When there was earth to plough/Or guns to bear  
I was always there right on the job. . . .  
Why should I be standing in line/Just waiting for bread? . . .  
Once I built a railroad/Made it run  
Made it race against time  
Once I built a railroad/Now it's done.  
Brother can you spare a dime? . . .  
Once in khaki suits/Gee, we looked swell  
Full of that Yankee Doodle-de-dum  
Half a million boots went sloggin' through hell.  
I was the kid with the drum.<sup>15</sup>

The song ends with a direct appeal to the listener and changes the emotional cast of the refrain to develop a tinge of a threat: “Say, don't you remember? I'm your pal. Buddy, can you spare a dime?”<sup>16</sup> The shift from the softer fricative tones of “brother” to the stop-

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Meyerson, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

plosive staccato of “buddy” imply that if the singer is not given justice, there is always the chance that he will take by force.<sup>17</sup>

The song works as an emotional appeal — the listener feels sorry for a guy down on his luck. However, it moves one step beyond that, for the singer makes it clear that he was part of “the mob” that “followed the dream” with “peace and glory ahead.” He invested in the country with labor and loyalty, and he was discarded when his project was done.

Although he demonstrated allegiance to the country, society had no fidelity toward him. As Harburg noted, the song emphasizes “the man who creates is not always the man who gets the profit. He’s always working for the man who sells him. So the bewildered person in the street”<sup>18</sup> says “I made an investment in this country. Where the hell are my dividends? . . . It’s more than a bit of pathos. It does not reduce him to a beggar. It makes him a dignified human, asking questions— and a bit outraged, too, as he should be.”<sup>19</sup>

It was really trying to expound a social theory, the theory that our whole system of capitalism, of free enterprise, is based on rather an illogical and unscientific groundwork, that we each exploit each other, we each get as much out of the wealth of the world, that your ruthlessness and our chutzpah and ability to step over others gives us permission to enjoy, and most people who don’t have that kind of power are left penniless, even

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<sup>17</sup> See Edith Skinner, *Speak With Distinction* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 1990) for discussion of fricative and stop-plosives.

<sup>18</sup> Lyrics and Lyricists series at the Ninety-Second Street Y, recorded December 20, 1970. Transcript available at NYPL-PA; \*T-Mss 1990-002, Box 25. Also quoted in *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Harburg quoted in Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 20. Quoted in *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz* and *A People’s History of the United States*.

though they do most of the producing.<sup>20</sup>

Harburg's economic analysis was not unique or revolutionary. What made Harburg unique was his success at dramatizing his social criticism and having his criticism widely disseminated as entertainment.

One month before Roosevelt's election, Harburg succeeded in making a victim of the Depression sympathetic. According to Harburg, "Republicans got pretty worried about it ["Brother Can You Spare a Dime?"]. Some of the network radio people were told to lay low on the song. In some cases, they tried to ban it from the air."<sup>21</sup> The song became the "acknowledged anthem . . . for the millions who would hear and sing it from then until the Depression's end."<sup>22</sup> "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" demonstrates Harburg's ability to consciously develop political ideas for a popular audience. That consciousness, combined with his talent, developed several popular political shows at times when it would seem unlikely for them to succeed.

### ***Bloomer Girl (1944)***

*Bloomer Girl* is formally much closer to the Rodgers and Hammerstein style of an "integrated musical," and develops progressive political issues that matched the social conditions during World War II. The political comments are made primarily through sentimental appeals, with some incidental satire. Harburg includes a romance at the center of the plot, but he draws a much larger circle to include political movements of the period.

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<sup>20</sup> Yip Harburg and Studs Terkel Interview, 1979.

<sup>21</sup> Yip Harburg in Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Davis, *Scandals and Follies: The Rise and Fall of the Great Broadway Revue* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 304. Milton Meltzer even named his history of the Depression *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? The Great Depression 1929-1933* (New York: New American Library, 1977).

*Bloomer Girl* focuses on the historic figure Amelia Bloomer (renamed Dolly Bloomer for the show), and her fictitious niece Evelina. It is set in Cicero Falls in 1861 – clearly Seneca Falls, the home of the 1848 women’s caucus. Ms. Bloomer published *The Lily*, a magazine that advocated women’s rights. She rebelled primarily against hoopskirts and corsets and favored replacing current fashion with “bloomers”— full pants gathered at the ankle and a knee length skirt with no hoops. At the time, hoopskirts seriously restricted women’s movement to such an extent that women were in danger of being burned alive in house fires because they could not get out of doors in their hoopskirts and the steel boning held the fabric outward, which provided ready oxygen to feed any flames on their skirts.<sup>23</sup>

Even though women were severely bound by the corsets, they also supported dresses that often weighed more than forty pounds of both steel and fabric. Mothers often sewed their daughters into their corsets and let them out only once a week to bathe. The ideal waist was thirteen inches and the ideal circumference of a skirt at the floor spanned ten yards (this included some ruffling so the actual circumference could cover about fifteen feet).<sup>24</sup> The idealization of feminine beauty also helped push society into the industrialized economy, based on the mass production of goods. As H. Mayhew wrote of the London economy in 1865:

It is no longer a matter affecting merely a few work girls in the London shops. It extends itself to the forge, the factory and the mine. At this moment and at any throughout the year, men and boys are toiling in the

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<sup>23</sup> Rachel H. Kemper, *Costume* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1977), 131-132. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 90-91, 145-146; Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 97-98; 171-174.

<sup>24</sup> Kemper.

bowels of the earth to obtain the ore of iron which fire and furnace and steam will in due time, by many elaborate processes, convert into steel for petticoats.<sup>25</sup>

In America, the dress reform movement of the second half of the nineteenth century developed out of feminism, concerns about health and hygiene, and out of the movement for utopianism. Followers believed by returning to a more natural state, women would be healthier, able to live autonomous lives, and/or be better mothers.<sup>26</sup>

*Bloomer Girl* dramatizes concerns of the women's rights movement, around the time of the Civil War, analyzing the political impact of clothing, the Underground Railroad, suffrage, and, albeit obliquely, birth control. It is the only Broadway musical ever to address the women's rights movement at length, and it probably could not have succeeded at any other historical moment. During World War II, for the first time since the industrial revolution, middle class women were needed as laborers in factories, and they performed work traditionally reserved for men and received wages on a par with men. Evelina's father manufactures hoopskirts and Evelina rebels against his business and expectations. She supports her aunt Bloomer and the crusades for women's rights and abolition. Each of Evelina's sisters is married to a salesman who handles a region of the country, which keeps the business in the family. Evelina's father sets her up with a potential salesman for the southern market for hoopskirts, Jefferson Calhoun of Kentucky. Meanwhile, the "bloomer girls" are working on the Underground Railroad and help free Jeff's slave, Pompey. Again,

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<sup>25</sup> H. Mayhew, *The Shops and Companies of London and the Trades and Manufactories of Great Britain* (1865; Quoted in Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995], 160.

<sup>26</sup> See Steele, Davis.

the United States' World War II reliance on the labor of African-Americans helped make the positive view of African-Americans commercially viable.

The show ends with the couples united. Whereas many musicals expect both romantic leads to change to accommodate the other partner, in *Bloomer Girl* only the men change to accept the women. Jeff comes to support Evelina's crusades and helps Pompey escape. The sons-in-law don bloomers as part of their military uniform (based on the Zouave uniforms), and the governor renews his long-term affection for Dolly Bloomer, gets her out of jail, and keeps Pompey from being sent back.<sup>27</sup> Following a Shavian formula of converting characters who can be enlightened and neutralizing those who cannot, the show ends with the announcements of Evelina's father's manufacture of bloomers for the war and Dolly's intention to become the governor.

*Bloomer Girl* uses many of its songs to develop the love plot or the family's idealized state of being. Songs are used to present societal expectations and to debunk them, as in "Sunday in Cicero Falls," which shows a bucolic community going to church followed by Evelina's satirization of the hypocrisy inherent in their attitudes. Aside from a charming love song, "Right as the Rain," the most interesting songs are "It Was Good Enough For Grandma (But It Ain't Good Enough For Us)" and "The Eagle and Me." The former satirized gender stereotypes and argued that women will no longer accept the status quo of a sexist patriarchy. "The Eagle and Me" is thematically simple, explaining Pompey's desire for freedom as the natural desire for all living things. The song is a haunting example of an empathetic appeal.

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<sup>27</sup> During the beginning of the Civil War there were numerous groups of men from the North who formed their own small units. The Zouave regiment wore pants that resembled bloomers.

Agnes DeMille choreographed the original ballet for the Broadway production of *Bloomer Girl* and recreated the Civil War Ballet for a television version of the show in the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> The ballet focuses on the women as the men are at war. The stage was empty with a backdrop of three silhouetted trees and a cloudy sunset. The ballet started with a single drum throbbing as the men go to war and the women deal with their frustration and survival. The ballet interweaves musical themes from the show as well as “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord.” As the men are at war, the women are occupied in ritualized and repeated movements of rudimentary survival that are occasionally broken by a single woman exploding with rage or fear. The men come home and the women are stunned into stillness. The woman whose husband did not return mourns as the rest of the company celebrates in a development of community. Although couples dance together for brief interludes, this portion is dominated by the community. The widow haunts them and goes around the dancers alone and in grief. In the end, two women help the widow up, and the three dancers hold their hands up, creating a sense of strength, survival, and mourning. The ballet uses very simple steps, and is in many ways closer to choreographed acting than a typical conception of ballet. The dancers use broad physical movement but employ very limited facial expressions. As a result, the dance does not descend into melodrama. It creates very specific mise-en-scenes, but the audience fills in the emotion.

*Bloomer Girl's* biggest difficulty is contextualizing the ballet. Going into the ballet works well, as the declaration of the Civil War creates a clean transition. However, the ballet

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<sup>28</sup> The ballets were not identical. Dozens of measures of music was cut for the television version, and photos indicate similar themes and movements but different execution. The television version, however, is the best documentation that exists.

gives an abstracted look at the entire war through the resolution, whereas the scene after the ballet takes place one week later with the preparation for the men's departure for the Civil War. Part of this may be because Harburg planned to cut the ballet after the first preview, but capitulated based on the audience's reaction. For whatever reasons, the ballet takes the viewer on a very specific journey, and the show then picks up exactly where it left off before the ballet started.

In *Bloomer Girl*, the issues of social justice arise primarily through the subjects of gender and race. Unlike most of Harburg's other shows, class issues are non-existent. The women are, however, clearly the more privileged minority. They enjoy both the financial and educational resources to challenge the status quo and help enslaved African-Americans through the Underground Railroad. Their battle song is aware of history, and they are clear about their proposed solutions.

When Granny was a lassie that tyrant known as man  
Thought woman's place was just the space/ Around a frying pan . . .  
She had no voice in gov'ment/ And bondage was her fate . . .  
Who says it's nix for us to mix/ Our sex with politics . . .  
Look twice before you step on/ The fair sex of the earth  
Beware our secret weapon: we could stop giving birth.<sup>29</sup>

"It Was Good Enough For Grandma" is sung as a call to battle and is based on a brisk tempo with the feel of a march. The appeal to the audience is grounded in intellect and entertainment. It is an upbeat number and the women are smart and funny. There is no

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<sup>29</sup> Yip Harburg, (lyrics), Sig Herzig and Fred Saisy (book), and Harold Arlen (music), based on a play by Dan and Lilith James, *Bloomer Girl*, first stage version for Broadway, 1944, NYPL-PA \*T-MSS 1990-002, Box 8 folder 2, 1-3-5— 1-3-6.

emotional appeal; it relies entirely on intellect, humor, and rhythm. The dance that immediately follows is about the comic character (Daisy, a maid) who learns to get in line with the revolution. The first half of the dance portrays things as they are; the women scrub, sew, and perform considerable manual labor to the extent that they even become pistons in a machine. The comical frustration of a single woman who tries to thread a needle and the automation of the movement prevents the viewer from empathy or identification. The alternative to the patriarchal status quo, however, is hardly appealing. The women throw their pantomimed babies away and Daisy, who wants to keep hers, is forced to follow suit. The women's movement, as choreographed by Agnes DeMille in this number, is a better alternative than the status quo, but it is thoroughly regimented and unable to incorporate dissent.

The issue of slavery is dealt with in two songs and a reenactment of *Unde Tom's Cabin*. "The Eagle and Me" is probably the most famous song from the show. A soaring ballad, its appeal is based primarily on emotional pathos, but like "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" it also develops a sense of justice. This time, however, Harburg invokes the Lord and the scripture. It is one of the few times that Harburg, who seemed to have been an agnostic, makes an outright moral and religious appeal, as opposed to an intellectual or emotional appeal.<sup>30</sup> The singer starts out with a simple spoken question: "What makes a

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<sup>30</sup> In *Rhymes for the Irreverent* (New York: Grossman Publishers, Inc, 1965) Harburg has poems about faith that include

Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree;  
 And only God who makes the tree also makes the fools like me.  
 But only fools like me, you see, can make a God who makes a tree (2).  
 His poem for the "Realist" says:  
 "For what we are about to receive, Oh Lord, 'tis Thee we thank,"  
 Said the Cannibal as he cut a slice off the missionary's shank (3).

gopher leave his hole, tremblin' with fear and fright?"<sup>31</sup> The answer invokes a spiritual dimension that Harburg rarely developed: "Maybe the gopher got a soul, longing to see the light."<sup>32</sup> The song goes on to assert that what many people think of as the highest authority deems that human dignity for everyone is a moral imperative. According to the song, the Lord made this clear both through the design of the earth and through the scripture. "Don't the good Lord all around you make it plain?" for "The scripture has it writ." The song goes on to cite other examples in nature:

'Twas natural for the spirit to soar and play  
The way the Lord wanted it.  
Free as the sun is free/ That's how it's gotta be  
Whatever is right for bumblebee  
And river and eagle is right for me.  
We gotta be free/ The eagle and me.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of this song, everything in the world was created by the Lord in the correct way, and no human holds the right to change that. Finally, Harburg identifies the singer with the country through the identification with the eagle.

The song also develops another image, based again in nature: "Ever since that day when the world was an onion."<sup>34</sup> The development of the idea of an onion as representative

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<sup>31</sup> Opening with a rhetorical question, this echoes the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz*: "What makes a king out of a slave? Courage. What makes a flag on the mast to wave? Courage. What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist or the dusty dust? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder? Courage! What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage."

<sup>32</sup> *Bloomer Girl*, 1-3-9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

of the world is the image of a multi-layered seedling — a natural entity with potential for growth and layers. In Jungian studies, the onion is viewed as a symbol for the cosmos. I think it works to develop a parallel between a world-view and the development of the individual in that society. The character needs to follow what is deemed as “natural” in the song (the desire to be free), and he demands a society that allows him to become a full individual.

The book to *Bloomer Girl* is straightforward about its political interests. As Dolly Bloomer proclaims, freedom “is without sex and without color! When you’re fighting for freedom for women you fight the enemy of freedom everywhere! If our lines break in Savannah, we’ve suffered a defeat in Cicero Falls.”<sup>35</sup> Political issues trump every other issue or concern. Evelina breaks up with her fiancée because he will not stand up to his brother on the issue of Pompey’s freedom. She ridicules his attempt to find a compromise: “Compromise! That’s the only thing you’re firm about! You can’t be a coy liberal one moment and a smug Tory the next!”<sup>36</sup> It is only after the Civil War starts and the issue of Pompey’s freedom is resolved that Evelina and Jeff are able to come together. Kentucky stays in the Union and Jeff and Evelina are able to stay together. Because the men immediately leave for war, however, it is a very bittersweet ending.

Opening in 1944, *Bloomer Girl* is very much a product of its time. Although the show puts a veneer on its contemporary commentary by setting everything in 1861, the parallels with the current situation and the authors’ political views are clear. The show starts with women waiting for absent men. It demonstrates that some things are worth fighting for, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1-3-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1-5-4.

the show ends with the men going to war to fight for those beliefs. It engages the issue of women's rights at the same time that the government encouraged women all over the country to support the war effort by taking high paying jobs doing manual labor, and Rosie the Riveter cheered "We Can Do It." At the same time, the issue of civil rights came to a boiling point because of segregation in the army, and the need for all men, regardless of color, to die for the war effort. Lawsuits regarding segregation in the armed forces brought integration to national attention, and the show looked at the antecedents to the nascent civil rights movement.

Some of the parallels are even more striking. In the show Evelina's father complains about the debt President Lincoln created fighting the Civil War. Evelina responds "the president is more concerned with the public welfare than the public debt."<sup>37</sup> Whereas Playbills of the time usually featured a picture from the show on the cover, one edition for *Bloomer Girl* replaced the customary picture from the show with an appeal to buy war bonds that (combined with the increased spending to spur the economy during the Depression) created the most massive debt in U.S. history. Evelina's father encountered difficulties with the manufacture of hoops because steel was needed for the Civil War; during World War II women gave up many of the customary beauty aids to help with the war effort. Most consumer goods were rationed and a massive black-market developed for people willing to pay more for limited luxuries. Various substitutions were tried. For example, nylon stockings were one of the many items that were rationed, and companies started selling leg make-up to use instead.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1-1-6.

*Bloomer Girl* delighted the audience and critics, ran for nearly two years, toured extensively, and propagated ideas for social change that its specific historical moment could nourish. It accomplished this by connecting a plot modeled primarily on the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition of sentimental shows based in picturesque places, but the issues of civil and women's rights comprised most of the plot. Harburg's next show developed political commentary through satire instead of emotional appeals.

### **Finian's Rainbow (1947)**

In many ways, *Finian's Rainbow* is the most successful of all political satires after *Of Thee I Sing*. Opening on Broadway in 1947 and running for 745 performances, *Finian's Rainbow* developed covert satire to appeal to a broad audience in a conservative time period. Just as *Bloomer Girl* appealed to the social concerns during World War II and developed them to create a stronger argument in favor of civil and women's rights, so *Finian's Rainbow* addressed its political moment and made its satire more palatable with fantasy and whimsy. It frames its traditional romantic plot within political and social issues, and it develops a fantastical element in the form of Og, the leprechaun. Like Kaplan in *Street Scene*, Og is able to comment on the action even as he stays in character; thus the show avoids becoming overtly didactic. My synopsis may seem convoluted, but the show itself flows quite gracefully and rarely plays as proselytizing.

*Finian's Rainbow* focuses on Sharon McLonergan and her father Finian, who emigrated from an ideal place in Ireland, "Glocca Morra," to the United States. They are in search of Rainbow Valley, by Fort Knox. Finian "borrowed" a pot of gold from a leprechaun. He believes that the success of America's economy is based on the gold at Fort Knox, and he came to America to plant the pot of gold in the ground by Fort Knox. When

they get to Rainbow Valley they oversee a tax auction, where a piece of land is about to be taken from a collective of farmers to further the corrupt and racist Senator Rawkins' plan to prevent public electricity and profit from a privately owned utility. Woody, a union organizer and beloved son of the community, returns with the money to pay the back taxes and prevent the sale, but unannounced bureaucratic charges raise the cost. The McLonergans donate their money to the cause and become part of the collective. Finian buries his pot of gold.

Sharon and Woody hit it off well, but Woody is torn between his admiration and love for her and his mission to organize people for social change. He echoes Harburg's belief of songs' potentials: "This guitar and I got a big job to do all through this part of the country — speak their language — tell 'em things the papers won't print. Music'll make 'em listen."<sup>38</sup> Woody's sister Susan cannot speak, so she dances all her communication. Meanwhile Og, the leprechaun from whom Finian "borrowed" the pot of gold, appears and demands the return of the fairy metal that will cause "doom and gloom" in the hands of mortals. If three wishes are made on the pot of gold, it will turn to dross; without his gold Og will slowly become mortal. The discovery of the gold on the property results in Senator Rawkins' increased attempts to evict the farming collective.

Senator Rawkins attempts to evict the community of farmers in Rainbow Valley for having black and white people living together; he argues it is illegal because Negroes depreciate land value. Sharon is infuriated and when a little girl asks if her friend Henry is the wrong color, she responds, "Of course not, child. There's nothing wrong with being black — But there's something wrong with the world that he and his kind have made for

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<sup>38</sup> E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saily, *Finian's Rainbow* (New York: Random House, 1947), 40.

Henry. I wish he could know what that world is like. I wish to God he were black so — ”<sup>39</sup> and a flash of lightening, which accompanies the granting of her wish, interrupts her. Like *Street Scene*, the emotional pain that racism inflicts is a primary reason to demand that society stop it.

Og meets Rawkins who is angry that he is black because he is now suffering from the laws he wrote. Og finds Rawkins’ transformation to be a poorly done job that could give witchcraft a bad name; the witch should have given him a new inside rather than a new outside. Og gives Rawkins a new personality, and Rawkins joins a group of traveling singers.

Meanwhile, a department store offers the farming collective credit because of the gold on their property, and they are able to buy tractors, clothes, and household items. Access to material goods transforms their standard of living. As Og’s mortality moves dangerously near his waist, he discovers love. Much to his surprise, he finds that “When I’m not near the girl I love, I love the girl I’m near.” After falling for Sharon, Og falls for Woody’s sister Susan wondering “Is this what it’s like to be mortal? Is every girl the only girl?”<sup>40</sup>

Sharon and Woody get married. Sharon, however, is arrested under a 1680 law against witchcraft and is to be hanged at dawn the next day, unless she turns the senator white again. When Rawkins protests, they decide to hang him with Sharon, for he is black and therefore holds no rights. Finian cannot find the pot of gold and begs Og for help. As the authorities get ready to hang Sharon, Susan kisses Og. He proclaims “Fairyland was never like this” and uses the last wish to change Rawkins white, condemning himself to

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 129.

mortality.<sup>41</sup> Og sells the rights to the now non-existent gold, which guarantees a steady income for the collective. Rawkins runs for senate on a people's platform as Finian leaves, once again in search of Glocca Morra.

*Finian's Rainbow* deals primarily with issues of class and race. The show takes place in an ideal collective where everyone is equal. The collective works to make ends meet as a community. Although Woody and Sharon own the property for the sake of tax issues, there seems to be no difference made between them and everyone else on the collective. Once the collective is given credit, its members are given access to unlimited material goods. The credit is not exploitive through interest rates, and access to material possessions allows the collective to develop a much more efficient farm, which gives them an entrée into better living conditions. Like "Seven and a Half Cents" in *The Pajama Game*, however, the song celebrating this, "Come and Get It Day," moves from useful products (like washing machines) to extravagant products (like helicopters). The song also uses a spiritual style to parody the packaging of materialism as a spiritual value, indicating that Americans used capitalism as a spiritual belief. When the collective receives their new material items, they are transformed from the idle poor to the idle rich. The stereotypes are contrasted through intellect and humor:

When a rich man doesn't want to work, he's a bon vivant . . .

But when a poor man doesn't want to work,

He's a loafer, he's a lounge, he's a lazy good for nothin'— He's a jerk . . .

When the idle poor become the idle rich,

You'll never know just who is who or who is which . . .

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

Let's make the switch.

With just a few annuities, we'll hide these incongruities.<sup>42</sup>

The song compares attitudes about behavior and how social class affects the response of society. Society condemns poverty, not specific behaviors. By exposing the double standard, Harburg illustrates the hypocrisy and argues that the "cure" for the idle poor is to make them rich.

The book of *Finian's Rainbow* includes a surprising amount of astute satire (particularly on the issues of civil rights and economic fairness), given its immense popularity in 1947. At that time, the House Un-American Activities Committee was beginning its investigations of Hollywood, public employees were being investigated, and the United States offered vast amounts of aid to other countries to resist communism. The following year the Republicans won both the House and Senate, for the entire country was far more conservative than at any point since the Depression.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, the civil rights movement started to organize, and society expected women to return to their homes after their successful employment during the war. Harburg and the co-librettists managed to balance the political issues with whimsy. Even so, it is still surprising that *Finian's Rainbow* was such a popular success at this moment, and its success demonstrates that progressive political arguments, if handled with humor and intelligence, can gain a wide following at nearly any time.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>43</sup> See Sean J. Savage, *Roosevelt: The Party Leader: 1932-1945* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991) for discussion of conservative and liberal elements in U.S. from 1860 to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election in 1932.

True to Harburg's continual intention, *Finnan's Rainbow* deals with the issues of civil rights with humor. Two main characters represent the issue of civil rights. Howard is a young, black college student who attempts to work as a butler for Senator Rawkins. He is intelligent and well spoken. The senator's white aide tutors Howard in the ways that black servants are supposed to behave, which, according to the script, is based on the characters in *Gone With the Wind*. Howard cannot mention college, for the aide deems it irrelevant because he will enjoy a job for life as a butler. According to the stage directions, the aide shows Howard that he must walk "based on the minstrel tradition of Dixie shuffle" and must talk like "Youah julep suh, Mr. Rawkins, suh, all frosted and minty— yawk, yawk!"<sup>44</sup> Howard continually questions the senator's expectations. It is not until the Senator undergoes a violent attack of nerves and needs his medicine that Howard masters the art of shuffling. He finally totters in the way he was told to act, and cannot reach the Senator even as the Senator crawls towards him and begs for his medicine. It is a funny stage joke because Howard uses the senator's offensive expectations against him.

After Rawkins' unsettling transformation Og tries to cheer him up, and mentions that he was green a couple of weeks ago and finds a change of color refreshing. The Senator, however, is black in the same country he previously governed and is now a victim of the same laws he enacted. He knows all too well that if you are black you "can't get into a restaurant. You can't get on a street car. You can't buy yourself a cold beer on a hot day. You can't even go into a church and pray."<sup>45</sup> Controversy surrounded the show's portrayal of African-Americans. The biggest issue concerned whether the Senator's transformation

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<sup>44</sup> *Finnan's Rainbow*, 44-45.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 111

was racist, and if was he punished by becoming black. Martin Gottfried raised this issue, and in a 1977 letter to Harburg he wrote, "It isn't enough, Yip, to deny the racial switch's being a stage joke and punishment, especially when that is the patent sense of the device."<sup>46</sup> The book argues that, aside from societal prejudice, being black is a good thing. Rawkins did not become "good Negro black. It's just bad liver black. Psychosomatic. . . Latest medical theory. Strawberries bring on hives, prejudice brings on jaundice. Anybody hates people like Rawkins does - it's triple jaundice."<sup>47</sup> The Senator is punished by his transformation, but that punishment is a result of living in a prejudiced society. Once Og changes the Senator's disposition, he develops his first friendships with a troupe of singers, and he does not want to change back. At the end, the Senator, once again white but changed from his experience, begins the labor to dismantle the legacy of racism he helped create and then suffered from.<sup>48</sup> Like the various resurrections in *Candide*, Rawkins' color change is fantastical and works to give the audience some distance between their world and the musical world. Nevertheless, the degrading tradition of blackface makes the stage portrayal of this problematic. This problem could, perhaps, be minimized in production by casting a black actor who could play the senator in whiteface or by casting two men to play the senator.

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from Martin Gottfried to Yip Harburg, dated August 10, 1977. Filed in Harburg papers, NYPL-PA, \*T-MSS 1990-002, Box 10. This letter regarded Harburg's response to a previous *Times* article by Gottfried making similar charges about the book.

<sup>47</sup> *Finnian's Rainbow*, 106.

<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that many of the concerns about the problems with the original book stemmed from people who were rewriting it for a planned New York revival for 2000. They claimed to make the book more politically correct, but in many ways they played down the commentary. This may be due in part, to a concern that the book would offend conservative people, and a Broadway show simply cannot afford today to target a narrower audience. Some of the changes, under the guise of making it "politically correct," included changing the character of Woody from a union organizer to a World War II veteran. The racist senator continually said "Nigger," but he didn't enact the same policies. Interestingly, even with much of the book eviscerated, the production was still unable to raise the six million dollars to bring it to Broadway, and it closed out of town.

In *Finian's Rainbow* Sharon is prosecuted for witchcraft, based on a 1680 law. It is not clear whether Harburg was reacting directly to HUAC, but the coincidences are tantalizing. Early in the show, Senator Rawkins is infuriated by the newly immigrated McLonergans who interfere with his plans to buy Rainbow Valley. His response typifies much of the humor and politics of *Finian's Rainbow* "An immigrant! Damn! My whole family's been having trouble with immigrants ever since we *came* to this country!"<sup>49</sup>

*Finian's Rainbow* used humor and good natured satire to playfully and cleverly develop the issues of economic and racial discrimination. Early in the show, Finian and Og argue about whether Og exists, and they allude to songs by Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Otto Harbach, and Oscar Hammerstein:

Og: Does an optical illusion feel the beat-beat-beat of the tom-tom in the roaring traffic's boom, in his lonely room? . . .

Finian: Do you feel like the promised kiss of springtime that trembles on the brink of a lovely song?

Og: Yes, and what's worse, smoke keeps coming out of my eyes? . . . Day and night, night and day.<sup>50</sup>

This indicates that the authors intentionally targeted regular theatregoers, or at least people with a broad knowledge of musical theatre standards. The show granted the audience laughter, enjoyment of their own knowledge, and emotional fulfillment, but it avoided undercutting the satire. Harburg and collaborators did this primarily by the use of a fairytale character to comment on an economic system that they viewed as also built on a fairytale. It

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<sup>49</sup> *Finian's Rainbow*, 50. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

is true that some of the energy may have been dissipated by the successful conclusion of the romance, but the fantastical elements served as a distancing device. Although *Firmin's Rainbow* managed to thrive in a conservative time period, Harburg's next show failed.

### Flahooley (1951)

When Harburg was blacklisted the following year, he responded by writing the radically satirical *Flahooley*. His anger heavily influenced the musical. *Flahooley* was personal for Harburg, and that may have made it harder for him to package the material in a way the public would enjoy. He relied on many of the fairytale elements of *Firmin's Rainbow*. The leprechaun became a genie, dolls talk, and puppets develop the action throughout the piece. Nevertheless, Harburg did not balance his political message for his audience, and *Flahooley* failed commercially.

The musical focuses on Sylvester Cloud who is in love with Sandy Star, both of whom work at B.G. Bigelow's toy factory. Like *The Pajama Game*, the issue of a living wage for factory workers frames the show. Because Sandy and Sylvester, as mere workers, cannot afford to get married, Sylvester invents Flahooley, a doll intended to be the Christmas special. After Sylvester demonstrates his loyalty to the company in a trial, his doll is accepted as the annual highlight of the commercialized holiday. Unfortunately, the competing toy manufacturer undercuts the price and Sylvester is fired. Meanwhile, a diplomatic contingent arrives from Arabia and asks Bigelow to repair their broken magic lamp. Sylvester rubs the magic lamp with a Flahooley doll's hand. Abou Ben Atom, a genie, appears and promises to make enough Flahooley dolls for every child in the world.<sup>51</sup> At first Sylvester is acclaimed as

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<sup>51</sup> Abou Ben Atom's name is probably a reference to the poem by James Leigh Hunt "Abou Ben Adhem," which starts "Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)/Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace." This

a production genius, but as the extraordinary rate of manufacture continues, the overproduction destroys the market for dolls, and Sylvester is again fired.

The second act opens with the townspeople, who have lost their jobs because of the factory closure; they burn dolls and arrest anyone they suspect of harboring a Flahooley. Abou convinces Sandy and Sylvester that they must get married to safeguard the future of the lamp. At this point, Abou and the lamp are clearly a metaphor for atomic energy, and Abou is terrified that if his lamp fell into the wrong hands it could lead to the destruction of the world. In the face of their uncertainty about how they will live, Sandy and Sylvester reluctantly get married. It is an unusual ending for a musical comedy, for it emphasizes the uncertainty of the world the characters live in. Despite Sandy and Sylvester's marriage, they are homeless, unemployed, and wanted by the law. The town's economic situation is broken, and they are expected to safeguard the lamp to avoid nuclear catastrophe. Their reluctance to marry indicates that romance cannot overcome these issues; despite the wedding, the show ends with an aura of uncertainty. The audience is left wondering how the issues will be resolved.

Harburg explored the issue of witch-hunts in much more detail in *Flahooley* than he had in *Fimian's Rainbow*, or than Hellman and Bernstein would in *Candide*. In addition to writing the lyrics for *Flahooley*, Harburg co-wrote the libretto and directed the Broadway production. In an early draft of *Flahooley*, which was subsequently rewritten, Sylvester creates a doll that is to teach children to become model citizens. It says "Dirty Red," goes to sleep

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is an interesting allusion given Abou's creation of millions of Flahooley dolls, his demand that Sandy and Sylvester have children, and his concern about his (nuclear power's) effect on the entire tribe.

with Phenobarbital, and wakes up with Benzedrine.<sup>52</sup> When Sylvester is tested for loyalty, the walls that are covered with ears close in on him as he is interrogated: “Did you or any member of your family or close friend or casual acquaintance ever buy or toy with the idea of buying a toy made by Schwartz and Company?”<sup>53</sup> Later as townspeople start the destruction of Flahooleys, they arrest anyone who demands a search warrant or prevents their destruction. When Flahooley first shouts “Dirty Red,” the show demonstrates that our own fear is capable of far greater destruction than outside threats: Bigelow floods the entire stage in gas as he tries to extinguish the threat of Flahooley’s cry. The curtain falls as everyone lies unconscious on the stage and Flahooley shouts “Dirty Red.” Although the Broadway production cut much of the more overt satire, it never found an approach that ameliorated the loss of the central political themes. The loss of the political elements created a void that was not replaced.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about *Flahooley*, however, is how limited the songs are in the types of appeals and commentary they develop compared to the book. Only “You, Too, Can Be a Puppet” (a song that satirizes conformity), “B. G. Bigelow Inc.” (a number that parodies how the toy business is dictating the norms of childhood), and “Sing The Merry” (a Christmas carol that lampoons the commercialization of the holiday) are truly sophisticated in their satire. “Jump Little Chilun Jump” juxtaposes a gospel sound with content about the economy, but the lyric itself does not employ the sentimental appeals that Harburg often developed in his previous work. Several of the love songs (“Here’s to Your Illusions,” “He’s Only Wonderful” and “The World Is Your Balloon”) are charming, but

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<sup>52</sup> Yip Harburg and Fred Saidy, *Flahooley*, Pre-Broadway draft, Harburg Papers, NYPL-PA \*T-MSS 1990-002, Box 12, folder 1, 1-5-27— 1-5-28.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-6-33— 1-6-34.

they completely eschew politic comments. The songs that are the most politically pointed are the songs of anger, especially “No More Flahooleys” and “Happy Hunting” (a song that was cut during an out-of-town preview).

Surprisingly, Harburg opened the show with “You, Too, Can Be a Puppet,” which is one of the most politically didactic songs. The performance by the elaborate Bil Baird marionettes downplayed the ideological message of the opening number that ridicules conformity. Nevertheless, at no other point did Harburg ever open a show with direct satire. It is indicative of the emphasis on satire and the lack of character development that occurred through *Flahooley*. “B.G. Bigelow Inc.” is an ad for the toy company that advertises both its ability to shape children into what society wants and to sell adults the illusion of their youth:

A Bigelow drum can make you run to battle  
 A Bigelow fife can make you want to fight  
 When Bigelow sells a kid a sword to rattle  
 That kid grows up an Eisenhower<sup>54</sup> . . .  
 Though Bigelow’s ethics are all as pure a crystal,  
 His influence on the young he can’t avoid . . .  
 You can buy your youth at Bigelow.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> When the show was written Eisenhower had not yet announced his presidential bid and was known primarily as a war hero.

<sup>55</sup> The song lyrics were not included in either the pre-Broadway or the Broadway draft. Ernie Harburg has supplied me with his personal copy of the script. Songs can also be heard on the original cast recording. “B.G. Bigelow Inc.” is included in the 1952 rewrite of *Flahooley as Jollyana* by E.Y. Harburg, Fred Saidy, music by Sammy Fain, NYPL-PA \*T-MSS 1990-002, Box 12, folder 8, 1-1-2— 1-1-3.

The power of marketing is further satirized when Bigelow presents the new Flahooley doll. Previous toys are highlighted and they exploit current events with no regard to the implications: In “1939: Hitler swarms over France with his panzer divisions. Bigelow swamps the U.S.A. with the rubber frankfurter. 1945: Oak Ridge gave us the atom. 1949: Bigelow gave you this cunning little bomb kit for kiddies. Three adorable H-bombs in pastel colors.”<sup>56</sup> The companies will exploit everything for a profit.<sup>57</sup>

“Sing the Merry” continues this theme, with carolers who sing in the traditional choral style of the wonderful gifts they will buy and receive, as well as the lift that excessive Christmas consumption gives the economy:

Ring in the bells that gaily peal,  
Dividends from Bethlehem and U.S. Steel  
Sing the cash box;/Sing inflation  
Sing the gadget overpriced.<sup>58</sup>

Despite several very clever lines, the songs in *Flahooley* are relatively restrained, and the commentary, although very clever, is not focused on the central book issues of the McCarthy witch-hunts and atomic power.

The issue to which Harburg was closest, the HUAC debacle, is treated with the least sophistication of any social or political element that Harburg developed in his career. This indicates that authors probably need distance from their targets to develop sophisticated satire. Like Blitzstein in *The Cradle Will Rock*, Harburg was too close to the subject. He

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<sup>56</sup> *Flahooley*, Pre-Broadway draft, 1-7-40

<sup>57</sup> While “B. G. Bigelow Inc.” remained, most of the other comments were toned down before the initial production.

<sup>58</sup> “Sing the Merry” can be heard on the Ben Bagley’s Arlen CD.

wrote *Flahooley* only months after he was blacklisted. Because he did not have the distance, he failed to create a hook that seduced the audience.

Harburg dealt with a number of issues that link both emotional and intellectual appeals. His oeuvre demonstrates the potentials of the form as a vehicle for a political message; Harburg's career shows the importance of individual writers in crafting American musical theatre to develop specific messages. Through conscious experimentation, Harburg developed dramaturgical techniques that fuse the empathetic appeals with political commentary. He was "whimsical, idealistic, and leftist;" he reconciled "the fun of the musical with the tetchy honesty of theme" and demonstrated the viability of political musicals.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Mordden, 147.

## Chapter Five

### *Anyone Can Whistle, Cabaret, and Hair:*

#### The end of satirical musicals and the beginning of concept shows

2-5 August, 1964: Two U.S. destroyers patrolling in *the* Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam are attacked <sup>by</sup> North Vietnamese P.T. boats.<sup>1</sup>

~*The Almanac of American History*

Three North Vietnamese PT boats attack U.S. destroyer Maddox in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin.<sup>2</sup>

~*Timetables of American History*

It later turned out that the Gulf of Tonkin episode was a fake, that the highest American officials had lied to the public.<sup>3</sup>

~*Howard Zinn*

*Did the attacks actually occur? . . . The evidence of the first attack is indisputable. . . . On November 9, 1995 . . . I learned in a meeting in Hanoi with General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's Defense Minister during the war, that the presumed attack on August 4 did not occur.<sup>4</sup>*

~Robert S. McNamara — United States Secretary of Defense

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed, *The Almanac of American History* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), 568.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Urgan, ed., *Timetables of American History* (New York: Touchston, 1996), 382.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985), 466.

<sup>4</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 128.

The administration never proved that the alleged DRVN attack took place. The American warships in question sustained no damage. The DRVN torpedo boats they allegedly sank with counterfire left no debris. The “battle” was guided entirely by radar sightings so unreliable that one U.S. destroyer nearly fired on its sister ship.<sup>5</sup>

~William L. O'Neill

### *Introduction*

The difficulty of analyzing musicals written during the sixties is that there was no single cultural foundation that united all shows. This is not unique to the sixties, but during that turbulent time, the dissenters raised their voices as events happened, and “authorities” possessed much less power to shape their understanding. It is difficult to really know what happened to American consciousness and history during the sixties, much less what it means or why it happened. The many differing opinions on how American involvement in Vietnam escalated to full-fledged war are indicative of the lack of a cohesive narrative of the time. Although people argue over the meaning of trends during the fifties, there is relatively little question about the foundation of the debate. The sixties, however, involved a fracturing of American society: “All We Are Saying is Give Peace A Chance,” “Burn Baby Burn,” “Hell No, We Won’t Go,” “The People United Will Never Be Defeated.” Even these slogans, however, became common only after the spring of 1965 when American involvement in Vietnam dramatically increased.

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<sup>5</sup> William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960's* (New York: Times Books, 1971), 121.

The first half of the 1960s in America was relatively calm. Despite a mild recession during the beginning of the decade, the majority of enfranchised Americans seemed relatively content with the status quo. Although Civil Rights became a rallying point for progressives throughout the country, the protests themselves were relatively confined to the South. Many younger people expressed discontentment, but that dissatisfaction was relatively general. In the words of a Berkeley Free Speech protestor, it was about “the right to participate as citizens in a democratic society.”<sup>6</sup> As the U.S. involvement in Vietnam increased, so too did unrest in the United States. Throughout the late 1960s, the United States encountered more sustained political movement without governmental support than it had ever previously seen; it stopped a war and made measurable progress against racial segregation. With the ubiquity of television, people saw footage of what was happening in Vietnam and in protests every day. Whereas the military used censors to approve all stories and thus controlled media coverage during World War II, the Vietnam War allowed journalists unprecedented coverage and access.<sup>7</sup> Many youths argued “never trust anyone over thirty” and the reverse may have held true for older Americans, who were confused at the anger and resentment of privileged, young, white kids with relatively few responsibilities.

For the most part, musical theatre in the 1960s ignored the fracturing of society and reflected the normalcy that these older, established people with families and careers desired. New artists experimented with adapting older styles and developed new formal devices for an audience that was shifting demographically, but the form was surprisingly conservative

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<sup>6</sup> Miller, 192.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, this would not be repeated. During the Panama Invasion and the Persian Gulf War the military assiduously kept the press far away from the front, feeding them only an official version and preventing them from covering the war in any meaningful way.

during this time. The audience that attended the theatre was not the young people that dominated much of popular culture. The commercial failure of *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) marked the end of a period that began in the 1930s, when full-length musical political satires were regularly presented on Broadway. Musical theatre did continue to enjoy many popular successes based on the Rodgers and Hammerstein integrated model. At the same time, the authors slowly began to experiment with time, plots, politics, and emotions. *Cabaret* (1966) marks the beginning of a new style, with numbers focused around a theme or “concept.”<sup>8</sup> The decade marks important ends and beginnings, but it does not possess a dominant form. Even the more conventional successes of the decade seem like anomalies, and all feature a strong-willed eccentric character: the displacement of Russian Jews; a quixotic old man running against windmills; a not particularly conventional, but very funny girl; an older woman and her active imaginative social life.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the shift resulted from the changing demographics of society and of Broadway audiences. After World War II, record numbers of working class people attended college. During the subsequent fifteen years, participation increased in all the arts. From museums to symphony orchestras, visual and performing arts enjoyed a wider audience base, which culminated in the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965.<sup>10</sup> The average playgoer in 1942 went to the theatre 14.63 times a year; by 1975 that number

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<sup>8</sup> *The Apple Tree*, also from 1966, is another show identified as an early conceptual musical. Martin Gottfried was one of the first critics to name this style. Dan J. Cartnell, in his dissertation on *Stephen Sondheim and the Concept Musical* (University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983), identifies eight indicators for a concept musical. These include: a show is developed around the concept, the director is the most important figure, the authors integrate the varying theatrical elements and that is as important as the concept, the concept gives the primary staging metaphor, it does not use a linear plot, the authors structuring the play around the concept, and there are fewer book scenes and more musical scenes.

<sup>9</sup> *Fiddler On the Roof*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Funny Girl*, and *Hello Dolly*.

dropped to 7.04 times a year. Theatre became the province of a wider percentage of the population going half as often. Upper-middle class people clearly patronized the theatre more frequently than working class people. With an average income of \$29,040.78 and a median income of \$23,040.78, Broadway theatregoers tended to fall in the top 20% of the population.<sup>11</sup> People of Jewish faith, and those who were politically independent or affiliated with the Democratic party attended the theatre far more regularly, as did people who purchased hardcover books and attended movies regularly. Overall, regular theatre attendance correlated with many other markers of a typical upper-middle-class privileged lifestyle. People who entertained regularly (and with alcohol), worked in Manhattan, and worked in managerial or professional jobs were much more likely to attend the theatre than people with less conventional social obligations.<sup>12</sup>

My family, living in the San Francisco Bay Area, illustrates the statistics. Although this is not indicative of a larger trend and is susceptible to the ephemeral nature of memories, in my family only my paternal grandparents went regularly to Broadway tours of musicals. My grandfather worked as an insurance executive, and he took my grandmother and clients to musicals on the company expense account. My parents, both active in the Berkeley political protests during the sixties, did not attend. Both loved Rodgers and

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<sup>10</sup> See Myron A. Marty, *Daily Life in the United States, 1960 - 1990: Decades of Discard* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>11</sup> According to U.S. Census reports, in 1975 the upper income limit for the fourth quintile (60% to 80%) was \$22,153, and the lower limit for the top 5% was \$34,700. That means that one half of all people attending made more than the 80% mark. The fact that the mean income is so much higher than the median income probably indicates a small group of audience members making considerably more than the mean. It is important to note, also, that the theatre statistics only refer to self-reported income. Many people do not include investment income in self-reported figures, so they may have actually been even higher. See <http://www.census.gov> for income tables.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, Research Department, "Live Theatre Attendance," 1974. See also "Who's Who in the Audience," *Playbill*, 1976.

Hammerstein's work, but they saw it more as a nostalgic holdover from their high-school youth. They did not see the genre as relevant to their lives. Although the movie *Cabaret* impressed my dad, he did not link that to musical theatre, and both of my parents were wary for some time of my being able to combine my political interests with the genre. Neither of my parents could remember anyone in their social circle talking about musical theatre. Both my parents viewed *Hair* much as I viewed *Rent* and as Thomas Frank viewed *The Conquest of Cool*: as a corporate rip-off designed to placate a wide-stream audience with commercialism conveniently packaged as rebellion.

I do not hold this up as a statistically reliable sample, but it does illustrate what the statistics seem to indicate — theatre-going appeared to be limited to privileged people who were already established in their careers. Indeed, by 1974 the most reliable of the New York Times sixteen statistical indicators predicting regular Broadway theatre going was Bloomingdale's patronage. Even irregular Bloomingdale's purchases correlated to a much greater-than-average Broadway theatre attendance.

At the same time, however, Broadway witnessed the widespread arrival of newer artists. Whereas the 40s and 50s often featured works by artists who started in the 20s and 30s, most notably Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin, the 60s was marked by the arrival of younger artists like Stephen Sondheim, Harold Prince, John Kander, and Fred Ebb. As a result, the sixties saw important innovation, and yet relied on a relatively small base of consumers for these shows. Several shows satirized the entertainment industries, including *Do Re Mi*, *What Makes Sammy Run*, and *Dames at Sea*. The British collaborators Anthony Newly and Leslie Bricuse brought the political, but unfocused *Stop the World I Want to Get Off*, and *The Roar of the Greasepaint— The Smell of the Crowd* to Broadway. *Sweet Charity* and *Golden Boy* respectively chronicled the lives of a working-class

woman and an African-American man, as each attempted to live the American dream. Perhaps the most famous political musical of the decade, *Hair*, celebrated the counterculture movement, focusing on sex, drugs, rock-n-roll, and pacifism. Overall, however, musicals were surprisingly conservative.

The two political musicals of the sixties that are most connected to the development of the genre are *Anyone Can Whistle* from 1964 and *Cabaret* two years later. *Anyone Can Whistle* marks the end of a period when politically satirical musicals were regularly presented, and it marks a first attempt to deal with the generalized discontent of the young people in the 1960s. Although some satire was included after *Anyone Can Whistle*, that satire was isolated. Audiences no longer possessed a framework against which they could understand the new shows. *Cabaret* is routinely identified as the first concept musical, but that title should probably go to *Love Life*.<sup>13</sup> *Love Life*, however, was so different from everything else at that time, that audiences and historians did not really know how to respond.<sup>14</sup> Just as *The Selling of the President* in 1972 could have enjoyed more success if audiences had been familiar with political satire in musicals during the seventies, so *Love Life* might have been more recognized if audiences had been familiar with non-linear, concept shows in the forties. However, audiences are much more receptive when they know how to respond. A single show does little to affect the genre — musicals need to be supported by similar pieces in order to gain a critical mass.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Willard, "Love Life Revisited," *Kurt Weill Newsletter* II (1984), David Michael Kilroy's *Kurt Weill on Broadway: The Postwar years (1945-1950)* (Ph.D diss., Harvard University, 1992) and Foster Hirsch in *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) have all argued for identifying *Love Life* as a "progenitor of the modernist concept musical" (Hirsch, 17).

<sup>14</sup> Because *Love Life* also played during a recording strike, aside from people who saw the original production, no one else is really familiar with it. The lack of a cast album (and the difficulty in acquiring permission to mount revivals) makes it very difficult to popularize this show.

Despite their very different formats, both *Anyone Can Whistle* and *Cabaret* reflect a fractured view of reality, challenge typical performance/audience relations, and develop extended comments on current politics. These musicals are, however, very different in their appeals, subjects, dramatic elements, receptions, and styles. *Anyone Can Whistle* is a radical satire of both politics and a conformist society that linked its commentary with a book plot. It is a wry, witty satire of American lifestyles of the time, ridiculing conformity, manufactured and commercialized self-help schemes, political corruption, and the glorification of experts. *Cabaret* is a relatively conventional book show with cabaret numbers that comment on the action. Ultimately, as the political structure of the society deteriorates, the lines between the book and the cabaret become crossed, and both are linked as the political situation disintegrates. The emotional tenor is angry and scared. However, *Cabaret* protests the Nazis, hardly a controversial stand to make during the 1960s in New York. There are some connections with *Cabaret*'s Berlin and the American political scene of the sixties, but members of the audience needed to make those connections themselves.

### *Anyone Can Whistle (1964)*

*Anyone Can Whistle*, with a score by Stephen Sondheim and a book and direction by Arthur Laurents (who previously collaborated respectively on the lyrics and librettos for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*), chronicles a town "so broke, only a miracle can save it." Like the town, the show failed economically. The last of the radical satires, it survived for only nine performances on Broadway, but subsequently gained a relatively large cult following. *Anyone Can Whistle* follows the town's government as it manufactures a rock that spouts water. This entices tourist-pilgrims who jumpstart the town's economy. Fay is the heroine and a nurse at the local sanatorium; she insists her patients, the "Cookies," be allowed to take the waters.

The town council works essentially as the mayor's cronies, and they know the miracle is a sham, so they prevent the Cookies from taking the water. In order to try the waters, the Cookies leave their group and mix with the pilgrims. As a result, the town's political leaders cannot distinguish the two groups. Hapgood, the hero, is a new patient mistaken for a doctor. He exploits everyone's inability to distinguish who is a safe and sane conformist from who is a dangerous and rebellious Cookie. The confrontation between the town's government and Fay and Hapgood dominates the play and the issues.

The government is unable to deal with the mess caused by the fraud of the so-called miracle, and they refuse to deal with the underlying issues. This is not surprising, because their own political corruption led to the devastation and the fake miracle. The town is bankrupt because the Mayoress bought everything she wanted and left the rest of the town to deteriorate. In an earlier draft, the social stratification and political manipulation is made even more explicit: the Mayoress juxtaposes the fact that she "Bought a new Rolls again" with the result: "Their shoes will have holes again."<sup>15</sup> She sees herself as completely separate from the citizens. She wants to be loved by them, but she views them as "poor! starving! miserable! dirty! dreary! depressing! Peasants!"<sup>16</sup> Her staff works primarily to keep her hands clean. They know their plan is unethical, and the Mayoress knows too, but demands they not involve her: "*I didn't hear it! Don't tell me! But,*" she quickly demands, "do it!"<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the government, as in *Knicknicker Holiday*, stays in power only when it finds people to blame. They "educate" the masses by smearing opponents or with "hoses and

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Sondheim, "The Native's Are Restless," 3. Author's personal papers.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Laurents (book) and Stephen Sondheim (music and lyrics), *Anyone Can Whistle* (New York: Random House, 1976), 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, emphasis in original.

tommy-guns and gas.”<sup>18</sup> As long as they control who becomes a scapegoat, they are happy. Like Joseph McCarthy a decade earlier, they spread any innuendo about their opponent that will discredit him: “Communist! Fascist! Red! Pink! Cheat! Liar! Fraud! Foreigner! Stoolpigeon! Embezzler! Capitalist! Egghead!”<sup>19</sup> Any label will do as long as it categorizes the political dissenter as a dangerous enemy of society.

Just as the plot develops Fay and Hapgood’s challenge against both the town council and the conformist social expectations, so political satire and social satire are continuously interwoven. At the time, many young people expressed frustration with, in the words of Norman Mailer, “The incredible dullness wreaked upon the American landscape in Eisenhower’s eight years [that] has been the triumph of the corporation. A tasteless, sexless, odorless sanctity in architecture, manners, modes, [and] styles.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, *Anyone Can Whistle* attacked conformity, materialism, and social expectations. The Cookies are defined as those people who make the rest of society uncomfortable. When they are finally named, they include Susie B. Anthony, and people with the last names of Brecht, Chaplin, Dillinger, Engels, Freud, Gandhi, Ibsen, Kierkegaard, Lafitte, and Mozart.<sup>21</sup> They are people who transcend societal norms: “Quarantined out of fear their disease may be contagious, they are people who made other people nervous by leading individual lives.”<sup>22</sup> Because society is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>20</sup> Norman Mailer, “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” quoted in Miller, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Lafitte was something of a Robin Hood pirate, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He never attacked American ships and sold goods at a deep discount to the American South. He served as the inspiration for Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Buccaneer*. See <http://www.crimelibrary.com/americana/lafitte/main.htm> for more information.

<sup>22</sup> *Anyone Can Whistle*, 34.

made uncomfortable by them, and because they challenge the political establishment, the mayor's cronies control their behavior by incarceration.

The primary difference between the Cookies and the supposedly sane is that the supposedly sane want to be relieved of the need to make decisions for themselves and prefer instead to follow rules and join groups: "The rabble worships anyone who tells 'em they belong to anything."<sup>23</sup> For example, Cooley, the current town treasurer, is later identified as crazy. He used to be a minister, but he was thrown out of his pulpit: "Because I believed! . . . In God and they only believed in religion."<sup>24</sup> Individuality of any sort threatens the culture, and Cooley needed to conform.

During the show Hapgood divides people into groups. The supposedly sane pilgrims clamor to be identified as part of a group. They do not care which group as long as their identity is defined for them. After they are placed in groups, they create a new identity that is developed around that membership. In contrast, the Cookies rebel. When they are incarcerated they are presumably drugged, and thus they follow the rules and always feel happy. Left on their own, however, they are practicing idealists who challenge society and inspire others. As the treasurer points out, the political cronies need to get rid of Hapgood so that the people will "be normal and frightened – like they used to be."<sup>25</sup>

Fay is an idealist playing by society's rules. She sees the political structure as the most efficient way to change social patterns, and she demands every advantage she can for the Cookies. She wants them to be free from incarceration not because life will be perfect

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 137.

for them, but because they will actually get to live. When they are incarcerated, “They smile according to their schedules, but they’re in limbo. . . . I want them out and free to be happy or unhappy any way *they* want.”<sup>26</sup> Hapgood strengthens her interest in politics as a tool that can change social structures: “The world made those Cookies, you didn’t. Fix the world, not them.”<sup>27</sup> He believes that society kills individuals, and either you capitulate to society and “you die slowly, or you have the strength to go crazy.”<sup>28</sup> In order to live fully, one must ignore societal demands and figure out how to live a life that is true for the individual.

Kay eventually tears up the patients’ records, and this frees them symbolically from society’s definitions. As the Cookies are released from external classification, they dance to celebrate freedom:

Fay hesitates and then with a surge of music, rips the record, setting Engels free. He stops his grin and begins to dance. This is the beginning of a ballet in which Fay rips up the records of the Cookies, setting them free, in dance, to be what they want. As each gets free, he infects other people who pick up what he is doing.<sup>29</sup>

This first ballet celebrated reality’s triumph over conformity.

Hapgood’s arrival (as the Cookies are dispersed through the town, causing panic) is perhaps the highlight of the play. An extended (fifteen minute) sung and spoken scene, “Simple” develops the idiosyncrasies of societal expectations taken to their logical conclusion of madness. Hapgood agrees to separate everyone into groups, and he does so

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 33. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 130.

by examining their acceptance of societal norms. George, the first man examined, follows all the societal expectations and is a model of conformed consumption with two children, two TV sets, and two daily martinis. He is placed in Group A until he acknowledges that he is not real. He is then put in Group One. Although the mayoress and her cronies assume Group A is insane and Group One is sane, Hapgood never explains the taxonomy.

The play continues to complicate issues and identities throughout "Simple." Martin, an African-American, is questioned, and his interrogation highlights stereotypes based on race. He spends his time "going to schools, riding in buses, eating in restaurants."<sup>30</sup> This is clearly a reference to the fights to integrate schools, the freedom riders, and the sit-ins at lunch counters. Hapgood questions whether such activities are still necessary, and Martin replies that they are because he is Jewish. This is probably a reference to Sammy Davis Jr., and it skews clear-cut racial stereotypes. "Simple" continued to fracture and problematize societal assumptions.

Another element that fractures the show from "reality" is an overtly theatrical veneer. A narrator introduces the characters and comments, "Our heroine is the head nurse. . . [She] won't be along for eleven minutes."<sup>31</sup> When Fay arrives she sings, "The play isn't over by a long shot yet!"<sup>32</sup> Hapgood is aware of his theatricality. He explains that he needs to dance in order "To announce I'm going to sing to you."<sup>33</sup> As Hapgood initially flirts with Fay, they both speak French with simultaneous translations projected for the audience. When Hapgood mangles his French, Fay steps out of the frame to look at the subtitles.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 52.

Even the sets participate in the celebration of theatricality. When Fay is disguised and flirts with the comptroller, she beckons him forward “and the scenery obliges: the whole balcony moves to her.”<sup>34</sup> The Mayoress does not change her clothes in time with a set change: she stops the set change and the accompanying music in order to don her glove.

The theatricality extended to social issues. Later in the show, Fay goes to Hapgood’s hotel room, causing the management concern about appearances. Management then sends up another room that comes rolling on-stage for their use. This highlights the prudery of many people’s reactions to changing mores. The birth control pill had recently been introduced, and sexual activity outside of marriage was increasingly common. Simultaneously, many people were unwilling to acknowledge their prudish concerns. Sending up another room if their child was sleeping with someone else might have comprised an ideal solution for many people in the audience. The show derides both puritanical instincts, and the unwillingness to talk honestly about sex.

The meta-theatrical element reaches its climax at the end of the first act. Hapgood’s “Simple” interrogation ends with the stage in blackout and a spotlight on Hapgood as he proclaims, “You are all mad.” This is followed by

A burst of gay, wild circus music. A row of lights resembling the balcony rail of a theatre has been lowered and it now begins to burn brighter and brighter with pink, blue, yellow lights, flooding the theatre audience. At the same time, the real balcony rail lights in the theatre are coming on and lighting up the stage. And there we see the company sitting in theatre seats and laughing

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 87.

and applauding louder and louder as *The Curtain Falls*.<sup>35</sup>

Later that year Peter Brook's production of *Marat/Sade* used a similar technique effectively for a different audience. It clearly stated that the authors considered the audience as schizophrenic as everybody on-stage; it also indicates that the creative team probably wanted to appeal to a younger audience.

The pilgrims' need for outside validation also leads to materialism. The "miracle" is only a miracle of commerce by consumers who look to products to change their lives. Encouraged to "Count your blessings, buy your tickets," the pilgrims come to take the waters and be "anything whatever, except you."<sup>36</sup> The Mayoress promises them that with luck they'll be "Happy and successful!/Liked and loved and beautiful and perfect! . . . Healthy, rich, handsome independent,/Wise, adjusted and secure and athletic!"<sup>37</sup> The mayoress is surprised by the demand: "I never knew so many would pay so much for new lives."<sup>38</sup> "The Lame, The Halt, and the Blind," which was cut before the show opened, extended the critique of materialism to include the conformity and empty promises of capitalist religion prominently practiced by people like Norman Vincent Peale:

Blest be the deaf, the dumb, and the sick.  
 And anything else you can pick.  
 The deaf shall hear and the dumb shall speak.  
 The sick shall find all the succor they seek . . .  
 Count your blessings! Find your succor!

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

(Count the suckers!).<sup>39</sup>

The purchase of items is the only path to the idealized version of your persona, and society has reduced everything, including any spiritual realm, to a commodity.

Over-consumption by the individual in order to assuage unmanageable concerns is linked to the issue of over-consumption by the government to assuage unmanageable political issues. As Hapgood proves the entire town is crazy, he outlines that the government is as crazy as any single individual:

Most of your money goes to the government in taxes. What does the government do with most of the money? Makes bombs. . . . But you say to make a product and not to use it is crazy. . . . Doesn't that make you crazy for letting them waste your money? . . . But perhaps the government is making bombs because it means to use the product. Which means everyone will be killed. . . . Which means you are paying most of your money to have yourself killed. Which means, my dear Doctor Comptroller Mayor Schub, you are the maddest of all!<sup>40</sup>

At this time defense spending accounted for much of the economic prosperity, but society generally ignored the logical and emotional results that mutually insured self-destruction could have led to.<sup>41</sup>

Fay looks at more immediate issues. She sees the town selling a myth to people who do not know how to change their lives through personal growth. When the myth fails the pilgrims will be disillusioned, and some will end up in the insane asylum. Interestingly, the

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen Sondheim, "The Lame, The Halt and the Blind," 6-7. Author's personal papers.

<sup>40</sup> *Anyone Can Whistle*, 78.

<sup>41</sup> *Dr. Strangelove*, which deals with this theme, will be discussed later in the chapter.

quirks of capitalism created the town's difficulties to begin with; the town is financially devastated because it relied on the manufacture of a product that never wore out, and capitalism is based on constant demand for disposable products. Consumerism also ends the problems associated with the pilgrims, because another city gets a better miracle, which leaves the town as poor as it was in the beginning of the play.

Traditional gender roles are also skewed. When Hapgood examines the crowd in "Simple," he interrogates John and June who are suffering from societal gender stereotypes. They are so frustrated that they need to talk about themselves in the third person and cannot marry because June makes more money than John does. Neither seems thrilled about the situation, and the confusion of gender persists as they continue to repeat what society has taught them:

A woman's place is in the home  
 A woman's place in on the shelf.  
 And home is where he hangs her hat,  
 And that is where she hangs himself.<sup>42</sup>

The confusion of gender specific pronouns and June and John's use of the third person imply that gender is as much of a construction as the other issues raised in "Simple." Other moments contribute to the undermining of strict gender roles. For example, during the Cookie Chase ballet, everyone in the company dances on pointe, usually a dance technique practiced exclusively by women.

Overall, the show generally views gender and sexual orientation as another artificial cultural construction. Jorgenson, the first transsexual, is included as one of the Cookies that

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<sup>42</sup> *Anyone Can Whistle*, 63.

need to be incarcerated for making society uncomfortable. During “Simple,” the comptroller stops everything (the only time the background music stops during the extended scene) when “A man crossed over.” Hapgood replies “That was a woman,” linking gender with crossing boundaries.<sup>43</sup> In another coded reference to homosexuality, Hapgood confirms society’s need for gay people not to be out:

The opposite of safe is out.

The opposite of out is in

So anyone who’s safe is in.<sup>44</sup>

According to George Chauncey, the idea of coming out of the closet did not develop until the sixties, but the idea of coming out into gay society existed before World War I.<sup>45</sup> Within the context of “Simple” sexual identity/preference is something that is “wrong” and must be hidden only because it unsettles society.

One of the most surprising aspects of the show is the inclusion of a woman as the mayor. Only two years after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and a year before the founding of NOW (The National Organization for Women), very few women were involved in politics. The Mayoress is very corrupt but not in a way that was stereotypical for women at the time. Both Nurse Fay and the Mayoress seem to experience difficulty discerning how they can play the role of a “lady” and pursue careers. The Mayoress expresses a surprising vulnerability when the town turns away from her toward Hapgood. She cannot, however, express those feelings and be successful. Fay is also unable to develop a personal life and be

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>45</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 7.

successful. She finds that when she hides in a red wig and a French accent she is finally able to let go, but she is not taken seriously in her sexy French disguise.<sup>46</sup> The ability to play the part of a sexy redheaded woman forms the basis for her romance with Hapgood. She defines femininity by exterior markers: “You like my style, yes? My brand, yes?”<sup>47</sup> As soon as Hapgood removes her wig, she goes limp; she is unable to function as a “woman” without the exterior indications. Anticipating by example feminist theorists like Judith Butler (looking at the performativity of all gender), sex roles in *Anyone Can Whistle* are parts that must be played.

For Fay gender is so much of a role that she needs a costume. The title song is about how she cannot whistle or “relax, let go, let fly. . . Lower my guard, Learn to be free.”<sup>48</sup> It is only once she stops caring what society thinks and is willing to defy convention that she can whistle. It is not a pretty whistle, but it is hers. Once she finds that part of herself, she is able to be with Hapgood as herself and they leave the town to live together.

*Anyone Can Whistle* combines anger at the current society with an idealistic belief that humanity is good. It should have been a hit. “The popular belief [is] that it failed because it was way ahead of its time.”<sup>49</sup> It came at a time of much political upheaval. The previous year, two books dealing with women’s experience were published: Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, a chronicle of her suicide attempts. Two years before, *Silent Spring* inspired the environmental movement, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*,

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<sup>46</sup> *Anyone Can Whistle*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>49</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 81.

and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* challenged conventional views of a homogenized society. Political and social criticism worked in other venues: Tom Lehrer and Lenny Bruce began to enjoy popularity, and Peter Brooks' production of *Marat/Sade* and Andy Warhol both attracted large audiences. *Anyone Can Whistle's* opening in April 1964 seems to capture many of the progressive social ideas of the time. Only two months earlier, one of the most enduringly popular film satires premiered: *Doctor Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Stanley Kubrick's movie uses music to make satirical points about patriotism and sentimentality in the face of nuclear annihilation. Devastating, eerie, and hilarious, *Doctor Strangelove* gained a large following relatively quickly.

However, movies benefit from a much wider audience, geographically, economically and in terms of taste, and age. *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* marked the last commercially successful musical theatre satire. Opening in 1961, it spoofed office politics, and, to a lesser extent, the Horatio Alger myth. It is the story of a young man who starts in the mailroom and ends up head of the company. *How to Succeed* developed a gentle, playful quality, almost reminiscent of a fairytale told with enough self-awareness to appeal to a broad population. It did not deride corporate America; it merely jibed at the ability of some people to get ahead through unctuousness.

In contrast to *How to Succeed*, *Anyone Can Whistle* took aim at society's rigid conformity and political cronyism run by illicit means. Another important factor affecting the reception of *Anyone Can Whistle* was Kennedy's assassination, which happened only five months earlier. The previous years saw increasing unrest as Martin Luther King Jr. led thousands of blacks and whites to fight the Jim Crow segregation laws. Hundreds of thousands of protestors marched on Washington and fire hoses tore the bark off trees and pounded black children who protested segregation. Bigots killed protestors, and with

Kennedy's death, the entire country became affected by the unrest. The arrival of the Beatles in February 1964 gave the country another trend to embrace, and marked a prominent shift in the popular music of younger people. Although rock and roll gained a strong following with Elvis Presley and other earlier performers, musical theatre continued to thrive. The Beatles, however, marked the shift from Tin Pan Alley to rock and roll as the basis for popular music in the United States. For the most part, the young people who supported anti-establishment pieces did not attend musical theatre.

The perceptions of musical theatre changed, in part because of the increasing accessibility of theatre to a middle-class audience through movies and recordings. The movie versions of *West Side Story*, *My Fair Lady*, *Mary Poppins*, and *The Sound of Music* dominated popular movies in the early 1960s, won numerous Academy Awards, and ran in movie theatres for years. Millions of people saw them, and this further encouraged the purchase of cast albums, soundtracks, paper dolls, and inexpensive paperbacks of the librettos available everywhere. By appealing to a much larger audience, musical theatre began to lose the smaller audience of regular theatregoers. Other staged musicals in 1964 worked to appeal to a large audience base, including *Fiddler on the Roof* (which ran for almost eight years with 3,242 performances), and *Hello Dolly* (which played almost as long). Both shows enjoyed numerous tours. The dead president had so loved *Camelot* that his widow quoted from it, and the musical became a dominant theme in remembering Kennedy's presidency. "Don't let it be forgot,/That once there was a spot,/For one brief shining moment,/That was known as Camelot." Musicals played much longer, and it became imperative that they appeal to a much greater segment of the population. With the need to appeal to a wider, middle-class, suburban audience, and the change in demographics, a

musical could no longer rely entirely on the urban crowd, and the urban crowds, perhaps, lost some interest.

As previously noted, the crowd that attended musicals was financially secure, politically independent or affiliated with the Democratic party, and tended to live a relatively conservative lifestyle. They shopped at Bloomingdale's and regularly entertained guests with alcohol. They were not interested in the latest fads, but some of their children may have been involved with the emerging youth culture. Between the news, their children, and the new youth popular culture, it is possible that many of the musical theatre audiences already heard that they were conformists who needed to be more like their kids. Throughout the show, *Anyone Can Whistle* praised the burgeoning social movement and satirized the middle-class contentment that characterized the fifties and that many regular theatregoers probably represented and respected. Although the satiric approach matched much of the popular culture of the time, the genre did not appeal to people who enjoyed the increasingly sardonic movies and pop culture.

*Anyone Can Whistle* closed after nine performances, a commercial and popular failure. It is part of the tradition of musical satires that dominated the political scene of the 1930s, continued to experiment throughout the forties and fifties, and ended with this show. The points are made through allegory. Rather than the characters blatantly stating what the audience should think and how the show relates to their world, the actors reflect a slightly skewed version of the audience's world, but the connection is made relatively clear.

### *Cabaret (1966)*

Audiences walking into the original production of *Cabaret* would also see themselves reflected, this time literally from a giant trapezoidal mirror that adorned the back of the

curtainless stage.<sup>50</sup> *Cabaret* is one of the first of the so-called “concept” musicals, a style that came to dominate American musical theatre during the 1970s, where a show is held together by a concept rather than a linear plot. In this case, the theme of apathy in Germany just before the rise of the Nazis worked as a concept around which the show centered. Like its predecessor *Love Life*, *Cabaret* developed both musical numbers that further the plot and songs that commented on the changing social and political fabric and used sentimental appeals and incidental satire to appeal to the audience. The show approached the issues of apathy from various angles in both book scenes and cabaret numbers that commented on the action.

The original *Cabaret* worked to challenge many assumptions, including theatrical conventions. As the show began, the sexually aware but androgynous, “pre-sexual (think Michael Jackson)” emcee welcomed the audience directly to the theatre, and established that there is no need to connect life with the show.<sup>51</sup> This is only entertainment. He commands, “Leave your troubles outside! So— life is disappointing? Forget it!”<sup>52</sup> The emcee then introduces the cabaret “girls” who continue to welcome the audience with very suggestive gestures and muddle the traditional proscenium that separates the audience from the stage. This also blurred the line between performance and prostitution. Throughout the show, the cabaret is a plot element and it comments on the action.

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<sup>50</sup> This discussion will focus on the original production. Sam Mendes’ direction of the recent revival changed how many people think of the show, and it is remarkable for how it influenced the popular understanding of that show. As of this writing, however, it has not changed the development of the genre. See Roger Copeland’s “*Cabaret* for the End at the End of the World,” *American Theatre* 16, No. 1, January 1999, 25-28, 88-90.

<sup>51</sup> Roger Copeland, 26. Emcee is the same as M.C., or Master of Ceremonies.

<sup>52</sup> Joe Masteroff (book), Fred Ebb (lyrics), and John Kander (music), *Cabaret*, 1966, reprinted in *Great Musicals of the American Theatre*, vol. 2, Stanley Richards, ed. (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1976), 534.

Joel Gray, the original emcee, created much of the transgression inherent in the show. He performed in whiteface, and his gleeful but undelineated sexuality worked to confuse both race and gender issues. Although he was not as sexually explicit as Alan Cummings was in the 1998 revival, his continual innuendoes played with transgression. Although the book scenes are very conservative and avoid any reference to the leading man's homosexuality that was clear in the original source, the cabaret ignores cultural expectations.<sup>53</sup> Gray was "Al Jolson becomes Brecht."<sup>54</sup> His performance mixed gender and race issues through his androgynous sexuality, while his whiteface makeup linked race with the rest of his performance. He spoke directly to the audience; his performances broke up the book scenes, commented on the plot, and alienated the audience from identifying emotionally with the plot.

After this very unconventional opening, the action switches to Cliff, a young American writer, and Ernst, a smuggler who takes advantage of him. Throughout the show the action alternates between three plot elements: the cabaret, Cliff's experiences in Berlin and with the cabaret performer Sally Bowles, and Cliff's landlady Fraulein Schneider and her engagement to a Jewish man, Herr Schultz. In the original production, a spiral-staircase on the left side of the stage in front of the proscenium arch allowed cabaret characters to watch the action, which served as a further reminder that it was a play.

A major theme throughout the show is apathy, and it is dealt with in various ways by various characters to critique various forms of passivity. The cabaret characters assume they can be immune from politics. The Emcee encourages the audience to forget what is outside

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<sup>53</sup> *Cabaret* was based on *Berlin Stories* by Christopher Isherwood.

<sup>54</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 64).

the cabaret. Like the rest of the cabaret performers, Sally believes she can be apolitical, and that the Nazis will not affect her life: “The Kit Kat Club is the most unpolitical place in Berlin.”<sup>55</sup> She epitomizes apathy, arguing: “It’ll all work out. It’s only politics, and what’s that got to do with us?”<sup>56</sup> The first number in the cabaret entertains the audience to forget their problems. The title song (the last song of the show) again seduces the audience to forget about politics: “No use permitting some prophet of doom to wipe every smile away. Life is a cabaret old chum,/Come to the cabaret.”<sup>57</sup> Although the cabaret characters see cultural problems, they do not involve themselves in the changing politics and appease themselves only by commenting on the issues through songs. They are aware of the political changes, and they possess the resources to help affect change, but they are too self-involved to do anything.<sup>58</sup> As the audience is seduced and the cabaret is enjoyed, the Nazis grab power.

Fraulein Schneider is more aware of the changing political tides, but she sees herself as helpless to do anything other than survive. She never changes during the show; she starts by singing about her survival: “The sun will rise and the moon will set,/And you learn how to settle for what you get./It’ll all go on if we’re here or not,/So who cares? So what?”<sup>59</sup> In the end, she is still focused on how she alone will survive.

All my life I have managed for myself — and it is too old a habit to change.

I have battled alone, and I have survived. There was a war — and I survived.

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<sup>55</sup> *Cabaret*, 582.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 591.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 587.

<sup>58</sup> This is, in part, a natural result of dramatizing Christopher Isherwood’s independent stories.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 538.

There was a revolution — and I survived. There was an inflation — billions of marks for one loaf of bread — but I survived! And if the Nazis come — I will survive. And if the Communists come — I will still be here — renting these rooms. For, in the end, what choice have I? This — is my world! . . . I regret — everything.<sup>60</sup>

Fraulein Schneider survives, but it is at a terrible cost. She loses her ability to make choices and regrets everything. Fraulein Schneider also challenges Cliff and the audience to not judge her inability to fight, noting that choices seem different when you are living a life rather than looking from the outside. She is not happy with her options, but she is so focused on her survival she does not see any other alternatives.

Herr Schultz, Fraulein Schneider's Jewish romantic interest, is oblivious to the problems and believes that they will pass. His naïve optimism leads him to assert, "Governments come. Governments go." After some Nazis throw a brick through his window he attempts to assuage Fraulein Schneider's fears, arguing it is "Just children. Mischievous children on their way to school."<sup>61</sup> Through the end of the show, he continues to believe that his citizenship will protect him: "I understand the Germans. After all, what am I? A German."<sup>62</sup> The casting of the original production emphasized both Fraulein Schneider's need to survive at all costs and Herr Schultz's victimization. Lotte Lenya — best known as the survivor Pirate Jenny from *Three Penny Opera* — played Fraulein Schneider, and Jack Gilford — a victim of the blacklist in America — played Herr Schultz.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 583.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 579, 591.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 591.

Cliff, the American, changes the most. In the beginning he is educated, but apathetic. He reads *Mein Kampf* because “I thought I should know *something* about German politics” but refuses to let his English student, Ernst, reveal his politics.<sup>63</sup> He smuggles for the Nazis, but when Ernst tries to tell him what he is working for, Cliff remarks, “Whatever it is, please don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”<sup>64</sup> As the political situation worsens, Cliff does not want to face it: “Why should I wake up? This dream is going so well./When you’re enchanted, why break the spell?/Drifting in this euphoric state, morning can wait.”<sup>65</sup> Eventually, he comes to see that “If you’re not against all this, you’re for it — or you might as well be.”<sup>66</sup> His only answer, however, is to leave Germany. He does not stay and fight, as he previously urged Fraulein Schneider to do.

*Cabaret* argues that fighting against bigotry is a moral imperative. It is not enough to ignore it; everyone has an obligation to do all they can to stop it. As the majority of the audience undoubtedly knew, Germany in 1929/1930 was about to succumb to the Nazis. The character of Herr Schultz would probably be killed in the concentration camps with millions of other Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and other “undesirables.”

*Cabaret* is structured by the Nazis’ rise to power and the Holocaust. Because the real conclusion is set by history, none of the characters could seem too involved or else the value of political activism could be negated. Thus, the show presents prototypes of dangerous behavior that center on ideas repeated at the end of the show. None of the German characters seems to possess the resources to fight. It is only Clifford, an intellectual young

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 552. Emphasis original.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 565.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 563.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 581.

American, who really seems to enjoy access to any other choices or resources, but he runs away.

The production team intended the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany to be analogous to civil rights issues in America. Harold Prince, who conceived the show and directed the original production, remarked, "I went so far in one draft of the show to end it with a film of the march on Selma and the Little Rock riots."<sup>67</sup> Although the final production focused only on Berlin, the allusions remained. This forced the audience to make connections themselves. Many probably did not, but, perchance, it addressed the issues more effectively than if the creative team forced the issues and created an atmosphere that seemed preachy or condescending.

The most compelling theatrical device for demonstrating the connection between Berlin during the thirties and America during the sixties was the large mirror. It tilted to reflect the audience before the show and during intermission and then rotated to reflect the characters during the show. Thus, a visual element linked the two worlds. In addition, the emcee performed directly to the audience. For example, the first act ended with everyone onstage freezing after the Nazis sang "Tomorrow Belongs To Me" at Herr Schultz's party. The Emcee descended the spiral staircase and walked among the characters with Herr Schultz and Sally both oblivious. He then looked at the audience and shrugged before the blackout. Coming directly before intermission, this could encourage audience members to connect to the characters on-stage.

The original production downplayed the ending. Cliff leaves, and various lines are repeated, but there is no dramatic moment when the Nazis take power. In contrast to the

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<sup>67</sup> Harold Prince, quoted in Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: From The Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera and Beyond* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1992), 137.

1998 revival, the Nazis took over a number of little things, but the audience needs to supply the information about what happened. By avoiding a cathartic release, the audience experienced no theatrical place to channel their energy. This lack of an emotional outlet worked to help create the feeling of uneasiness that Patricia Meyer Spacks defines as the goal of effective satire. Although *Cabaret* used little satire, it is possible that it created a similar effect through other techniques including Brechtian alienation devices.

*Cabaret* makes the relatively safe assumption that the audience would be familiar with the horrors of the Holocaust and abhor the inhumanity of Nazism. The authors do not develop the issue of anti-Semitism in great depth. Fraulein Schneider and Cliff both try timidly and unsuccessfully to debate with Ernst that Herr Schultz's welfare matters. Cliff also fights some Nazis at the club and refuses to continue smuggling for them. Despite these small acts, however, Fraulein Schneider leaves Herr Schultz because she realizes "that one can no longer dismiss the Nazis. . . . I need my license to rent my rooms! If they take that away. . ." <sup>68</sup> Likewise, Cliff leaves Berlin because it is not fun: "The party in Berlin is *over!* It was lots of fun but it's over. And what is Berlin doing *now!* Vomiting in the street." <sup>69</sup> Neither Cliff nor Fraulein Schneider makes any major sacrifice. Instead they remove themselves from the situations that put them at risk. The show is very sympathetic to Cliff and Fraulein Schneider, but there is also an awareness that surviving at all costs results in an enormous penalty. All the characters are complicit in the rise of the Nazis, and even Herr Schultz, to a lesser degree, is responsible for not recognizing the political danger and protecting himself.

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<sup>68</sup> *Cabaret*, 579. Ellipses in original, which implies that Fraulein Schneider cannot articulate her fears about survival if she is left without the small income on which she now lives.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 584. Emphasis in original.

The most powerful of the direct comments on racism comes in one of the cabaret numbers. The emcee sings an elaborate love song to a gorilla and argues against the discrimination of society for loving a being that is not in line with societal expectations. He argues that if the audience could see her through his eyes, they would understand. The last line of the song is “If you could see her through my eyes/She wouldn’t look Jewish at all.” This ending tends to catch the audience members as they are laughing at the situation, which demonstrates the horrible dehumanization that Jews in Germany faced, and subtly links it to racism in the United States, for African-Americans were often portrayed as less human than whites. During out-of-town tryouts, the collaborators responded to complaints from Jewish audience members and changed this last line to “She isn’t a meeskite at all!” This illustrates the difficulty with insuring reception of indirect political comments.<sup>70</sup> The creative team cannot guarantee that any comment will be read the way they intend. In this case, the creative team assumed that the statement was so outrageous that audience members would automatically be shocked, and the audience would subsequently understand the political commentary. By contrast, some theatregoers who were Jewish (and leaders of theatre groups) who had lived through horrendous anti-Semitism of the Holocaust did not see it as commentary on anti-Semitism but as straightforward anti-Semitism. They were unable to see the difference between a production 1930s cabaret audience the audience for the 1960s’ *Cabaret*. With any statement that requires the audience’s response to override a literal decoding and contradict the text, there is always a chance that some audience members will not react the way the creators expected.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 581. The word *meeskite* is defined earlier in the play as a Jewish word, which means homely. The change was instituted primarily for economic reasons as theatre groups were threatening to cancel because some Jewish people thought it implied Jewish people were similar to gorillas. See Ison, 146-147.

Most of the rest of the points were made through comments in the vaudeville numbers. Like *Love Life*, the numbers commented on the show and happened in the “in-one” space. In *Cabaret* the collaborators saw the in-one space as a sort of limbo area that existed between the book scenes and the audience. After Clifford begins to smuggle money for the Nazis, the emcee performs “Sitting Pretty.” This song celebrates the emcee’s ability to obtain all the money he needs by working as a pimp. In the next scene Fraulein Kost escorts three men out of her room. The juxtaposition of these three seemingly unrelated elements explicates the idea that smuggling without knowing the beneficiary is linked with prostitution; Clifford is selling himself just as much as Fraulein Kost and a pimp. Economic issues create an undercurrent in the book scenes for Clifford, Sally, and Fraulein Schneider all struggle to survive. Surprisingly, however, the cabaret seemed immune from economic difficulties in the original production. In contrast to the 1998 revival, Prince’s production developed “garish color and honky-tonk gaiety.”<sup>71</sup> The cabaret performers commented on the issues, but they seemed, as a group, to be relatively immune to the economic and political devastation destroying the country.

Despite the original conception to link the Nazis with racism in the America, *Cabaret* does not create a direct analogy, but it pins responsibility for the Holocaust on people who stood idly by and did not work to stop it. Act two opens with a conventional kick-line with the emcee in drag as one of the women. The kicks then mutate into a military drill, and the number ends with the dancers’ arms and legs mirroring the Nazi salute as they Heil Hitler. It is not clear where the entertainment ends and the military drill begins. Likewise, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” and its metamorphosis from a sweet, unconnected song to a

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<sup>71</sup> Copeland, 27.

Nazi anthem that all the characters know, further illustrates that it is easy to allow fascism to happen incrementally. Ultimately, *Cabaret's* final argument is not that Nazis are bad or racism is bad, but that apathy allows unspeakable horrors, and those who are apathetic are responsible for the calamity that they do not work to stop.

There could be, however, another unacknowledged factor in the reception of *Cabaret*: the Americans helped defeat the Nazis. Whereas *Anyone Can Whistle* highlighted the ways that an older audience did not live up to the show's expectations, the reception of *Cabaret* was influenced by the fact that the Nazis lost World War II. It was a hideous war, when sides were much clearer and the stakes much higher. The older, established parents who made up a typical audience also made up many of the soldiers and workers who helped to defeat the Nazis. *Cabaret* could serve as a powerful reminder that what members in the audience accomplished was right. It could also create a subtle bridge between the generations. The older generation fought the Nazis and helped end the Holocaust. The younger generation actually followed the older generation's example when they worked to help end analogous situations here. Given the tendency of many people in the north to see racism as only taking place in the south, *Cabaret's* success may be due, in part, to the subtle exoneration of both generations in their own milieus. Simultaneously, *Cabaret* may have allowed some complacency among the audience that slightly undercut its message.

### *Hair (1968)*

The best-known political musical of the sixties, however, was a celebration of the counterculture. Even more than *Cabaret*, *Hair* was a concept musical connected by a theme. Similar to its predecessors, *Hair* uses sentimental appeals but the authors develop a larger variety of satirical approaches that range from superficial to radical incidental numbers

throughout the show. Created entirely by Broadway outsiders, *Hair* was the first musical to transfer from off-Broadway to Broadway. LaMama actors Gerome Ragni and James Rado conceived the show; Montreal native Galt McDermot wrote his first theatre music, and Tom O'Horgan, whose previous experience also centered on LaMama, directed. *Hair's* lack of any Broadway credentials may explain why it is viewed primarily as an anomaly with very little impact on the genre. The show focused on a tribe of young people and celebrated the hippie movement. The characters were defined by their counterculture, hippie values, and their age. In their notes, the authors command directors to "take note of the ever-present threat of the outside world on the Tribe, as expressed through the presence of the large police puppets, the projections on the walls of FBI, CIA, dark mysterious men, and Mom and Dad."<sup>72</sup> The generation gap defined much of the conflict in the show.

*Hair* is much more of a concept show than *Cabaret* or *Love Life*, because it avoids any traditional narrative. Essentially, it is a joyous celebration of a counterculture lifestyle. Off-Broadway the show developed a strong anti-war message, but by the time it got to the Broadway Biltmore theatre the collaborators diluted the anti-war theme. *Hair* also became much less conventional in terms of plot, theme, and characters; the show also became much more upbeat. The off-Broadway production ended with tanks symbolically annihilating the audience, but the Broadway production focused on identity and ended with a celebration of generational individuality. In some ways, the off-Broadway production focused more on ideology and the Broadway production focused more on style: "The tribe's members at the Public were hippies because they opposed the war. At the Biltmore, they opposed the war

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<sup>72</sup> Gerome Ragni and James Rado (libretto), Galt MacDermot (music), *Hair*, 1968, reprinted in *Great Rock Musicals*, Stanley Richards, ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 391. Capitalization in original.

because they were hippies.”<sup>73</sup> According to Barbara Lee Horn in *The Age of Hair*, when the show moved to Broadway it developed many more songs and much less book.

The narrative elements were deemphasized. The result was “a decimated version of the already plotless story told earlier downtown.” *Hair* at the Biltmore had become “A succession of songs and dances with [almost] no libretto to absorb any of the time.” The book, in the traditional sense, was all but banished from the Biltmore production. Emphasis was not on plot, character, or theme, but on picturesque physical activity and bold anti-illusionistic devices.<sup>74</sup>

*Hair* obliterated the traditional fourth wall; actors entered from the back of the house holding each other’s hands as they made their way to the stage by stepping on the backs of the audience members’ seats. The plotless aspect was further accentuated by the constant improvisation; the heavy drugs that the management subsidized for the actors probably heightened this improvisatory element.<sup>75</sup>

The authors were given total artistic freedom by the Broadway producer, the politically progressive Michael Butler. The appeals against racism and the war in Vietnam are clear, as is the glorification of sex and drugs. The authors successfully satirized both racial stereotypes in “Color Spade” and the expectations that black Americans should die for the still very racist America in “Abie Baby.” The inherent racism shown by the disproportionate number of African-American men dying in Vietnam was further developed

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<sup>73</sup> Barbara Lee Horn, *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 45.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 45. Quotes are from Gerald Bordman’s *American Musical Theatre* and Martin Gottfried’s *Opening Nights: Theater Criticism of the Sixties* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1969).

<sup>75</sup> Horn, 90-92.

in “Three-Five-Zero-Zero” with the tribe viewing the entire war as “256 Vietcong captured” by “Prisoners in Niggertown/It’s a dirty little war.”<sup>76</sup> Other prominent issues included the fear of nuclear war, inter-racial relationships, and concern about the environment.

*Hair* was the most formally radical show to play on Broadway at that point, and it played to a much younger audiences. According to a study in *The Wall Street Journal*, half of *Hair*’s audience members were between eighteen and twenty-five; that age group comprised only three percent of other Broadway shows.<sup>77</sup> For some hippies and friends, *Hair* worked to celebrate their life choices and perhaps to strengthen their political commitment. Other hippies viewed it as a crass commercialization of issues for which they sacrificed. For those audience members who did not already sympathize, *Hair* did little to change their minds. Indeed, the off-Broadway director of *Hair* called the Broadway production “a freak show.”<sup>78</sup> *Hair*’s very willingness to embrace all taboos undercut its own power to persuade non-sympathetic audience members. An example is the song *Sodomy* (in its entirety):

Sodomy  
 Fellatio  
 Cunnilingus  
 Pederasty  
 Father  
 Why do these words  
 Sound so nasty

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<sup>76</sup> *Hair*, 461.

<sup>77</sup> “Shaggy Show Story,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 11, 1969), cited in Horn.

<sup>78</sup> Gerald Freedman, quoted in Horn.

Masturbation can be fun<sup>79</sup>

By equating pederasty with the other sex acts, the authors imply that any taboo is ridiculous, regardless of the reason. Likewise, one of the characters equates dropping out of high school with the emancipation proclamation. The continual celebration of everything taboo may have undercut its political power.

The tendency of the authors to treat most of the songs as giant lists of things they were against or in favor of is a recurring device. In "Hashish" the tribe sings of illegal substances, moving from LSD to other acronyms, including IRT (part of the New York subway system) and A&P. The title song is another list song, in favor of long hair. Even "Color Spade" is merely a list of racial stereotypes.

There are a few sentimental moments, evoking a more traditional theatrical style, mostly when characters try to connect with each other or to figure out their place in the world. "Where Do I Go" is a haunting song that examines the life choices a young man faces, to follow the crowd or try to find his own way. He follows the crowd and dies in Vietnam. More typical, however, is "Easy To Be Hard." The song is about a young woman who is "hung up" on a guy who is not interested in her. She uses many of the political arguments of the time and argues that he should be involved with her, because it would be the right thing to do.

In many ways the show comes across as being against anything that "the system" favors. *Hair* is seductive, joyous, and playful for people who already identify themselves as sympathetic to the counterculture movement. By the time the show reached Broadway, however, the elements that worked to incite political action were reduced and the show

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<sup>79</sup> *Hair*, 397.

became a celebration of a style. It would certainly encourage a young audience to identify with the counter-culture movement, but it may not have encouraged political action. The equation of Mom and Dad with the FBI and CIA worked to equalize all youth rebellion: opposing parents, avoiding barbers, and demonstrating against war and racism were all treated as morally comparable. As a result, the show may have implied that long hair and fighting with parents would change the world just as effectively as political action. The emphasis on style, identity, and anti-establishment values for their own sake and the de-emphasis of the Vietnam War and direct political action undercut *Hair's* political message on Broadway.

### *Conclusion*

Satire served as an important factor in musicals from the beginning of the Depression until the 1960s, and it continues to appear intermittently in musicals. From the clever “Bring the Boys Back Home” satire of Lyndon B. Johnson in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to *Capital Steps* and *Reefer Madness*, satire continues to develop political ideas in musical theatre. Even movie musicals such as *Bob Roberts* and *Burke and Wives* used the techniques of political theatrical satires to attack the right-wing agenda and the campaign finance system. Musical theatre historians need to reclaim the history of political satire to develop an understanding of the genre that embraces non-narrative and satirical elements. The work of artists like the Gershwins, Yip Harburg and Kurt Weill points to possibilities for synthesizing political and empathetic, which, in turn, could influence current authors, directors, producers, and theatre-goers to reevaluate the boundaries of the genre. Unfortunately, musical theatre dramaturgs and historians are quick to label any satirical comment as dated, and producers are quick to cut it. Although most revivals are heavily

rewritten, critics generally blame the original authors, even when the original books have been mutilated. For example, Joel Hirschhorn in *Variety* commented that the Los Angeles revival of *Strike Up the Band*, which used the Encores' script, demonstrated that the book had little political value:

It's hard to believe that "Strike Up the Band," the musical satire by George S. Kaufman, with songs by George and Ira Gershwin, was considered so scathingly harsh and grim in 1927 that audiences rejected it. Today . . . the political content seems dated and quaint, a slim pretext on which to hang some of Broadway's greatest songs.<sup>80</sup>

Although the show acknowledged that David Ives "adapted" the script, some critics assumed that the production used the original script. Producers' common cuts of political commentary combined with critics' failure to research the original librettos continues to perpetuate the idea that these shows had little political value.

Ultimately, satire in musical theatre is probably the most viable technique to transform anger into a sense of community and perhaps help fuel social change. Charles Schutz, in his discussion of political humor, argues, "To view something humorously is to lessen hostility. That at which one can laugh is no longer fully threatening. To laugh at someone with others in political humor is a step toward community."<sup>81</sup> In order to sustain political involvement, people need hope and a sense of community.<sup>82</sup> Ideally, satire will

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<sup>80</sup> Joel Hirschhorn, "Strike Up the Band," *Variety*, Feb. 27, 2001. See also Michael Phillips, "An Embraceable Revival: The Gershwin-Kaufman Satiric Musical 'Strike Up The Band' Makes A Snappy Comeback At UCLA's Freud Playhouse," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2001.

<sup>81</sup> Charles E. Schutz, "The Psycho-Logic of Political Humor," *It's a Funny Thing, Humour: The International Conference on Humour and Laughter*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> I believe hope is necessary to committed political activism, because activism requires a sacrifice of time on the part of individuals to a cause with an uncertain future. If there is no hope, there is no point. Some people

work to transform isolated anger or helplessness from despair into a sense of community. Musical satires may encourage social activism by reducing the perceived power of the social structures and creating humor in a shared environment.

Satire will not create political change by itself, but some satire may be able “to effect a gradual moral reawakening.”<sup>83</sup> Although satire can only work as part of an interwoven dialogue, many authors believe it maintains a powerful connection with politics. As Hodgart argues:

There is an essential connection between satire and politics in the widest sense: satire is not only the commonest form of political literature, but, insofar as it tries to influence public behavior, it is the most political part of all literature. . . . All social and legal systems are in need of continuous reform, and politics is the only means of achieving reform; while only satire can release powerful enough acids to break down the attitudes of mind which hinder reform.<sup>84</sup>

Humor can work both to liberate and to oppress, but “when humor undermines the forces that stifle the basic human needs for freedom, justice, and dignity, laughter is experienced as a wave of liberating release.”<sup>85</sup> Charlie Chaplin, who portrayed the “little tramp,” perhaps the best known of the little people who rebelled against the stricture of

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become involved in social action for other reasons, but I think that believing your actions can make a difference is necessary to sustain political involvement. If individuals truly have no optimism, they are going to have little reason to try to create change. Community is necessary because it is almost impossible for an individual to create social change.

<sup>83</sup> Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, *Satire's Persuasive Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 16.

<sup>84</sup> Matthew Hodgart, *Satire* (New York: World University Library, 1969), 33.

<sup>85</sup> Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 2.

society, said “Ridicule is an act of defiance. We must laugh at our helplessness against the forces of nature or go insane.”<sup>86</sup> Like all art and humor, satire can work both for and against social change. Satire is an important component of musicals; its history is imperative to understanding the rich cultural value of America’s most popular theatre.

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<sup>86</sup> Charlie Chaplin *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 303.

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The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPL-PA) has been an enormous asset for this project. I have consulted the clippings and photo folders for *Strike Up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, *Of Thee I Sing*, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, *Face the Music*, *As Thousands Cheer*, *Louisiana Purchase*, *Leave it to Me*, *Anything Goes*, *Red Hot and Blue*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *Parade*, *Pins and Needles*, *Sing Out the News*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Johnny Johnson*, *Oklahoma!*, *Street Scene*, *Allegro*, *Love Life*, *South Pacific*, *Miss Liberty*, *Lost in the Stars*, *Pajama Game*, *Candide*, *West Side Story*, *Fiorello*, *Tenderloin*, *Bloomer Girl*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Flahooley*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Cabaret*, and *Hair*.

In addition to the clippings and photo folders for the above shows, I consulted numerous scrapbooks, and special collections. The most important of these were the Harburg papers, which are filed at the Yale music library, with copies filed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Kurt Weill Archives located at the Kurt Weill foundation in New York. Additionally, I consulted the Harold Rome papers at the Yale music library and Stephen Sondheim's personal papers, and I consulted *The New York Times* and *New Theatre*.

Finally, recordings of *Strike Up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, *Of Thee I Sing*, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, *Louisiana Purchase*, *Anything Goes*, *By Jupiter*, *On Your Toes*, *Pal Joey*, *I'd Rather Be Right* (private collection), *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *Pins and Needles*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Johnny Johnson*, *Oklahoma!*, *Street Scene*, *Allegro*, *Love Life* (private collection), *South Pacific*, *Lost in the Stars*, *Pajama Game*, *Candide*, *West Side Story*, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* (released as *White House Cantata*), *Fiorello*, *Tenderloin*, *Bloomer Girl*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Flahooley*, *Anyone Can Whistle*,

*Cabaret*, and *Hair* as well as compilations of composers and lyricists' work greatly enhanced my project.

Please note: Throughout I use "book" to refer to the non-sung dialogue in a musical and "libretto" to refer to the entire script, including the lyrics.

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