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**THE AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROCK MUSICAL
ON THE NEW YORK STAGE**

by

ELIZABETH LARA WOLLMAN

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

2002

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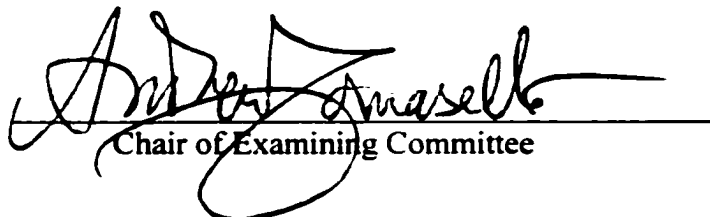
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THE AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROCK MUSICAL ON THE NEW YORK
STAGE

by

Elizabeth Lara Wollman

Adviser: Professor Peter Manuel

Rock music's relationship with the American musical theater has always been an uneasy one. Although rock 'n' roll was introduced in the mid-1950s and became increasingly popular in the following decade, the creators of American musical theater were slow to respond to the genre. Musical theater composers occasionally experimented with rock 'n' roll through the 1950s and 1960s, but it was not until 1967 that *Hair*, the first critically and commercially successful rock musical, opened in New York City. Despite the impact of *Hair*, which some critics believed would revolutionize the American musical, there have since been very few successful staged rock musicals.

A primary reason for the marginal status of the rock musical lies within the aesthetic realm. The label "rock musical" contradicts itself, in that a rock musical generally does not offer any "real" rock music, nor does it remain within the narrative confines of the traditional musical. Thus, rock musicals cannot be categorized as "traditional" in their approach to musical theater, or as "authentic" in their approach to rock. In this dissertation, I explore ways in which rock musicals interpret and negotiate aesthetics extant in traditional musicals on the one hand and rock music on the other. I also consider the ways that the rock musical has been influenced over the past three decades by the mass media, sound and recording technology, and the economic developments that have affected New York's theater district as a whole.

Acknowledgments

Many people assisted in the completion of this project. I must first thank my informants, all of whom are listed in the appendix: without their insights, opinions, and patience in answering my many questions, this dissertation could not have been written. Thanks also to the members of my dissertation committee: my adviser, Peter Manuel; my first and second readers, John Graziano and Judith Milhous; and my readers, Stephen Blum, David Savran, and Andrew Tomasello, who also chaired the committee.

I am grateful to the members of the music department: Peg Rivers, Joyce Boone, Allan Atlas, and David Olan. All exhibited patience and good humor in answering my countless questions and abiding by my habit of barreling through the music office whenever I needed a break from writing.

My thanks to my colleagues and friends at RILM Abstracts of Music Literature, where I worked during the course of my graduate student career. I am especially grateful to André Balog, James Cowdery, Risa Freeman, Lenny Lionnet, Barbara Dobbs Mackenzie, Mark Pottinger, Lori Rothstein, Andrea Saposnik, and Carl Skoggard.

Many friends, colleagues, and family members offered me advice, guidance, and camaraderie along the way: Norma Adler, Stephen Amico, Christopher Bruhn, Jak Cheng, Dan Ehrenhaft, David Garcia, Joanne Hoffman, Marion Jacobson, Nancy Langer, Sandra Mardenfeld, Jason Oakes, Shuli Passow, Josh Saltman, Joe Sampson, Sara Sterling, Mark Stein, Steve and Jessica Swenson, Jessica Valiente, and Paul Yoon.

Finally, I am grateful for the love, support, and encouragement of my parents, Barbara and Michael, my sister, Jessica, and my husband, Andrew.

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Introduction

I got up this morning and did fifty-five press-ups, dad / I brushed my teeth since breakfast and I threw away my *Playboy*, that's bad / The Ferrari's in the garage and I gave it a wash just for you / But please don't make me come to the theater / It's so uncool

—The Who
Cousin Kevin Model Child

Rock music has always had an uneasy relationship with the American musical theater. Before the rise of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, musical theater composers routinely acknowledged popular musical idioms—jazz and ragtime, for example—by appropriating them for theatrical purposes shortly after their emergence. Yet, although there have been repeated attempts over the past half-century to unite rock music with musical theater, their divergent performance aesthetics have made such a union especially problematic.

Although rock 'n' roll was introduced in the United States in the mid-1950s and became increasingly sophisticated and influential in the following decade, most of those who were then creating American musical theater dismissed the new popular genre as a noisy, vulgar fad. A few musical theater composers experimented with rock 'n' roll through the 1950s and 1960s, especially once it became clear that the genre was rapidly outselling Tin Pan Alley fare. Nevertheless, it was not until 1967 that *Hair*, the first critically and commercially successful rock musical, opened at Joseph Papp's Public Theater in the East Village neighborhood of New York City.

When *Hair* transferred from Off Broadway to Broadway in 1968, its phenomenal popularity and impact led some critics to proclaim that rock music's influence would revolutionize the musical theater, which by then had begun to decline in popularity among the American people. In the years since *Hair* premiered at Broadway's Biltmore Theater, the rock musical has become something of a staple in New York City. Almost every season since *Hair* first opened in 1967, at least a few rock musicals have appeared on, Off, or Off Off Broadway to wildly varying degrees of commercial and critical success.

Yet despite their constant presence, staged rock musicals have almost always been somewhat marginal, and their status problematic. Far more staged rock musicals fail than succeed. For every success, like *Hair*, *Rent*, or *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, there are countless long-forgotten critical and commercial flops, like *Dude*, *Via Galactica*, and *Lieutenant*, most of which were openly scorned by theater critics and blithely ignored by theatergoers.

A primary reason for the marginal status of the rock musical lies within the aesthetic realm. The label "rock musical" contradicts itself, in that a rock musical generally does not offer any "real" rock music, nor does it remain within the narrative confines of the traditional American musical. Thus, rock musicals cannot be categorized as "traditional" in their approach to musical theater, or as "authentic" in their approach to rock music.

This dissertation examines attempts to merge rock with the American musical theater and identifies recurring problems that arise when such attempts are made. The ways in which the staged rock musical has interpreted and negotiated the aesthetics of traditional American musicals on the one hand, and rock music on the other, are also explored. The role of the audience and the ways that this particular musical subgenre has been influenced since its

inception by the mass media, sound and recording technology, changes in the music and theater industries, and the economic developments that have impacted American theater as a whole are also considered.

I. The American Musical: History and State of Research

While the specific origins of the modern musical comedy are both confused and contested,¹ they are generally understood to have their earliest roots in comic opera, operetta, musical hall, minstrel shows, vaudeville, and burlesque.² What is often cited as the first American musical, *The Black Crook*, opened in New York City in September 1866; this piece offered “melodrama, romance, comedy, dance, songs, specialty acts, spectacular scenic effects, elaborate costumes, and legs, legs, legs,” but very little in the way of a unified plot.³ In this respect, *The Black Crook* served as a prototype for the American musical as it developed through the first half of the twentieth century.

For decades after the premiere of *The Black Crook*, musical comedies were most akin to vaudeville shows: they were vehicles for popular songs and specialty acts that were loosely connected through the thinnest of plots. During the mid- to late-1920s, however, a number of young popular composers and songwriting teams—including George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Vincent Youmans, and Cole Porter—began to create theater pieces that more fully integrated songs and plots.⁴ The American musical matured during the World War II era.

¹Boroff, 1984.

²Lamb and Snelson, 2001: 453.

³Mast, 1987: 7-8.

⁴Lamb and Snelson, 2001: 453.

War II era, when theater composers and lyricists like Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, Frank Loesser, Leonard Bernstein turned their attentions away from frivolous boy-meets-girl storylines, and toward the development of “musical dramas,” in which songs and dance numbers defined increasingly complex characters and propelled increasingly sophisticated plots.⁶ This “integrated” musical play flourished during the 1940s and early 1950s, until the rise of rock ‘n’ roll caused a rift between American popular music and the American musical theater. It is with the development of this rift that the present study begins.

Despite its rich history, its populist appeal, and its continuous reflection of the changing moods of the nation, the American musical theater has been curiously neglected as an area for scholarly investigation, with the exception of a large number of linear histories that do little to shed light on the sociocultural aspects of the stage musical. Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh suggest that

one reason for this may be the uncomfortable way in which the musical straddles the high/low cultural divide. It is too “low-brow” musically and dramatically to interest high art critics, yet it is too conventional and mundane for culture critics of popular musical forms such as jazz and rock.⁷

There is some indication that this may be changing: in the mid-1990s, a significant number of studies began to appear that suggest a growing interest in exploring new perspectives in musical theater studies.⁸ Nevertheless, to date, aside from the many articles that appear about

⁶ Mast, 1987: 201.

⁷Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh, 1999: 381.

⁸See, for example, Lawson-Peebles, 1996; Steyn, 1997; Block, 1997; Burston, 1997 and 1998; Filmer, Rimmer, and Walsh, 1999; Wickstrom, 1999; and Savran, 2002.

the musical theater each season in the popular press, a vast majority of the scholarly works that do examine the American stage musical appear in the form of historical surveys.*

Although rock musicals have been considered in a number of musical theater histories, their treatment is generally superficial and almost always negative. Theater historians tend to cite what they see as the shortcomings of the rock musical; traditionalists, especially, reject its typically unstructured quality, its often sketchy or nonexistent plot, and its reliance on amplification and alternative instrumentation.⁹ A few studies, however, focus on the development of particular rock musicals, which are discussed in a refreshingly positive light. Barbara Lee Horn's *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991) includes interviews with the musical's creative staff and provides information about the hippie subculture and the Off Broadway theater community in New York City, both of which directly inspired the musical. Horn follows the model of Nassour and Broderick's *Rock Opera: The Creation of Jesus Christ Superstar, from Record Album to Broadway Show and Motion Picture* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973), which also includes interviews with the cast and crew of the original Broadway production. So, too, does the "behind-the-scenes" oral history of the rock musical *Rent*, which was compiled by Evelyn McDonnell and Katherine Silberger (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1997).

In contrast with the American musical, a great deal of scholarly work has been written about rock music's socio-historical development, performance approach, and aesthetics. Unlike the musical theater's precarious position on the high/low culture continuum, Gracyk

* See, for example, Ewen 1959; Mates 1985; Hamm, 1986: 300-09; Schubert, 1997: 687-710; and Lamb and Snelson, 2001: 453-65.

⁹ See, for example, Mordden, 1976.

points out that rock music “is a cultural *rival* to traditional high culture, replicating within itself a full hierarchy of tastes from low-brow to high-brow.”¹⁰ As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, however, the staged rock musical clearly occupies the lowest rung of such a continuum in the eyes of many rock journalists and historians, a few of whom have written about staged rock musicals with the utmost contempt, and a majority of whom simply ignore the subgenre entirely.

The field of popular music studies is currently flourishing in music scholarship. Yet music scholars in general and ethnomusicologists in particular have not as yet contributed many studies that directly consider the adaptation of rock music for the theatrical stage. The works by music scholars that do exist—for example, those in *Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the Musical Theatre in America*, edited by Glenn M. Loney (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984)—are insightful and informative, but none considers the rock musical. Likewise, while many ethnomusicologists have examined the role that music plays in the theater genres of many nonwestern countries, few have considered the American musical theater as a topic for scholarly consideration.

This study has been most directly influenced by writings on popular music by sociologists, philosophers, and media studies scholars, including Simon Frith and Theodore Gracyk. These writers have helped me to frame discussions on the importance of rock music to audiences, the ways that rock music has been commodified, and some of the many difficulties inherent in adapting rock for the musical stage. Finally, and although audience studies remain frustratingly challenging due to the multifaceted and diverse nature of the subject matter, a few works that focus primarily on the audience—especially Susan Bennett’s

¹⁰ Gracyk, 1999: 214.

Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception—have helped to direct my own fieldwork among theater and rock music audiences.

II. Scope

This study examines musicals that rely, for the most part, on rock instrumentation (electric guitar, bass, and keyboard, as well as traps), and that have been staged in New York City between the 1950s and the early 2000s. The setting for this study is by no means a randomly chosen one: New York City has been considered the theater capital of the United States since approximately 1825, when its population surpassed that of the country's former theater capital, Philadelphia. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, New York's commercial theater district, located on and around Broadway in midtown Manhattan, has been home to the largest collection of professional theaters in the nation.

In the early twentieth century, the city also became home to a number of comparatively small, non-commercial theaters and theater companies that comprised what was then called the Little Theater Movement. In the early 1950s, some of these smaller theaters became known as "Off Broadway" houses.¹¹ As Off Broadway theater became increasingly influential and commercial through the 1950s and early 1960s, the even less commercial, decidedly more experimental Off Off Broadway movement was born in New York. Although most writing on American theater tends to treat these three realms as unique entities—with, for example, histories of Broadway virtually ignoring Off and Off Off Broadway—they are in fact interconnected entities that have exerted a great deal of influence on one another at different times in their histories.

¹¹Kauffmann. 1979: 36.

A dissertation that examines the development of the staged rock musical must consider its role in all three realms of New York theater. Because rock music was and, many would argue, remains largely unwelcome on the Broadway stage, creators of rock musicals have regularly nurtured their shows in the Off and Off Off Broadway realms. In a number of cases, rock musicals that prove successful in smaller theaters are moved to the larger houses on Broadway. In this respect, the rock musical differs markedly from the traditional American musical, which is most firmly rooted in the commercial theater, and which, at least historically, owes little to Off or Off Off Broadway.

As chapter 1 demonstrates, *Hair*, the theatrical production whence the term “rock musical” is derived, serves as an excellent example of the ways in which the development of the rock musical is related to all three theatrical realms: *Hair* was written in the mid-1960s—a time when Broadway was suffering, both economically and artistically—by two former Broadway actors who had become involved in the then-flourishing experimental realm of Off Off Broadway. The musical was first produced Off Broadway in 1967 as the inaugural production of the Public Theater; its markedly experimental and hugely successful Broadway incarnation was directed in 1968 by the Off Off Broadway director Tom O’Horgan.

Hair is not unique in this respect. Other rock musicals, such as *Godspell* and *Rent*, originated as Off or Off Off Broadway shows and were later moved to Broadway houses. Just as many—for example, the failed *Dude, or, The Highway Life* (1972) and the interactive *Rocky Horror Show* (2000)—reflected stylistic influences of Off or Off Off Broadway movements, even though these musicals were developed for commercial runs in Broadway houses.

Because the rock musical was developed in New York City and continues to appear with some frequency in all three realms of the New York theater, any consideration of its aesthetic development must necessarily relate back to New York's interconnected and mutually influential theater communities. This study, therefore, offers a more holistic approach to the history and development of the American theater than can be found in most writing on the subject.

Of course, there have been many rock musicals that have been developed and staged outside New York City, not to mention outside the United States. The impact of staged rock musicals that enjoy long runs in other parts of the world—especially those with strongly nationalist themes—is a topic that seems ripe for study, for example, but which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this project.

Regrettably, a thorough treatment of race as it applies to rock musicals is also beyond the scope of this study. While firmly rooted in African-American genres like the blues, rock music is largely made by, marketed to, and consumed by white people. In spite of their often strong similarities to what is commonly defined as “rock,” African-American popular music styles that have developed since the 1950s are often labeled and marketed differently. In this respect, despite the success in recent decades of such crossover genres as rap, which appeals to both white and black youths, contemporary popular music styles remain somewhat segregated in terms of the ways that they are advertised, marketed, and consumed.

The Broadway musical proves even more segregated than the popular music industry. Gerald Mast notes that during the late nineteenth century, when American musicals were first taking shape, they featured casts that were either “all white or all black.”¹² The American

¹²Mast, 1987: 20.

musical seems to have developed along these segregated lines: while casts have long since been integrated, Broadway remains a site in which musicals written and performed by, about, and for white middle-class Americans comprise a vast majority of the offerings in any given theater season. Meanwhile, musicals by, about, or aimed at African-Americans are regularly labeled “black” musicals by the industry, the press, and historians, and are thus treated not as mainstream productions but as “specialty” shows. Although musicals like *The Wiz* (1975), *Dreamgirls* (1981), and *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* thus make use of contemporary music styles that could easily be interpreted as “rock,” they are never referred to as rock musicals. Rather, they tend to be described in terms that refer more to the skin color of their casts than to their content. Bordman, for example, refers to *The Wiz* as a “soul musical” most notable for being an “all-black re-creation of *The Wizard of Oz*.”¹³

A combination of contemporary popular music and the musical theater has thus done little to break down racial barriers or to further desegregate Broadway, an institution that remains rather backward-looking in its approach to race despite recent attempts to appeal to more diverse audiences through nontraditional casting. Although I regret that I have inadvertently reinforced the segregation that is often tacitly promoted in the development and marketing of the modern Broadway musical, I also must admit to focusing, in this study, on musicals that are largely by, about, and aimed at white youth, since it is these musicals that are most readily labeled “rock musicals” by theater critics, historians, spectators, and members of the theater industry.

¹³Bordman, 1992: 683.

III. Definitions

As Richard Middleton acknowledges in the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the word “rock” is famously complicated to define:

Rock can be defined along three dimensions. Sociologically, it is a commercially-produced popular music aimed at an exclusionary youth audience of a type characteristic of late-capitalist societies. Musically, it tends to be highly amplified, with a strong beat and rhythmic patterns commonly considered erotic, and to draw heavily on proto-folk (especially African-American) musical sources from Southern USA. Ideologically, it is associated with an aesthetic programme of “authenticity,” developing elements from discourses around folk-revival (“community,” “roots”) and art music (“originality,” “personal expression,” “integrity”). The sociological and musical elements are so variable, however, that the ideological dimension is the strongest factor.¹⁴

Further complicating matters is the fact that the terms “rock ‘n’ roll” and “pop” or “pop music,” which are similarly difficult to define, are often used interchangeably with the word “rock.”

Musical theater terminology can be just as confusing: because the term “rock” is so elusive, it follows that the term “rock musical” is as well. Further, the terms “rock opera” and “rock musical” are occasionally used interchangeably. Finally, the vague term “pop musical” has crept into the literature over the past decade.

While it is somewhat difficult to work with these terms because of their ambiguity, I have attempted to shed light on all of them in the following pages. Some distinctions are simpler than others. “Rock opera,” for example, is fairly easily distinguished from “rock musical,” in that the former generally refers to dramatic productions that are sung-through, whereas the latter generally refers to dramatic productions that include spoken dialogue. *Jesus*

¹⁴ Middleton. 2001: 485.

Christ Superstar, which features no spoken dialogue, is thus a “rock opera”; *Hair*, which features a great deal of spoken dialogue, is, rather, a “rock musical.”

The distinction between “rock musicals” and “pop musicals” is not as clear. The latter term is often applied to musicals that draw from myriad popular music styles, but that are usually decidedly less aggressive, in terms of instrumentation, amplification, performance approach, or combinations thereof, than what tend to be labeled “rock musicals.” Further, rock musicals tend to focus thematically on the trials and tribulations of adolescence or young adulthood, or to take as subject matter the lifestyles associated with a contemporary youth culture; this is not necessarily the case with pop musicals. The differences between them, however, are often simply subjective.

Because of the many elusive terms that appear and that are discussed throughout this study, I have taken pains to avoid a number of semantic obstacles. In the following pages, I have attempted to distinguish “rock ‘n’ roll,” “pop” and “rock” from one another. The first term is thus exclusively used in reference to the rhythm-and-blues-influenced genre of popular music that developed in the mid-1950s and fueled the development of the broader and less easily defined “rock” in the mid-1960s. “Popular music,” the broadest of the three, is used for more general discussions, or for music that defies more specific descriptors. Similarly, I am careful to distinguish rock musicals from rock operas on the one hand, and pop musicals on the other. While discussions about terminology appear throughout this work, chapters 1, 2, and 3, in particular, contain further clarification of terms like “rock,” “rock musical,” “rock opera,” and “pop musical.”

IV. Overview of Chapters

The body of this project is divided into two sections. In chapters 1 through 3, I emphasize the history of rock musical as it developed on the New York stage from the mid-1960s to the late 1990s. In chapters 4 through 6, I consider performance aesthetics and are thus more analytical in nature.

In chapter 1, I begin with an examination of the severing, in the late 1950s, of the once-strong connection between Tin Pan Alley and popular culture. Early attempts at bringing rock music to the musical stage are considered. Such attempts were more often the result of perceived necessity on the part of theater producers than they were the result of theater composers' interest in or respect for the new popular music genre. *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*—the first rock musical to have a successful run on a New York stage, and one of the only commercially and critically successful rock musicals to date—is examined in detail. Reasons that *Hair* attained such success while so many of its imitators were panned by critics and ignored by audiences are evaluated.

In chapter 2, I examine the many rock musicals staged in New York City during the 1970s by producers eager to emulate the success of *Hair*. Most of these musicals emulated the free-form, non-narrative structure of *Hair*, only to become critical and commercial failures. Their collective inability to win the favor of critics and audiences contributed to a rapid demise in enthusiasm for rock musicals among New York's theater producers, who began, for the most part, to shy away from such projects by the end of the decade. A discussion about the influence exerted on rock musicals by trends in rock music during the early 1970s—specifically, the rise in popularity of the rock concept album—is followed by my examination of recurring difficulties that were encountered in the conception and staging of the

Broadway and Off Broadway musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), *Rainbow* (1972), *Dude* (1972), *Via Galactica* (1972), and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* (1974), as well as in the 1993 Broadway version of the Who's 1969 concept album *Tommy*.

In chapter 3, I examine the economic changes that have influenced the American theater in general, and Broadway musicals in particular, from the early 1980s to the present. In the last 20 years, beginning with the introduction in the early 1980s of such internationally successful "pop musicals" as *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, rising costs and new emphasis on the international marketing of entertainment properties have significantly changed the ways in which Broadway musicals are developed, staged, and marketed. These changes have only accelerated since the early 1990s, due to the renovation of the Times Square area and the increased presence of entertainment conglomerates as theater producers. The increasing "corporatization" of the commercial theaters in New York has led to the rise of ever more spectacular productions that structurally and stylistically reflect the influence of Andrew Lloyd Webber and feature musical scores fashioned after middle-of-the-road pop music.

Although such ventures prove popular with tourists, they also work to limit access by independent, original productions to Broadway theaters. The rock musical *Rent*, which moved from Off Broadway to Broadway just before Times Square underwent its most drastic changes, is contrasted with subsequent successful Broadway musicals. The influence of past rock musicals on the current slew of pop musicals, as well as the reasons that theater producers favor the former over the latter, are also considered.

In chapter 4, I discuss issues of authenticity as they apply to rock music; such issues are seen to hinder the adaptation of rock music for use in the musical theater. As rock music has developed, it has come to carry with it an air of imagined authenticity that has led many

of its fans to distinguish the music from and hold it in higher esteem than more overtly commercialized and corporate-driven “pop” music. This perceived authenticity is bound up with the belief that despite its strong commercial moorings, rock is a transgressive, rebellious genre of music created and performed by uncompromising, soul-baring artists. Such notions about rock music are considered, in light of the fact that musical theater does not rely regularly on immediacy and is so strongly associated with older audiences that it cannot plausibly pose as a rebellious or transgressive art form.

In chapter 5, I consider the differing approaches to and executions of performance, including the roles of the body, instrumentation and orchestration, musical form, collaboration, and performance space. In chapter 6, I explore the role that the audience plays in the aesthetic makeup of a particular mode of performance. Spectators are viewed as active participants in the execution of a successful rock music performance on one hand and musical theater performance on the other. Audience behavior, expectation, and the relationship established between the performer and the audience are discussed here.

V. Approach

Despite recent attempts to extend their explorations from non-Western traditional music genres to Western popular genres, ethnomusicologists are only beginning to apply that which sets them apart from other music scholars—their emphasis on fieldwork—to popular music studies. At the same time, extant popular music studies by scholars from a variety of disciplines tend to be consistently strong on the application of social theory to such music, but often place the importance of such theories above the voices of those creating and consuming such music. In applying ethnomusicological fieldwork techniques to a Western, popular

performing arts genre, I hope to enhance understanding of that genre's artists and audiences, as well as to demonstrate the applicability of fieldwork to Western popular music studies in general.

In researching this project, I conducted over forty formal interviews with many individuals who have been or are currently active in New York's professional theater circles. These include actors, directors, producers, musicians, administrative staff, conductors, voice teachers, press agents, critics, and historians. I also interviewed several rock musicians and a rock critic. These interviews were scheduled in advance at the convenience of the interviewee, and were conducted either in person, over the phone, or via email. Most interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. The questions I posed were deliberately open-ended, and designed to promote detailed, conversational responses rather than terse, less-informative ones. Those interviews that were conducted in person or over the phone were tape-recorded. These were later transcribed in full, and saved on a computer diskette. Those that were conducted via email were simply saved on a computer diskette.

All interviews were conducted with the full consent of the interviewees, who were told that I intended to use their comments in a dissertation about rock musicals. I informed all interviewees that their comments would not be used for any purposes other than my own scholarly research and writing. All interview subjects who requested a transcribed copy of their comments were granted one. Any informant who chose to was also given the chance to reread their comments as they appeared in my chapters. Two informants who were concerned that their comments might offend specific colleagues requested and received anonymity after reading their comments; all others who read chapters in which excerpts from their interviews appeared gave no indication that they had any objections to my use of their comments.

During the fieldwork segment of this study, I also habitually brought a hand-held cassette recorder to the theater, and used it to record the comments of audience members at specific productions. All audience members were approached at random, either during intermission or immediately after the production. My interactions with audience members were brief and relatively informal. Before beginning my questioning, I informed every audience member selected that I was at work on a dissertation about rock musicals, and that I intended to use their comments for no purpose other than my own scholarly research and writing. I immediately abandoned attempts to interview any audience member who exhibited discomfort in being questioned or recorded. The comments of all willing participants were transcribed in full and saved on a computer diskette.

Finally, because rock and the musical theater are highly accessible in this country—especially, when it comes to the latter, in Manhattan—I frequently found myself engaged in casual conversations or email exchanges about my dissertation topic with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who frequent the theater or listen avidly to rock music. The casual conversations I have had with such individuals over the years have yielded a number of enlightening and insightful comments, some of which are included in this study. Friends or acquaintances who offered strong general opinions about particular aspects of my topic were asked more pointed questions at a later date, either over the phone, via email, or in person. Their spoken comments were recorded—again, after I had informed them that their words would be used only in my own scholarly research and writing—and were later preserved in the same manner that I preserved my formal interviews and discussions with audience members at the theater.

My use, in this study, of formal interviews, question-and-answer sessions with randomly chosen theatergoers, and conversations with acquaintances makes my dissertation qualitative and not quantitative, and thus not scientific by any means. Nevertheless, my dependence on dialogue is, I believe, far from unfounded. In the five years that I have been working on this project, I have found that the insights of all of my informants have helped to shed light on the subject in ways that no written source, standing alone, possibly could. The process has also allowed me to gain deeper insights into the tastes and preferences of popular music audiences on the one hand, and musical theatergoers on the other.

This said, I have also gathered a great deal of information from periodicals, scholarly studies, sound recordings, program notes and liner notes, documentary videos and television programs, scripts, and critic's reviews, all of which are documented in footnotes or the bibliography. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in general, and its Billy Rose Theatre Collection in particular, houses a treasure of old clippings, programs, production notes, photographs, and rare recordings. These holdings were particularly helpful in researching obscure, older musicals, about which little has been written except critical pans.

In researching this project, I also attended numerous musical theater productions, as well as a number of rock concerts. In almost all cases, field notes were recorded within 48 hours of the production in question. Finally, I attended 20 hours of rehearsals and a number of performances of the New York Theatre Workshop's premiere of Paul Scott Goodman's *Bright Lights Big City* in January, February, and March of 1999, which greatly aided my understanding of the way a major musical production develops from first read-through to opening night.

Chapter I

***Hair* and the Development of the Rock Musical on the New York Stage**

Claude: This is 1968, dearie, not 1948.

Mom: 1968! What have you got, 1968, may I ask? What have you got, 1968, that makes you so damn superior and gives me such a headache?

-Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical

Since the time of its Broadway premiere at the Biltmore Theater on April 29, 1968, Ragni, Rado, and MacDermot's *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* has been praised by some critics and historians as a "revolutionary" piece of musical theater.¹ Although the production was publicly derided by a number of Broadway's potentates and given a few scathing reviews, it was nevertheless enthusiastically received by some of New York City's most influential critics—notably Clive Barnes and Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times*. Audiences, on the whole, also responded favorably to the musical: the Broadway production ran for over four years (1742 performances—a great success at the time)² and spawned simultaneous productions in several American, European, and Asian cities, as well as a number of international touring companies.

Hair has been considered particularly groundbreaking because of the experimental qualities of its conception and direction, and its effective blend of rock and Broadway

¹ See for example Chase, 1987: 540.

² Suskin, 1992: 565-66.

music—two genres that had previously been regarded as mutually exclusive.³ There were certainly many aspects to the musical that made it unique for its time: *Hair* was the first Broadway musical devoted to the hippie culture of the 1960s, as well as the first to display male and female nudity. It was the first successful Broadway musical to rely exclusively on rock instrumentation and, as a result, the first to feature elements of rock music throughout its entire score.

Although it proved critically and commercially successful and featured songs that remain internationally known over 30 years after it opened, *Hair* ultimately did not prove to be as influential as many thought it would be. Bordman notes,

In every respect—commercial, historic, esthetic—[*Hair*] was far and away the most important musical offering of the season, possibly of the era. And yet . . . it was in some ways a tragic failure . . . for it failed to usher in a new era in the American Musical Theatre. Though rock continued to dominate popular song for years to come, it played little further part on the Broadway musical scene. . . . The fault cannot be laid at the feet of the new sound, however untheatrical, unmelodic, and uninteresting it often seems. The authors of *Hair* proved this need not be the case. But, as with swing, Broadway had apparently grown too old and decrepit to embrace youthful forms.⁴

Rather than exerting profound and lasting influence on the American musical theater, *Hair* might better be viewed as one of the few pinnacles in a subgenre—the staged rock musical—that has experienced an inordinate number of low points.

Despite repeated attempts, both before and after *Hair*'s opening, to unite rock music with musical theater, the divergent performance aesthetics of these two genres have made such

³ Gottfried. 1984: 288.

⁴ Bordman. 1992: 658-59.

a union highly problematic. In this chapter, I shall examine the various ways in which Broadway and Off Broadway composers grappled with rock music in the years before and immediately after *Hair* opened on Broadway. I will also suggest some reasons as to why *Hair*—despite its critical and commercial impact, its many innovations, and its many imitators—nevertheless failed to exert the lasting influence on later musical productions that many critics and historians believed it might.

I. The 1950s

Despite common misconceptions, *Hair* was by no means the first staged musical to feature rock music, nor was its composer, Galt MacDermot, the first to attempt the fusion of two genres that had previously been considered mutually exclusive. In fact, musical theater composers had been attempting to incorporate elements of rock music into their scores for at least a decade prior to the Broadway premiere of *Hair*. Although these composers' attempts did not often culminate in successful productions, their work sheds light on a fact that has been overlooked by some historians: rather than a revolutionary production, *Hair* was, rather, an evolutionary musical whose creators simply managed to achieve, for the first time, a fusion that had been desired for many years.

The interest in adapting rock music for the Broadway stage was, at least initially, one borne out of a perceived necessity, not out of a fondness on the part of Broadway composers for the then-new music. The popularity of Broadway music—for decades, synonymous with

America's popular music—had slowly begun to decline through the late 1950s and early 1960s, as reflected in a number of disappointing seasons dominated by poorly-received and ephemeral musicals (with the 1957 hit *West Side Story* being one notable exception).⁵ Simultaneous with the late 1950s decline in popularity of Broadway music was the emergence of rock 'n' roll, a popular music genre that was closely associated with an increasingly powerful youth market.⁶ By the end of the decade, rock 'n' roll had surpassed the fading Tin Pan Alley sound to become the dominant type of American popular music.

The surge of youthful interest in rock 'n' roll became the cause for much concern among Broadway composers, especially since rock 'n' roll differed dramatically from Tin Pan Alley in terms of listenership; while Tin Pan Alley had traditionally catered to audiences of all ages, rock 'n' roll was almost exclusively the domain of the young. In his book *Broadway Musicals*, Gottfried notes,

Smugly superior, the musical theater refused to stoop to rock 'n' roll, convinced this was but a fad that, if ignored, would go away. . . . Conditioned to look for hits, the composers for the stage still identified with the old pop music, even as it was being embalmed by the purveyors of "mood music." These soft, orchestral, soulless renditions of older songs found their uninvited way into elevators, supermarkets, banks, restaurants, even telephones. This wordless sound—usually in the form of castrated Kern, Rodgers, Berlin, and Loesser—spread like an antimusical cancer at the very time that rock 'n' roll was becoming popular. The oppositions set up between the two were unmistakable: the young versus the old, action versus passivity. The theater, forgetting it had created the vital popular song of which the "mood music" was a mockery, now became the slave of such music. Average audience age began

⁵ *Ibid.*: chapter 10.

⁶ For early identification and discussion of the youth market, see "A Young \$10 Billion Power: The US Teen-age Consumer Has Become a Major Factor in the Nation's Economy," *Life* magazine (31 August 1959), pp. 78-84; reprinted in Griffith, 1992: 203-04.

to rise as composers of musicals—once the leaders of popular musical taste—retreated, refusing to recognize the ruffians of rock and roll Musicals became theater for a complacent, Eisenhower America.⁷

By the late 1950s, Broadway composers had begun to exhibit a somewhat ambivalent relationship with rock ‘n’ roll, one that would plague them for much of the following decade. For some of the more traditional Broadway composers, the advent of rock ‘n’ roll signified the end of their careers; those composers who remained active found that “their newer efforts were not awarded the constant replaying on records or radio that their older songs had been given.”⁸

Although a majority of theater composers reacted negatively to the new music, some nevertheless attempted to include rock ‘n’ roll songs in their scores, in hopes of attracting younger audiences. Their lack of appreciation for or understanding of the new genre was, however, often obvious. Gottfried notes that composers who first attempted songs in the rock ‘n’ roll vein were rarely successful in part “because in their hearts they believed they were musically slumming.”⁹

That the creators of Broadway musicals were attempting to capitalize on a musical form with which they were unfamiliar and uncomfortable is clear upon examining some of the earliest attempts to write rock ‘n’ roll songs for the Broadway stage. These attempts, unfortunately, are largely undocumented: many of the earliest revues and musicals to feature rock ‘n’ roll were not recorded, and their scores are inaccessible. Nevertheless, extant

⁷ Gottfried, 1984: 287.

⁸ Bordman, 1992: 642.

⁹ Gottfried, 1984: 287.

material indicates that the Broadway shows which introduced rock 'n' roll into their scores during the mid-to late 1950s often did so by making a mockery of the music, either through staging, dialogue, lyrics, or combinations thereof.

This initial approach may be interpreted as an attempt to attract younger audiences, while simultaneously insuring that the majority of Broadway theatergoers—historically white, middle-class adults¹⁰—would not be alienated. Such a tactic was perhaps necessary at first; as Hamm notes, in its early years,

rock-and-roll was not well received . . . by many older listeners, who found it loud, harsh, uncouth, and often unintelligible. It seemed linked to such problems as juvenile crime, sexual permissiveness, racial unrest, and the growing antagonism of many young people towards parents and other figures of authority. Some adults tried to prevent their children from listening to rock-and-roll, radio stations were brought under pressure not to play it, ordinances were proposed to ban its live performance, the clergy delivered sermons decrying it, and the press, after ignoring the music at first, later ridiculed it.¹¹

Despite hopes of attracting young people to their shows, however, Broadway composers more often succeeded in mocking the growing youth culture for the benefit of adults.

The advent of rock 'n' roll coincided with the end of an era. In March of 1957, the final edition of the Ziegfeld Follies opened on Broadway. The production, “advertised as a Golden Jubilee edition, fifty years after the unveiling of the initial *Follies*”,¹² was a critical and commercial failure that closed after a run of 123 performances.¹³ While the show's star,

¹⁰ Lefkin's *The Audience for New York Theatre: A Profile of the Broadway and Off-Broadway 1997 Theatre Season* notes a market increase in attendance at Broadway shows by individuals under the age of 18 through the 1990s, but notes that even with this increase, the majority of Broadway theatergoers (78.2%) are over the age of 24 (p.22).

¹¹ Hamm, 1986: 63.

¹² Bordman, 1992: 602.

¹³ Kronenberger, 1958: 336.

Beatrice Lillie, received strong reviews, many critics saw in this last edition of the *Follies* a desperate attempt to recapture the past glories of a fading genre. Atkinson wrote, in his review for *The New York Times*,

The “Ziegfeld Follies” cannot recapture the glamour of another era. They are entitled to respectable retirement now. Perhaps the formula of the big, brassy Broadway revue is obsolete, quite apart from the “Ziegfeld Follies.” The energy is now going into other forms of entertainment.¹⁴

This edition of the *Ziegfeld Follies* nevertheless offered at least one innovation: a musical sketch spoofing rock ‘n’ roll. David Chapman of the *Daily News* noted in his review that the revue featured a “satire on Presley and the rock and rollers.”¹⁵ That satire, a musical number written by David Rogers and Colin Romoff entitled “I Don’t Wanna Rock,” was performed by Billy De Wolfe in the role of the “Juvenile Delinquent” and an ensemble chorus of “Tenth Street Sheiks.”¹⁶ Unfortunately the music used in this edition of the *Ziegfeld Follies* was never recorded, and the notated music is unavailable; it is thus impossible to determine how, exactly, a brassy, old-fashioned musical revue negotiated a brand-new form of popular music.

Although *The Girls Against the Boys* was also not recorded, and information about the instrumentation and orchestrations used in the actual production is sorely lacking, a piano score for the November 1959 revue has survived. *The Girls Against the Boys*, with music by Richard Lewine and Albert Hague, and lyrics and sketches by Arnold B. Horwitt, featured Nancy Walker, Bert Lahr, and the up-and-coming Dick Van Dyke, among others, in a series

¹⁴ Atkinson. 1957.

¹⁵ Chapman. 1957.

¹⁶ Kronenberger. 1957: 357-58.

of sketches and songs that were loosely linked by a common theme: the domestic woes of men and women. The show was a critical and commercial failure; despite the efforts of what critics roundly praised as a very talented cast, *The Girls Against the Boys* ran for only 16 performances.

One sketch from the show featured Lahr and Walker as “a pair of rock and rollers, he in blue jeans, one of those crazy loafer jackets and a T-shirt of blue and white stripes, she in a pleated skirt and blue jacket.”¹⁷ During this sketch, Lahr and Walker made fun of the fashions and dances accompanying early rock ‘n’ roll with the song “Too Young to Live.” This song actually features very few elements that are reminiscent of early rock ‘n’ roll. Whereas most early rock ‘n’ roll songs, like their rhythm-and-blues predecessors, were structured after the blues, with successions of choruses each more or less adhering to the standard 12-bar blues form, “Too Young to Live” is in a verse-chorus form somewhat more typical of Tin Pan Alley (as well as many later rock songs). The song modulates between the verse and the chorus—oddly, from G major to E-flat major—which, again, differs from an early rock ‘n’ roll that was usually tonally uncomplicated.

The most predominant similarity that “Too Young to Live” shares with early rock ‘n’ roll is the syncopated bass line featured in its verse section. This is reminiscent of ostinati used in songs that accompanied the popular mid-50s line dance known as the stroll. This ostinato, however, disappears at the beginning of the chorus, as does any further indication that this is supposed to be a rock ‘n’ roll song.

¹⁷ Funke, 1959.

Despite the attempt on the part of the composer to integrate some aspects of rock 'n' roll into "Too Young to Live," the song—as perhaps suggested by its facetious title—did more to mock the blossoming youth culture and the popular music associated with it than it did to attract young Broadway audiences:

Verse 1:

Baby I love ya and want ya and need ya
And you got the hots for me.
And yet tho' I love ya and want ya and need ya
They say that it just can't be.
Oh why won't they set us free?

Chorus:

They tell us we're too young to live.
Too young to live, they say.
But burning with love like we do
Our hearts say nuts to they.
They tell us we're too young to stand
Too young to stand alone.
They say we're living in dreams.
They say, "Get off the phone."

Verse 2:

Just like a river flows down to the ocean
A boy must become a man.
And seen' we feel all this love and devotion
The confetti must hit the fan

Bridge:

Why can't we share the passion
That thrills us through and through,
Though we be adolescent
And adenoidal too?

Chorus:

They tell us we're too young to live.
But who are they to say?

When Saturday night in your daddy's Chevrolet
 We found we're not too young to
 Found we're not too young to
 Found we're not too young to live!

They tell us we're too young to live.
 But we know more than they.
 And when we come home with that tiny relative,
 They'll know we're not too young to
 Know we're not too young to
 Know we're not too young to live!

The subject matter of "Too Young to Live"—adolescent love and sexual longing—are indeed reminiscent of many early rock 'n' roll songs. Yet the lyrics, especially the punch-line, ultimately work to mock the irresponsibility of teenagers from a conservative, parental perspective.

II. *Bye Bye Birdie*

In 1960, the first commercially successful Broadway musical to feature rock 'n' roll in its score opened at the Martin Beck Theater. Michael Stewart's *Bye Bye Birdie*, with music by Charles Strouse (who had done arrangements for *The Girls Against the Boys*) and lyrics by Lee Adams, parodied Elvis Presley and his adolescent fans, but did so without a preponderance of mean-spirited humor. A thinly-veiled satire based on Presley's 1958 induction into the US Army, *Bye Bye Birdie* was an unexpected success with audiences and many critics, and had a healthy run of 607 performances. Unlike the rock 'n' roll spoof in *The*

Girls Against the Boys, the music and plot of *Bye Bye Birdie* gently poked fun at older and younger generations alike, and the show proved popular with audiences of all ages.

Edward Padula, the musical's producer, notes in his unpublished autobiography that he first had the idea to satirize the rock 'n' roll phenomenon in the mid-1950s, but took time in hiring Michael Stewart to execute his idea because he wanted to make sure that the musical would be free of elitism or condescension.¹⁸ Stewart's book¹⁹ for *Bye Bye Birdie* pleased Padula; rather than mocking one generation and siding with the other, Stewart managed to create a musical that gently parodied all of its characters.

The lighthearted plot of *Bye Bye Birdie* involves the Elvis Presley-like singing sensation Conrad Birdie, who has been drafted. This muddles the plans of Birdie's manager, Albert Peterson, and Albert's girlfriend, Rose Grant, who wish to marry, but will not have enough money if Birdie is inducted into the Army. Rose devises a plan: in a publicity stunt to be broadcast on national television, Birdie will sing a new song, "One Last Kiss," to a carefully selected teen admirer; if the song is successful, Albert and Rose will be able to live off the royalties until Birdie returns to his recording career.

The teenager selected for this stunt is Kim MacAfee, who lives in the small town of Sweet Apple, Ohio. Birdie and his entourage visit the town; Birdie is housed in the MacAfee household, where he clashes with Kim's father, who embodies the older generation in his frustrated befuddlement over the rise of rock 'n' roll and other teen fads. Birdie's

¹⁸ Padula. 1995: 2-3.

¹⁹ The term "book," here, refers to a musical's script, which is often written separately from its music and lyrics.

flirtatiousness soon threatens to drive a rift between Kim and her devoted boyfriend, Hugo. While Albert's overbearing mother threatens to come between Albert and Rose. Rose responds to her meddling by going on a bender, and disrupting a local Shriner's meeting by breaking into a wild dance. At the end, however, all works out for the best. Albert and Rose are reunited despite the protestations of his mother. Also, Kim tires of Birdie, who proves highly egotistical and not very smart, and she and Hugo reconcile.

Regardless of the fact that the book for *Bye Bye Birdie* was something of an equal-opportunity satire, it more often than not resorted to gross parodies of rock 'n' roll. Unlike *Hair* and later rock musicals, which featured scores that more thoroughly blended rock music and Broadway fare, Strouse's music for *Bye Bye Birdie* was generally written strictly in one style or another, featuring few songs that boasted aspects of both genres. While the most well-known songs from *Bye Bye Birdie*—the standards "Put on a Happy Face" and "Kids," for example—featured no rock 'n' roll influences at all, those sung by the character of Conrad Birdie are heavily influenced by rock 'n' roll, and are thus sharply distinguished from the rest of the score.

The two rock 'n' roll numbers performed by the character of Conrad Birdie differ from the songs performed by the other characters in that they are far more repetitive, feature vapid lyrics that verge on the ridiculous, and vocals that were distorted through much amplification in both the Broadway production and the original cast recording. The first of these songs,

“Honestly Sincere,” is performed during the first act, when Birdie first arrives in the town of Sweet Apple.

“Honestly Sincere” borrows its instrumentation from early rock ‘n’ roll. The singer is accompanied by electric guitar and bass, traps, and a brass section. Although not in true 12-bar blues form, the song features a prominent, syncopated I-IV-V bass line that increases in tempo as it accompanies the short, narrowly-ranged melodic fragments. The song’s lyrics are unquestionably ridiculous. There is no attempt at rhyme or at thematic development; rather, Birdie—in the loud, lamé, Presleyesque suit he wears through the show—sings the following while surrounded by screaming, swooning adolescent girls:

You gotta be sincere!
 You gotta be sincere!
 You gotta feel it here!
 ‘Cause if you feel it here,
 Well, then you’re gonna be
 Honestly sincere!

Birdie’s second song, “One Last Kiss,” again relies rather heavily on rock ‘n’ roll elements: rock ‘n’ roll instrumentation, an arpeggiated I-IV-V bass line, strong amplification, heavy syncopation, and short, repeated melodic fragments. Like “Honestly Sincere,” “One Last Kiss” features amplified lyrics that are silly and redundant:

Oh, gimme one last kiss
 Oh, gimme one last kiss
 It never felt like this
 No, never felt like this
 You know I need your love
 Oh-oh-oh
 Gimme one last kiss!

One can, of course, argue that such lyrics are no sillier than, for example, contemporaneous chart-toppers like “Charlie Brown” or “Alley Oop.” Yet in *Bye Bye Birdie*, the songs are sung by a character whom the audience has come to know as rather foolish, self-absorbed, and outrageous; by the very nature of their context, then, the songs work more to spoof rock ‘n’ roll’s emphasis on emotionalism over lyricism than they do to reflect the actual rock ‘n’ roll hits of the time.

Only one song in *Bye Bye Birdie* offered a true blend of traditional Broadway melody and early rock ‘n’ roll. The show-stopping number “The Telephone Hour,” performed early in act I, depicts small-town teens tying up their families’ phone lines after school, as they gossip excitedly about the recent pinning of Kim MacAfee by Hugo Peabody.²⁰ The song borrows from rock ‘n’ roll in its heavy syncopation and its instrumentation: acoustic bass and saxophone double on the arpeggiated I-IV-V bass line, an electric guitar alternates with a snare drum to emphasize the backbeats of each measure, and the frequent use of triplets in the vocal lines adds some metric complexity. The song’s lyrics emulate both the teen slang of the time (“What’s the story, morning glory? What’s the word, hummingbird?”; “When they got’cha hooked, then you’re really cooked!”; “It’s crazy, man!”) and the intensity with which teens talk on the phone, by featuring a number of different conversations taking place at once, all of which fit into the song’s harmonic framework.

²⁰ “Pinning” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the “indication of a relationship, falling short of a formal engagement, between two young people through an exchange of fraternity or sorority pins” or “the exchange of such pins for that purpose.”

These voices sound comparatively raw, and thus depart from the clear, belted, vibrato-heavy and trained-sounding voices that were typical of musical theater at the time. Many of the lines are shouted excitedly, with more emphasis on youthful emotion than on vocal clarity; Dean Stolber, in the part of the awkward Harvey Johnson—who calls from house to house throughout the song, desperately trying to find a prom date—sings all of his lines in the unsteady, breaking voice of a boy in early adolescence. Near the end of the song, doo-wop groups are emulated, as the male and female characters alternately punctuate one another's melodies with accompanying rhythmic glissandi, sung to slangy lyrics: "Ooooh yeah!" "Doo-oo-oo tell!"

Mixed with the many rock 'n' roll elements in this song are ones more reminiscent of traditional Broadway musicals. Unlike the songs performed by Conrad Birdie, "The Telephone Hour" is not heavily amplified. Typically lush Broadway orchestrations fill out the accompaniment of this piece. Along with brass, bass, electric guitar and snare drum, the song features flutes and strings. The many overlapping vocal parts are occasionally a bit more complex than they tend to be in early rock 'n' roll, and even in doo-wop, where, typically, one solo line would be backed by a small chorus.

While "The Telephone Hour," like much early rock 'n' roll, takes teen romance as its theme, the song serves a primarily theatrical function, and thus functions like a majority of American theater music that has been composed since the late 1910s. Filled with description of the recent pinning of Kim by Hugo, "The Telephone Hour" is directly related to the plot of

Bye Bye Birdie, and thus its form follows its narrative function. Rather than adhering to the comparatively straightforward 12-bar blues form upon which much early rock ‘n’ roll was based, “The Telephone Hour” has a number of recurring, alternating, and eventually overlapping themes that are sung by the male chorus, the female chorus, and the character of Harvey Johnson. All of these sections work either to advance the action onstage, to introduce characters and explain their relationships to one another, or to set up the romance of Hugo and Kim, which will be challenged later in act I with the appearance of Conrad Birdie. The lyrics to “The Telephone Hour,” then, include many details that are too plot-specific for the song to be successfully removed from its theatrical setting. Unlike early rock ‘n’ roll hits, and despite the fact that the original Broadway cast recording of *Bye Bye Birdie* remained at number 12 on the Billboard album charts for 21 weeks in 1960, “The Telephone Hour,” like the other rock ‘n’ roll-influenced songs in the show, never sold as a single or received radio airplay.²¹

In their reviews of *Bye Bye Birdie*, critics reacted to the show’s rock ‘n’ roll songs with glee, but often this glee did not derive from witnessing the successful use of rock ‘n’ roll in a Broadway musical. Rather, the songs seemed to work, for many critics, at least, to reinforce the idea that rock ‘n’ roll was loud, ridiculous noise. Although reviews do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the theatergoing public, the ones for *Bye Bye Birdie* certainly remain in keeping with the Broadway establishment’s lack of respect for the rock ‘n’ roll genre. Brooks Atkinson, one of the few critics to give the show a negative review, noted

²¹ Information according to Whitburn’s *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*, and the *Billboard Book of Top 40 Albums*.

in *The New York Times*, “Dick Gautier plays the primitive singer [Conrad Birdie] with pompadour, sideburns, gaudy costumes, a rugged voice, and a contemptuous vulgarity that are funny—a good, unsubtle cartoon of hideous reality.”²² Similarly, Ernie Schier of the *Evening Bulletin* noted, in an otherwise favorable review, that the “bouncy score . . . slyly demonstrates the difference between music and rock ‘n’ roll.”²³ Regardless of such comments, the success of *Bye Bye Birdie* proved that Broadway’s audiences could tolerate, and perhaps even appreciate, elements of rock ‘n’ roll on the Broadway stage. *Bye Bye Birdie* did not, however, represent a new trend in Broadway musicals; after its success, few musicals featuring rock ‘n’ roll would open on Broadway until *Hair* in the spring of 1968.

There are a number of reasons why *Bye Bye Birdie* did not spawn many imitations. First, its use of rock ‘n’ roll notwithstanding, the show was by no means a bold departure from previous theatrical forms. On the contrary, *Bye Bye Birdie* was something of a throwback; in a period when dark, music-and-movement laden “concept” musicals such as *West Side Story* were becoming increasingly influential, *Bye Bye Birdie* offered cheery sentimentality, light humor, and a traditional boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-wins-girl-back story line that Padula felt would be comforting to Broadway audiences.²⁴

Another reason that *Bye Bye Birdie* did not spawn many imitations or inspire more Broadway composers to try their hand at rock ‘n’ roll was that in 1960, rock ‘n’ roll, still in its infancy, was basically simple dance music and thus, many argued, not sophisticated enough

²² Atkinson, 1960.

²³ Schier, 1960.

²⁴ Padula, 1995: 2-3.

to carry an entire musical. As the composer Galt MacDermot notes, “back then . . . [rock ‘n’ roll] was a dance music, something to dance to. [But] you can’t make a show out of any one rhythm. You get bored, and it’s not dramatic”.²⁵

Thus, despite the success of *Bye Bye Birdie*, rock ‘n’ roll remained elusive on the Broadway stage. Rock ‘n’ roll elements continued through the 1960s to be used only in the occasional revue, and even then continued to be featured only in sketches that spoofed the new genre and the people who performed or listened to it. The British import *The Cambridge Circus*, which opened in 1964, for example, featured a sketch entitled “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” as the act II opener; in this sketch, three performers sang “a Beatles version of Handel’s *Hallelujah* while another [went] mad at the drums”.²⁶

III. The 1960s

In the years immediately following the success of *Bye Bye Birdie*, however, a few Broadway composers did attempt to win younger audiences and chart status by using parody-free rock ‘n’ roll in their musicals. More often than not, such attempts seem to reflect a desire to keep up with changing times, rather than a true understanding of or interest in the developing style. Too often, Gottfried notes, such composers

merely added the rock rhythm to [their songs], looking for hits by thinking new (rock) and old (ballads) at the same time. Inevitably, these were bastard songs, defeating a show’s integration and making for isolated numbers.²⁷

²⁵ Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

²⁶ Chapman, 1964.

²⁷ Gottfried, 1984: 288.

In simply adding rock elements to a Broadway show, however, such composers learned of an insurmountable problem: while a musical like *Bye Bye Birdie* practically demanded at least a few rock 'n' roll elements in its score, some musicals had no reason to feature rock 'n' roll music at all; its inclusion in some musicals, then, seemed entirely incongruous.

In 1962, for example, Irving Berlin composed the music for *Mr. President*, which ran for a disappointing eight months. Hewes wrote of the show,

At best . . . *Mr. President* could be summed up as a series of mildly pleasant and disappointingly innocuous jokes about how being President of the United States or the First Lady can be a damn nuisance.²⁸

In stark contrast with much of Berlin's previous work, "none of the songs from [*Mr. President*] won wide public acceptance,"²⁹ despite a stab at musical topicality. The score for *Mr. President* included the song "The Washington Twist," a nod to the dance that was popular with teens at the time. "The Washington Twist" featured a full Broadway orchestra thumping out an insistent I-IV-V bass progression as a female soloist talk-sang the lyrics. The placement of the song, which was used to accompany a big number set at a formal dance in the White House, seemed somewhat bizarre: why would the characters of a political satire suddenly burst into the twist at a stuffy White House reception?

On December 15, 1966, a musical named *A Joyful Noise* opened at the Mark Hellinger Theater to scathing reviews, and closed after 12 performances. Despite its brief run, the show was significant in that it foreshadowed the beginning of a new approach to adapting popular

²⁸ Hewes. 1963: 15.

²⁹ Bordman. 1992: 628.

music for the Broadway stage. Rather than expecting composers who had been active in the theater industry before the rise of rock 'n' roll to write music representative of the new popular genre, producers by the mid-1960s began to choose, instead, to work with relative outsiders, who were not necessarily familiar with theater music, but were instead rooted in, and thus comfortable with, other musical traditions.

Edward Padula, flush with the success of *Bye Bye Birdie*, next attempted to bring popular music to the Broadway stage with *A Joyful Noise*. The show, which Padula produced, wrote, and directed, was based on Borden Deal's novel *The Insolent Breed*. Its plot followed a grass-roots folksinger named Shade Motley, who is run out of his hometown of Macedonia, Tennessee, by the father of his sweetheart, Jenny Lee. Shade takes up with a hustling promoter and quickly becomes a folk-rock star at the Grand Ole Opry. Caught between the trappings of stardom and a longing for his true love, Shade chooses the latter, and thus returns to Macedonia and a quiet life with Jenny Lee.

Padula enlisted the folk musician, satirist, and radio host Oscar Brand to write the music for *A Joyful Noise*. Together with his collaborator, Paul Nassau, Brand wrote an original folk-rock and country-and-western score for the musical. But unlike *Bye Bye Birdie*, which featured a few rock 'n' roll parodies amid an otherwise traditional Tin Pan Alley score, the score for *A Joyful Noise* was seen by critics to suffer under its attempt to mix popular strains with a standard Broadway sound. In his review for the show, Gottfried hints that

William Stegmeyer's lush orchestrations did not mix well with the simple folk-rock and country tunes offered by Brand and Nassau:

There was a fine idea for a musical at the root of *A Joyful Noise* . . . and Oscar Brand was just the kind of guy to write its music, but Mr. Brand and his collaborator, Paul Nassau, got mixed up with people who demanded a "Broadway" look, a "Broadway" sound. As a result, still another chance for a fresh musical went down the drain, dragged most of the way by an interfering, irreverent injection of brassy nonsense, put together cheaply and ignorantly. . . . The songs have . . . been pressured into abandoning the folk or rock'n'roll genre for regular departures into standard ballads and comic songs. Although Brand and Nassau could surely have composed these consistently, they apparently were not permitted to and so the musical styles move across a ridiculous range. When they are in folk-pop styles, they are fine. When they try for the so-called Broadway sound, they are terrible. . . . The shame is that this opportunity to utilize so vital and modern an American music was tossed away.³⁰

After the disappearance of *A Joyful Noise*, no attempts were made to bring current popular music to the Broadway stage between 1966 and the spring of 1968, when *Hair* opened at the Biltmore Theater.

IV. *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*

In contrast to the musicals that have been discussed thus far, *Hair* opened Off Broadway before it moved to Broadway. Such a move was not atypical: productions that opened Off Broadway to rave reviews, such as *The Golden Apple* (1954), were occasionally hurried uptown, retooled, and reopened on larger, more commercial stages. Yet the Off Off Broadway influence on *Hair* proved too strong for a number of Broadway denizens, who

³⁰ Gottfried, 1966.

refused to support the show. The strong reviews and commercial success of its first run notwithstanding, *Hair* very nearly never made it to Broadway at all.

An understanding of the development of *Hair* and its transformation from the fringe to the mainstream is contingent upon an understanding of the relationship between Off Broadway and Broadway at the time. Although New York City had been host to a variety of theater companies that existed beyond the flashiness of Broadway since the turn of the century, it is in the decades immediately following World War II that Off and Off Off Broadway theater companies began to exert their strongest influence, and to challenge theatrical conventions imposed by the mainstream theater.³¹ At a geographical and philosophical distance from the commercial Times Square theater district, such companies devoted themselves chiefly to developing and performing new, nontraditional theatrical works in alternative spaces, including the black-box theaters, cafés, churches, parking lots, garages, and basements of lower Manhattan.

Off and Off Off Broadway attempts at challenging the commercial theater gained momentum through the 1950s. Fringe theater became especially influential through the 1960s,

³¹ The term "Off Broadway" and the subsequently named "Off Off Broadway" are often hard to distinguish, and thus the terms—both of which are germane to the topic at hand—warrant some explanation. The term "Off Broadway" was coined in the early 1950s, at a time when experimental, non-commercial theater was flourishing in New York City. Since its inception, the term has been used to describe theaters and theater companies that are not only geographically removed from the commercial Broadway houses in the Time Square area, but that also strive to offer theatrical productions that are generally more experimental, less commercial, and less expensive to produce than their Broadway counterparts. The term "Off Off Broadway" was coined by the end of the 1950s. Off Off Broadway houses and companies generally share geographical territory with Off Broadway houses, but are generally even less commercial and more experimental than their Off Broadway counterparts. For further discussion of the distinctions between Broadway, Off Broadway, and Off Off Broadway, please see Kauffmann, 1979.

at a time when Broadway was suffering. Bordman notes that the escalating war in Vietnam and resultant domestic turmoil had a damaging effect on the commercial theater:

It would have been remarkable had the lyric stage been able to ignore . . . [the country's] upheavals, but for several reasons the American Musical Theatre had been manifesting unmistakable signs of exhaustion. Beset by the collapse of so much order and decorum, it, too, fell apart. Merely getting to the theatre became something of an ordeal. New York's aging playhouses were clustered together in an area fast growing sleazy and occasionally dangerous. Honky-tonk bars and shops vending pornography crowded into the Times Square district. Derelicts, female and male prostitutes, and muggers pestered and sometimes molested playgoers. . . . Inflation, fueled by the Vietnam War . . . created havoc on both sides of the footlights. Few theatregoers were old enough to remember that from the Civil War to World War I ticket prices held steady at a top of \$1.50. . . . But many could attest to the relative stability that prevailed from the twenties to the early fifties, always acknowledging the drop in scales that reflected hard times during the Depression. Now a \$6.00 top gave way to \$7.20, which quickly shot up above the \$10.00 level and gave every indication of rising to astronomical heights in the foreseeable future. . . . To compensate for escalating costs producers started to reduce the ranks of the chorus drastically and to cut down on the lavishness of scenery . . . [and] the theatre offered less assurance of regular employment. . . . Except for a fortunate few, Broadway's financial rewards, for all of its inflated ticket prices and salaries, were meager compared with television's or film's . . . fewer genuinely good musicals premiered, while many of the better offerings seemed wistfully derivative.³²

By contrast, the comparatively cheap performance spaces and lack of star power proved beneficial for the alternative theater scene in New York. Also unlike the commercial theater, the fringe was invigorated by the antiwar movement and the influence of both the new left and the counterculture. Various forms of "protest theater" began to proliferate through the 1960s

³² Bordman. 1992: 642-43.

and early 1970s, as those involved in fringe movements pondered “the role that theatre ought to play in a society increasingly characterized by division, turmoil, and dissent.”³³

Many Off Off Broadway companies that were active at the time devoted themselves to making social and political statements. A number of them reflected the influence of such directors as Jerzy Grotowski, whose works were largely geared toward enhancing the relationship between performer and spectator, and Julian Beck and Judith Malina, whose Living Theatre “sought the marriage of political and aesthetic radicalism.”³⁴ The works of such directors and their followers included attempts at breaking the fourth wall, or imagined barrier between audience and performer; extending the realm of what the mainstream had deemed theatrical; and applying theatrical events to social and political causes. Because members of the new left and the counterculture—with which rock had become strongly associated—had direct influence on and involvement in the alternative theater scene in New York through the 1960s, it is no coincidence that the rock musical in general, and *Hair* in particular, would be born in such an environment.

The members of the creative team that eventually brought *Hair* to Broadway had either been active in Off and Off Off Broadway experimental theater, or, in the case of the composer, Galt MacDermot, had almost no previous theatrical experience. Before writing the book for *Hair*, the classically-trained actor Gerome Ragni had turned his back on the Broadway stage and become active in the experimental theater. Among other projects, Ragni was involved with

³³ Simmer, 1977: 61.

³⁴ Banham, 1995: 647.

Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre from its inception in 1963.³⁵ Similarly, Ragni's collaborator, James Rado, had trained at Lee Strasberg's Method studio and appeared in such Broadway productions as *Marathon '33*, *Generation*, and *The Lion in Winter* before turning his attentions to more experimental projects. The director, Tom O'Horgan, was firmly established in the Off Off Broadway realm; through the 1960s, he had directed over 30 productions at the experimental Café La MaMa.³⁶

In spite of, or perhaps because of, their commitment to experimental theater, Rado and Ragni hoped from the outset that *Hair* would run on Broadway. Rado explains,

We wanted to make it as . . . authentic as possible, and we were very aware that this was the audience we were going to reach. That's why the original impulse was to write it for Broadway. We didn't want to just preach to the colored folks, to the Off Off Broadway scene. We wanted to bring the whole message and the scene uptown to a wider audience.³⁷

Nevertheless, the Broadway producers to whom Ragni and Rado first showed *Hair* roundly rejected the musical. Abandoning their initial hopes for a Broadway run, the writers showed their musical to the comparatively progressive Off Broadway producer Joseph Papp, who was struck by the show's social relevance.³⁸ He chose the musical to be the inaugural production at the Astor Place library, which was, at the time, being renovated to house the Public Theater. Papp's one stipulation was that Ragni and Rado—who had written lyrics for the show but, as yet, had no music for them—find a composer.³⁹

³⁵ Horn, 1991: 17.

³⁶ Simmer, 1977: 61.

³⁷ Personal communication with James Rado, 16 January 1999.

³⁸ Horn, 1991: 135.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 27.

Given the fact that theater composers had experienced more bad luck than good in adapting rock music to the theatrical stage, it is quite fitting that the first fully-realized, successful rock musical to open on Broadway would be composed by a relative outsider. Galt MacDermot, whom Ragni and Rado hired as the composer for their musical, notes that his involvement in the show was largely coincidental:

I met [Ragni and Rado] through a mutual friend, a guy called Nat Shapiro, who was a publisher and a publicist. But it was kind of ironic. [Ragni and Rado] thought he was a Broadway producer, and so they were trying to sell him *Hair*. . . . They were from the theater. I was from—strictly from jazz, and rock ‘n’ roll, and rhythm and blues. I was making a living at the time playing demo records and stuff in the city. And I knew nothing about the theater. I had done reviews in—I’m from Montreal, and I had done theater reviews, but the music never interested me much. . . . But I do love setting words to music, that’s what I really like doing. And I had been bugging Nat to get me some kind of a project. So when he saw this, he just put us together. It took him a long time, ‘cause they were pretty far-out guys, and he didn’t know how we’d get along. But we got along fine.⁴⁰

With Papp’s stipulation met, *Hair* opened for a limited eight-week engagement at the Public’s 300-seat Anspacher Theater in the fall of 1967.

It was during this Off Broadway run that the musical caught the attention of Michael Butler, a young, liberal member of the wealthy, Chicago-based Butler family. While in New York City awaiting a meeting with Mayor Lindsay, Butler took interest in an advertisement for the *Hair*, which featured Ragni and Rado dressed in Native American garb. Believing that the show was by and about Native Americans—a people whose mistreatment was one of his main concerns—Butler attended the first preview. Although *Hair* had little to do with what Butler

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

had anticipated, he was so impressed by the musical that he secured the first-class rights once Papp let them expire.⁴¹

Butler became interested in moving *Hair* to Broadway after it closed at the Public, but despite its strong reviews, he was unable to secure an uptown theater. Thus, in late December 1967, once the run at the Public ended, Butler temporarily moved *Hair* to the Cheetah, a huge, rundown discotheque at 45th Street and Broadway that was about to be torn down. The show ran at the discotheque for 45 performances as the producer courted Broadway theater owners. MacDermot remembers that Butler's task was not easy, since a majority of theater owners were unimpressed by what they saw and heard, and were largely put off by the subject matter:

Nobody wanted to have it in their theater. The Shuberts wouldn't and the other one wouldn't. So we had to go to a guy, sort of a renegade guy, at 47th Street, who just owned that one theater.⁴²

The "renegade guy" in question was David Cogan, owner of the Biltmore Theater on 47th Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Cogan granted Butler permission to move *Hair* to the Biltmore, and thus a revised version opened on Broadway in April 1968.⁴³

The commercial success of *Hair* might well have been due, in part, to the fact that those involved with the musical managed to walk a fine line between the traditional and the experimental, both theatrically and musically. Although they are strikingly different musicals, *Hair* can be compared with *Bye Bye Birdie* in this respect. In *Bye Bye Birdie*, innovation—in the form of rock 'n' roll songs, however parodied—was offered in small, careful doses, and

⁴¹ Horn, 1991: 35-36.

⁴² Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

⁴³ Horn, 1991: 41-42.

was offset with traditional music, plot, and direction. While *Hair*'s subject matter, music, and structure were far riskier, the musical, like *Bye Bye Birdie*, offered a careful blend of inventiveness on one hand, and of tradition on the other, resulting in a musical that offered something, it seemed, for everyone. In the face of its many innovations it is important to note that *Hair* did not depart as radically from previous theatrical forms as some believed it did. Rather, while the musical's chief influences came from the experimental theater that was flourishing at the time, it also reflected some important influences that can be traced to previous Broadway musicals.

Horn notes, for example, that the relatively free-form structure of *Hair*, its de-emphasis on plot development, and its heavy reliance on song and dance connect it with what Martin Gottfried has termed "concept musicals"—sophisticated productions that rely on music and movement to tell a story or elaborate upon a unifying theme, while de-emphasizing the book.⁴⁴ The concept musical was a form that would come to dominate the Broadway stage in the 1970s, especially following the critical adulation of Sondheim's *Company* in 1970 and the overwhelming critical and commercial success of Hamlisch's *A Chorus Line* in 1976. Progenitors of the concept musical are generally seen to be Bernstein and Sondheim's *West Side Story* (1957) with its rather weighty subject matter expressed as much, if not more, through music and dance as through dialogue; Bock and Harnick's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), which continued the "innovative trend of submerging dialogue and extending the emphasis on musical and dance sequences with a production idea based on the portrayal of

⁴⁴ Loney, 1969: 596.

the *shtetl* on stage”;⁴⁵ and Kander and Ebb’s *Cabaret* (1966), which featured a number of scenes set in the Kit Kat Klub, which did not further the plot but instead elaborated upon the concept of decadence.⁴⁶

While these early concept musicals featured no rock music, their structural influence on *Hair* is nevertheless important; *Hair*, like the aforementioned works, was a musical in which “stories and characters [tended] to be generated by attitudes and perceptions rather than the reverse.”⁴⁷ Rado notes that although he grew up with a passion for traditional musical theater, he and Ragni were indeed more interested in depicting the lifestyles and beliefs of a specific group of people at a particular point in time than they were in creating a conventional piece of music theater:

We were trying to capture the essence of what [the counterculture] was. We really believed in it, we really loved what was happening. . . . In the case of *Hair*, we were very aware of breaking the form of a musical. We were very audacious because *Hair* was the first show we had written. I had done revues in the past, but this was the first book show. We proceeded to sort of demolish the book, or bring in twice or three times as much music, and still maintain the characters. We were exploring, we were open to changing and rewriting and finding out what worked for us, and we were aware that we were doing a musical. Characters, book, story—there was a story line even though some people thought there wasn’t—and we just knew this was a new form of the musical.⁴⁸

The linear narrative of *Hair* was so much looser and the musical numbers—32 in all—so much more abundant than those in the typical Broadway musical that some critics were

⁴⁵ Horn, 1991: 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Lamb, 1986: 297.

⁴⁸ Personal communication with James Rado, 16 January 1999.

prompted to describe *Hair* as devoid of story. In his review of the Biltmore production, Clive Barnes, for example, wrote, “the authors of the dowdy book—and brilliant lyrics—have done a very brave thing. They have in fact done away with it altogether. *Hair* is now a musical with a theme, not with a story.”⁴⁹

It is easy to view *Hair* as a musical with no cohesive story, since it consists, largely, of many separate vignettes that celebrate or condone different countercultural concerns. In loosely connected songs and sketches, the many characters discuss, among other issues, drug experimentation, sexual experimentation, Eastern spiritual and religious practices, civil rights, class issues, the generation gap, and the Vietnam war. Uniting these vignettes, however, is a cohesive, albeit comparatively skeletal, plot, which is developed and resolved in traditional musical theater fashion: a young man named Claude, who has fled his parents’ middle-class home in Flushing, Queens, for the hippie enclave of Greenwich Village, debates whether or not he should burn his draft card or go to Vietnam. He ponders his future while spending time with his friends, fighting with his parents, and pining after Sheila, a socially- and politically active student at New York University. Unable, in the end, to burn his draft card, Claude goes to Vietnam where he is killed; the musical ends as his friends gather to celebrate his life and mourn his untimely, senseless death. The structure of *Hair*, then, matched an ultimately conventional plot (central character has a conflict that is examined throughout the musical) with a setting and series of depictions (hippie culture in Greenwich Village in the mid- to late-1960s) that were atypical of Broadway musicals.

⁴⁹ Barnes, 1968.

V. *Hair's* Relationship to Off Off Broadway Theater

Hair departed further from the traditional American musical in its reliance upon techniques that came out of the experimental theater proliferating Off Off Broadway through the 1950s and 1960s. From its very conception, in fact, *Hair* reveals strong ties to Off Off Broadway. According to Horn, Gerome Ragni first got the idea for *Hair* during his involvement with the Open Theatre production *Viet Rock*. The Open Theatre, founded in 1963 by the former Living Theatre actor Joseph Chaikin, was a collective of actors, directors, and dramaturges who believed in a non-hierarchical, collective approach to theatrical production. *Viet Rock*, with which Ragni was involved before he and Rado began work on *Hair*, clearly inspired the musical, both in its structure and development.

In 1966, on Armed Forces Day (May 21st), the Open Theatre performed *Viet Rock* at Café La MaMa for the first time.⁵⁰ The experimental play, developed collectively by the playwright Megan Terry and a troupe of Open Theatre actors, took shape during weekly workshops in 1965 and 1966:

... Terry and the actors examined the Vietnam war. They discussed, abstracted, and improvised newspaper clippings, television accounts, and first-hand observation of events in both the United States and Vietnam. The motives behind the violence were examined; patriotic rhetoric was taken apart; the feelings aroused by the events of the war were questioned. The troupe looked into the impulse of the individual toward aggression, hostility, and destructiveness, and tried to understand the fears and insecurities which trigger it. Gradually a pastiche of patriotic skits, scenes of warfare, and dramatic

⁵⁰ Pasolli, 1970: 74-75.

comments emerged. . . . Terry scripted some scenes, and it was decided to make *Viet Rock* one of [that season's] La MaMa productions.⁵¹

At the same time that Gerome Ragni was involved in the Open Theatre production, he and Rado had begun to spend their spare time among hippies in Greenwich Village; they observed, first-hand, the hippie lifestyle, and scribbled down their observations, which accumulated and became the raw material for *Hair*.⁵² Since *Viet Rock* and *Hair* were created in comparable ways—by observing and recording people's reactions to the war (and, as will be discussed later, by encouraging an ensemble of actors to improvise during the rehearsal period)—there are many striking similarities between *Viet Rock* and *Hair*.⁵³

The very skeletal plot of *Viet Rock* is similar to that of *Hair*: a group of young men are inducted into the Army, sent into combat in Vietnam, attacked, and killed.⁵⁴ Both productions also placed emphasis on spiritual themes, which worked, along with the loose plots, to connect one scene to the next. *Viet Rock*'s underlying narrative stressed the passage from "birth to death and . . . rebirth";⁵⁵ production notes for *Hair* state, "note should be taken of the spiritual theme running through the play; outer space, astrology, the earth, the heavens, interplanetary travel, mysticism."⁵⁶

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 75.

⁵² Personal communication with James Rado. 16 January 1999.

⁵³ For a more in-depth examination of the relationship between *Viet Rock* and *Hair*, as well as further discussion on the development and sociological impact of *Hair*, please see Horn 1991. It should be noted that Horn's study differs from this one in that it places primary emphasis on the theatrical aspects of *Hair*, not the musical ones.

⁵⁴ Passoli. 1970: 76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Richards. 1979: 391.

The OffBroadway practice—utilized in *Viet Rock*—of breaking the imaginary “fourth wall” in order to address or interact with the audience was also incorporated into the Broadway production of *Hair*. In creating *Viet Rock*, members of the Open Theatre worked to limit the distance between actors and audience members, and between the stage and the auditorium. Thus, the play was “done without sets, costumes, or props, except for some benches where the actors [sat] when . . . not involved in a particular scene.”⁵⁷ Because the sparse stage sets and lack of costumes did little to separate fantasy from reality, the audience was able to view the company of *Viet Rock* “as actors, then as actors-as-characters, then as actors again.”⁵⁸

In the final scene of *Viet Rock*, the acting company did away with the fourth wall altogether. At the end of the play, “the GIs are on leave in Saigon. They are carousing in a bar with Vietnamese girls; there is an explosion; everybody dies.”⁵⁹ Then, “after a brief silence, the actors rise one by one . . . and go to mingle with the audience”⁶⁰ in celebration of life. According to production notes for *Viet Rock*, interaction between actor and audience member should take place only after the actors have shed their characters and are able to interact with audience members as their equals.

While both *Viet Rock* and *Hair* can be seen to have employed a negation of the fourth wall for many of the same ends, it should be noted that the interaction between actors and

⁵⁷ Passoli, 1970: 76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 80.

⁶⁰ Horn, 1991: 25.

audience members was not unique to either production. Tom O'Horgan has noted that the act of breaking the fourth wall was purposely incorporated into a number of experimental productions at the time, not merely as a theatrical exercise, but as an act of great symbolic importance:

It's hard to understand now why it seemed so important then . . . but there was an incredible urge and need to do it. . . . You would sit in the audience and you would just suffocate. The lights would go down, and you could feel yourself beginning to get nauseous. There was even one theater where they used to pump perfume into the audience. You felt you just had to break through that—it was an emotional reaction to something the body simply didn't want to do.⁶¹

Thus, O'Horgan, among many others, made a practice of regularly breaking the fourth wall in the works he directed Off and Off Off Broadway. The practice, however, was comparatively new to Broadway, and especially to the Broadway musical.

O'Horgan's production of *Hair* featured stage directions that regularly required actors to break the proscenium and address the audience directly, or to leave the stage and mingle with them. Upon entering the Biltmore Theater during the run of *Hair*, audiences were immediately confronted by "[t]he bare stage, totally exposed, [with] no wing masking and . . . the entire proscenium arch stripped of any curtain, thus exposing the fly area, the grid, etc. The brick walls, the radiator pipes, the stage ropes, the light-pipes, all lights [were] visible."⁶² On this bare stage were members of the company, dressing and putting on makeup in

⁶¹ Simmer. 1977: 61-62.

⁶² Stewart. 1979: 389.

preparation for the performance. Still other cast members, already in character, were scattered throughout the house. O'Horgan recalls,

They were there, lying, sleeping in the aisles, you had to step over them, there were [actors] in people's seats, sometimes they would take somebody and put them in the wrong seats. And the [show] started—you never quite knew when the show started, and that's what I wanted to happen. As if it were going on forever.⁶³

Natalie Mosco, a member of the original cast, notes that *Hair* was unique to musical theater at the time in part because the show required its actors to ignore the proscenium separating cast from audience:

We started in the audience, which you rarely do, we were very aware of the audience, very interactive with them. . . . There was a certain kind of playing that occurred in Brechtian presentation, which had to do with the Berliner Ensemble sitting around the sides and watching the performance going on. Tom employed this . . . in *Hair*, so it created almost a show within a show, which gave us the license to perform and to acknowledge we were performing. This is a very different audience relationship to a traditional musical comedy, which has . . . a fourth wall where we pretend they are not there.⁶⁴

As in *Viet Rock*, then, audience members of *Hair* were encouraged to view the performers both as characters and as actors portraying characters.

The regular fourth-wall breaks certainly resonated with Broadway critics, although reactions to them were hotly mixed. While Clive Barnes was excited by O'Horgan's "irreverent, occasionally irrelevant staging,"⁶⁵ John Chapman displayed obvious discomfort with the actors' frequent journeys from the stage into the auditorium, in writing for the *Daily*

⁶³ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 23 February 1999.

⁶⁴ Personal communication with Natalie Mosco, 3 January 1999.

⁶⁵ Barnes, 1968.

News, “The best title for the show would be “The Dirty Foot-Follies,” for hardly anybody in this twitchy, itchy extravaganza wears shoes and they all kept running up and down the center aisle waving their calluses at me.”⁶⁶

Perhaps most important to the development of *Hair* were its alternative approaches to casting and preparing its actors for performance. Just as Megan Terry had “scripted *Viet Rock* from the collective creativity that emerged from the Open Theatre workshop techniques and discovery period, Ragni and Rado would rewrite much of the Broadway *Hair* from the collaborative ensemble creativity that developed under O’Horgan’s leadership during the rehearsal-workshop period.”⁶⁷ Of course, the rehearsal period for any theatrical production is necessarily bound to involve some collaboration to some degree; yet many of the actors involved in the original Broadway production of *Hair* recall that preparing for this musical involved such a high degree of collaboration, among all involved, that the rehearsal period was unique.

In casting *Hair*, the creative team was less interested in finding professional actors than they were in finding a group of performers who accurately interpreted the material. Rather than simply bringing the original Off Broadway cast to Broadway, then, O’Horgan recalls,

we recast it completely. Because most of the people in the [Off Broadway] cast were like glossy print kids. We had the hardest time casting. We were looking for the real thing. And just couldn’t—did everything we could to get them, and nobody knew what we wanted. The kids that did it at the Public were just regular kids that they dressed up like hippies. It was pretty awful. There were a couple of people that were terrific. But we finally got a cast

⁶⁶ Chapman, 1968.

⁶⁷ Horn, 1991: 19.

together. We followed people down the street who looked right. . . . We got people out of studios, things of that sort.⁶⁸

O'Horgan notes, further, that in searching for cast members, he placed a great deal of importance on seeking out people who could sing rock music convincingly, since he was aware that "very few people could really sing this stuff."⁶⁹

A number of actors who appeared in *Hair* remember auditioning with rock songs, a practice that was atypical at the time. Marjorie LiPari notes, for example, that while she cannot recall the specific piece she sang at her audition, she is sure it was a Beatles song;⁷⁰ Heather MacRae, who replaced Diane Keaton when she left the company approximately eight months after *Hair* had opened, remembers singing the Jefferson Airplane song "White Rabbit" for her audition, and adds that such a choice was unusual.

Once the cast had been chosen, the creative staff continued to watch the performers to make sure that they were bonding properly, and to make adjustments when bonding did not occur. Natalie Mosco, an original Broadway cast member, recalls,

We did not all start [rehearsals] on the same day. . . . [W]e had people come in one by one by one all that first week. We also had two people, a boy and a girl, who were in rehearsals with us on the first two or three days, and they were fired. And it was not because they were bad, it was just because they did not seem to fit into the tribe. And I did not realize then but obviously they had overcast and were planning to fire, just to see who meshed. And I remember the guy, who was probably a terrific guy, had a slightly English accent and kept talking about Paul Scofield being a great actor. And he obviously did not fit in. The girl later became very famous playing a violin

⁶⁸ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 23 February 1999.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Personal communication with Heather MacRae, 5 December 1998; personal communication with Marjorie LiPari, 15 December 1998.

naked—a cello. Her name was Marty Whitehead. She became quite famous playing it. It was very interesting, though—why did they pick me and keep me instead of someone else? I don't know. I do know we did a lot of bonding exercises and a lot of tribal stuff.⁷¹

Many members of the original Broadway company remember that their rehearsal period was more befitting of an Off Off Broadway show than a typical Broadway production. Marjorie LiPari, who, like O'Horgan, had been affiliated with La MaMa, appeared in the original Broadway production of *Hair* as a member of the chorus (referred to as “the tribe” by the company to reflect the show’s communal approach). She recalls a unique period of collaboration during rehearsals:

Tom [O'Horgan]'s approach is a metamorphosis. We did a lot of . . . lifting and trusting and finding. A lot of body sculpture, if you will. And we found the frames, we found the moments, and Tom would say, “Go! That's it!” He had a very strong vision of what he wanted, but he gave a lot of permission to all of us to move and figure out ways that we would go. . . . It was very freeing and . . . extremely challenging creatively, and it was a collaboration. . . . We were moving in a realm that was very different than what average theater was about . . . a very different approach.⁷²

Similarly, Mosco, who had trained as a ballet dancer and attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts before being cast in *Hair*, notes that the directorial and developmental approaches to the musical were quite different from those typical of mainstream theater:

Tom was more interested in the event, in letting it happen. . . . The rehearsals for *Hair* were very different from rehearsals for anything else, before or since. . . . Rehearsals for *Hair*—maybe I was handed a script, but I don't think it mattered, we didn't look at it. . . . We did sensitivity exercises where we took people on journeys. Their eyes were shut. At one point [fellow cast member] Paul Jabara was at Variety Arts Studios hanging out the window. And he

⁷¹ Personal communication with Natalie Mosco, 3 January 1999.

⁷² Personal communication with Marjori LiPari, 15 December 1998.

opened his eyes and screamed. People were taking each other on a lot of trust exercises, a lot of bonding exercises, a lot of relaxation exercises. I remember we stood around in a circle, and Tom wanted us to hang there letting our jaws hang loose until we all drooled on the floor because he didn't want that control. Other times we did—you know, what happened during *Hair*, especially because it was the late '60s and a very important time in civil rights—was a lot of black and white bonding. [The show] was totally integrated. It had to be.⁷³

The rehearsal period of *Hair* differed further from that of a traditional musical in its emphasis on improvisation exercises, many of which were incorporated into the production. The process of improvisation encouraged trust among cast members, and also added to the show's decidedly loose, spontaneous aesthetic. Mosco recalls specific improvisations that were developed in rehearsal and eventually used in the show:

A lot of stuff came out of improv[isation]. The whole Abraham Lincoln—where I was the shoeshine boy and Mary Davis was Abe Lincoln, and the boys were all singing “Happy Birthday, Abie Baby,” in the background, pretending to be Supremes or whoever they were pretending to be. I guess Inkspots. That . . . came out of improvisational experiences in rehearsal. They started singing, and I think [cast member] Paul [Jabara] coached Mary to start doing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and she said, “Wait a minute! Four score! Four score and seven years ago!” And they just started jiving off it . . . And suddenly, I was there, we had no place to put me. So I thought, well, if she's the President and she's black, I am a white girl, so I will be the shoeshine boy. . . . I think it was Mary herself who came up with, “Shit, I ain't dying for no white man.”⁷⁴

The spontaneous mood that such improvisations afforded the show apparently affected many audience members. Tom O'Horgan describes a segment that was born out of impromptu actions by audience members attending the London production:

⁷³ Personal communication with Natalie Mosco, 3 January 1999

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

In London . . . we did the show, and people began, at the end of the show, to just come up onstage and start dancing with the cast. Nobody asked them, they just did it. And I thought that was so amazing, and so then we put it in every production after that.⁷⁵

While directorial techniques typical of Off Off Broadway theater had not before been applied to Broadway musicals, it should be noted they were not entirely new to Broadway. Playwrights who had influenced Off and Off Off Broadway theatrical approaches in the 1950s were beginning to be featured on Broadway by the early 1960s. Works by such playwrights as Pinter, Ionesco, and Beckett, for example, were presented on Broadway as early as the mid- to late 1950s. Further, directors who had made their names working with experimental theater companies had begun to cross over to Broadway by the mid-1960s. O'Horgan, in fact, became known to Broadway audiences in 1967 when he directed *Futz*, Rochelle Owens's absurdist drama about a farmer who falls in love with and marries one of his pigs. Hence, while *Hair*'s staging was cited by a number of critics as particularly innovative, a majority focused on the musical's score as that which set it apart from those that had preceded it.

Through the 1960s, as Broadway composers were still struggling to incorporate early rock 'n' roll music into their scores, the music had begun to evolve from what is commonly referred to as "rock 'n' roll" into what is known simply as "rock." The latter is a far broader and often more musically sophisticated genre, which became increasingly linked with the social and political turmoil of the time. Hamm notes that the 1960s were

a decade in which various groups, distinguished by race, nationality, age, ideology, or sex, sought greater freedom and radical change of other kinds.

⁷⁵ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 23 February 1999.

Rock music became widely identified with such movements. . . . Rock differs from rock-and-roll in a number of important respects. . . . Rock depends to a far greater extent on electronic generation, amplification, and distortion of sound. Forms are freer and more elastic, and range from brief sectional song structures to extended improvisations that often appear to be amorphous. Texts sometimes address social and political issues, and often deal with personal experiences in introverted and even obscure language. Tempos can be as fast as those of early rock-and-roll but are often slower. Instrumentation consists not only of the usual rock-and-roll complement of electric guitars, electric bass guitar, and drums, but often of keyboards . . . and, in the later stages of rock, a wide range of other instruments, including folk instruments and even a full symphony orchestra.⁷⁶

Thus, by the time *Hair* had opened on Broadway, rock 'n' roll had expanded into a genre that was both musically and lyrically more varied, and was somewhat more reflective, in general, of social, political, or personal issues.

Because it was a genre that featured more diversity than its predecessor, rock music became increasingly adaptable to the theatrical stage by the mid-1960s. Rock and theater performance had become somewhat intermingled by this point, both in theatrical experiments known as “happenings,”⁷⁷ and in rock concerts that began to make more conscious use of visual imagery. By 1966, for example, Andy Warhol had incorporated the live music of the Velvet Underground into the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, a mixed-media presentation that he developed in his converted factory (known as The Factory) on East 47th Street in Manhattan.

At around the same time, the “psychedelic” bands popular in California’s Bay Area were

⁷⁶ Hamm, 1986: 64.

⁷⁷ “Happening” is roughly defined by Kirby as “a purposefully composed form of theater in which diverse alogical elements, including nonmatrixed performing, are organized in a compartmented structure” (1965: 21). The term “happening”, however, has been contested as imprecise by a number of writers on the subject. Kostelanetz offers, instead, the label “theatre of mixed means,” which, he notes, “encompasses various strains of activity and yet makes the crucial distinction between this theatre and traditional, predominantly literary mono-mean practice” (1968: xi).

performing happening-like “light shows,” in which musicians would perform while accompanied by slide and film projections, and colored or strobe light displays. Although not yet successfully adapted to the Broadway stage, rock music had thus been featured in fringe theatrical productions by the middle of the decade; it had, in fact, been used in *Viet Rock*, the theatrical piece that Ragni performed in before beginning work on *Hair*.

Although *Viet Rock* was not a musical, it did feature six songs, which have not received much attention in past studies of *Viet Rock*; they are mentioned only in passing in both Pasolli’s *A Book on the Open Theatre* and Horn’s *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway’s First Rock Musical*. This fact is not surprising: the music used in *Viet Rock* is difficult to discuss in detail, since recordings are unavailable and the production notes to the play are unclear as to the way the songs were executed in performance. The stage directions note only that the musical accompaniment was taped, and that no instrumentalists were present during the performances.

Published notations, however, do exist, and indicate that the songs are written in a variety of styles.⁷⁸ There is, for example, a march, as well as a waltz. Yet a number of the songs seem most reminiscent of the Bob Dylan-inspired, socially conscious folk-rock that was popular at the time. Handwritten notes on the transcriptions indicate that the six songs were to be performed on electric or acoustic guitar, harmonica, snare drum, “Eastern percussions” and, in one case, a trumpet.⁷⁹ Many of the songs are blues-based, and almost all of them have

⁷⁸Terry, 1966.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*: 261-62.

stridently anti-war lyrics. Most of them feature restricted melodic lines. Some are built, for example, around just one or two notes, and many include directions that instruct performers to talk-sing the lyrics, rather than to sing them. The title song, for example, includes notes indicating that the actors should perform the song in a “Dylan-esque drone-like” way.⁸⁰ Written by Marianne de Pury, who attended the workshops during which the theatrical piece was developed, these songs, like the sketches themselves, were the result of an organic and collaborative process; Terry writes in her production notes, “the composer . . . worked with me from the very first exercises. The music grew along with the play.”⁸¹

Rehearsals for *Hair* and *Viet Rock* can again be compared, in that the collective approach was extended to the composer, who in both cases worked with the actors and creative staff to build musical numbers. In rehearsals for *Hair*, the collective approach was taken a bit further. In marked contrast to a traditional Broadway pit band, the accompanying musicians were present in rehearsals for *Hair* from the beginning, and were thus also actively involved in preparing musical numbers for production.⁸² Mosco describes the way in which musicians, actors, composer, and choreographer worked collectively during rehearsals:

Galt [MacDermot], in the singing, would just let everyone sing. . . . And we were basically allowed, up to some extent, to make up our own—and then if Galt liked what we made up, [the final product] was set out of that . . . [actors] like Leata Galloway had five octaves. And Galt would turn around and say, “Leata, can you give it one of your dog notes, one of your freak notes?” And

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 251.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 21–22.

⁸² In general, Broadway bands are rehearsed separately, and are brought in during “tech” rehearsals—when the company moves from the rehearsal studio to the stage—approximately a week before performances are scheduled to begin.

that would be it. Or, “Could you give me a wail, Melba?” and that would be it. Throw something out and let people do it. And then he would give the rest of us, after we had experimented, a more solid foundation. . . . The truck for the band was onstage. All the musicians sat in the truck, it was an open pickup truck. [Lead guitarist] Steve [Gillette] was outside the door, with his foot on the stage, leaning against that truck, playing the guitar. So he was as much a part of us as he was a part of the band. He was bridging that gap. In rehearsal, Steve would just jam and we would all dance. And the choreographer would go around and say, “Let’s do a Marjorie LiPari step!” and we would put that into the show. I had one that was my step, which was a kick thing. And we had another one which was somebody else’s. . . . So that gives you an example where musically it came out of rock free-form, theater free-form, and dance free-form.⁸³

The connection established between actors and musicians was not severed once rehearsals ended and the show began its run at the Biltmore. The musicians were not relegated to the orchestra pit beneath the stage in the manner of the traditional musical. Rather, the band, which for the first few months included Galt MacDermot on keyboards,⁸⁴ was placed onstage, further intensifying connections between musician, actor, and composer.

Like the songs in *Viet Rock*, those in *Hair* were often used to express political or social sentiments. Song lyrics sung in the musical feature blunt commentary on topical issues including the Vietnam war (“Three-Five-Zero-Zero”), drug use (“Hashish,” “Walking in Space”), free love (“Black Boys/White Boys,” “Sodomy”), and the generation gap (“Hair”). The score also featured songs that had less to do with plot development than they did with the emotional life of the characters singing them (“Easy to Be Hard,” “Where Do I Go”); these

⁸³ Personal communication with Natalie Mosco, 3 January 1999.

⁸⁴ Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

songs feature lyrics that are often ambiguous (“The Flesh Failures”) or even incoherent (“Good Morning Starshine”).

Hair’s score reflects the fact that rock music had matured significantly in its first decade of existence. A rich array of maturing popular American musical styles, in fact, may be heard in the score of the musical: for example, soul music (“Easy to Be Hard”), the Motown sound (“White Boys”), country and western music (“Don’t Put It Down”), and psychedelic rock (“Walking in Space”). MacDermot’s use of a wide variety of styles distinguishes his score from previous composers’ attempts at bringing rock music to the Broadway stage by simply featuring repetitive bass-lines or lyrics that parodied early rock ‘n’ roll. Further, easily incorporated into the score for *Hair* were several ballads, as well as songs in the 32-bar form that had been a staple among Tin Pan Alley composers for decades. Due to the increased importance, in the rock world, of balladeers like Bob Dylan and the music hall-influenced songs of British groups like the Beatles and especially the Kinks, both forms were becoming more prevalent in rock music as well. Hence, a quiet, solo number like “Frank Mills,” with its AABA format, its simple keyboard accompaniment, and its straightforward, clear lyrics, was perhaps more reflective of traditional Broadway musicals than it was of more aggressive rock songs, but was nevertheless not out-of-place in a musical with rock at its core.

MacDermot’s success in blending rock and theater music throughout his score was due in part to the fact that he had been schooled in a number of types of music, and thus differed

from many Broadway composers who, firmly rooted in the music of Tin Pan Alley, were attempting to imitate a popular style that they did not fully understand. MacDermot, who studied jazz, many varieties of popular music, and classical music during his youth in Montreal and then in Capetown, South Africa, was comfortable working with a number of styles. He argues that one cannot define the score he wrote for *Hair* as simply “rock”, but, rather, one reflective of much variety:

I am not sure what rock ‘n’ roll really is, and I don’t care . . . [but] no two songs in *Hair* are exactly the same. There were certain things, like . . . “White Boys/Black Boys.” “White Boys” [reminded me of] Motown, so you tried to get at a little bit of that feel. “Black Boys,” I didn’t know what to go for with that. . . . I went a little bit country, but it’s not even country. . . . “Walking in Space” is, like, spacy in a way, but I don’t like spacy music. I like all music to have a rhythm. So you try to get at something that pleases you musically and then is dramatically close to what you wanted. . . . I don’t feel like a rock ‘n’ roll composer. . . . I studied music in Africa, so I consider myself an African composer and a West Indian composer more than a rock ‘n’ roll—I would not know how to describe [my style]. That’s what I mean—I’m not very good at categories. Not interested in categories. The only sense that I would go into a category is if it’s dramatic. You know, like if you are writing a story about Mexico, you would write something, you know, Mexican. But not all night!⁸⁵

Despite the fact that the score featured a number of different styles, and borrowed from a wide variety of genres, *Hair* was billed as a rock musical, a term that remains, at present, largely misleading. MacDermot argues that the term “rock musical” is often applied to musicals that feature rock-influenced orchestrations, regardless of actual musical style, but that the term—first featured in *Hair*’s subtitle, *The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*—was actually meant as a joke:

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

[Rado and Ragni], like a joke, called it a tribal love-rock musical. Because they were talking about, in those days, you know, there was folk rock and this kind of rock, and they were making a joke out of it.⁸⁶

The term “rock musical” caught on, however, and became a descriptor for the musical and ones like it, presumably because of its topical, youth-oriented themes and because, as MacDermot argues, the score’s instrumentation set it apart from previous Broadway shows.

A further, and rather important rock music influence most likely added to the notion of *Hair* as a “rock musical”: Because the instruments were amplified, and because the band was placed onstage, the musicians often threatened to overpower the actors’ voices. The actors thus needed to use microphones while singing,⁸⁷ a practice that would become the norm in the following decades, but that was relatively rare at the time.⁸⁸

What is perhaps most remarkable about the score for *Hair* is that in composing it, MacDermot seemed to strike a balance—one that had not previously and has since rarely been attained—between what was deemed acceptable on a Broadway stage, and what proved appealing to those who listened to or performed rock music. *Hair* not only proved popular with theatergoers, it also remains one of the few Broadway musicals to achieve chart status in the years since the rise of rock ‘n’ roll. In November 1968, the original Broadway cast recording of the musical was released and became the first (and only) such recording to hit number-one on the *Billboard* album charts since *Hello Dolly* (1964). Further, many of the songs from the musical proved particularly appealing to a wide variety of popular artists: by

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Bordman. 1992: 643–44.

1969, radio stations across the country were rotating songs from the show, in cover versions that included the Fifth Dimension's medley "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In (The Flesh Failures)" (16 weeks at number one); Three Dog Night's "Easy to Be Hard" (number four for 12 weeks); the Cowsills' "Hair" (number two for 13 weeks), and Oliver's "Good Morning Starshine" (number three for 11 weeks).⁸⁹

Many people interviewed for this project, whether they are fans of rock music, theater music, or both, seem to embrace the music from *Hair*, even when they roundly reject other adaptations of popular music for the Broadway stage. Even the rock musician and composer Stephen Trask—who insists that he composed the music for the recent Off Broadway show *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* because he despises all rock musicals and wanted to see if he could improve on the form—nevertheless admits to "a grudging affection" for *Hair*.⁹⁰ In his review of the show for *The New York Times*, Barnes seemed to recognize and to celebrate that fact that *Hair* adeptly attained such a delicate balance:

this is a happy show musically. Galt MacDermot's music is merely pop-rock, with strong soothing overtones of Broadway melody, but it precisely serves its purpose, and its noisy and cheerful conservatism is just right for an audience that might wince at "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," while the Stones would certainly gather no pop moss. Yet . . . the show is the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Information according to Whitburn's *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*, and the *Billboard Book of Top 40 Albums*.

⁹⁰ Personal communication with Stephen Trask, 29 July 1998.

⁹¹ Barnes, 1968.

Although the Broadway production of *Hair* received some glowing reviews and had a strong commercial reception, it was never embraced by a significant number of Broadway's more influential denizens—composers, producers, and a large faction of theater critics—who either resented the show's loose, experimental feel, its loud music, and its controversial themes, or who simply failed to recognize it as a significant theatrical work. Horn notes,

Among the composers, lyricists, book writers, and producers who were accustomed to exercising hegemony over what goes on uptown, reaction to *Hair* followed the conventional crisis sequence of denial, anger, and depression, but never reached acceptance. Richard Rodgers . . . and Leonard Bernstein . . . attended . . . performances of *Hair*, each venting anger at its iconoclastic presence and expressing pessimism about the outlook for the American musical theater. David Merrick, who had turned the show down a year and a half before, commented, "I don't know what the hell this is. I don't know why people like it." . . . For a segment of the New York theater critic corps, *Hair*'s success was their Waterloo. These reviewers . . . used the strongest language that their publications would allow to try to persuade readers to avoid the Biltmore like the plague. John Chapman of the *Daily News* reported that [the] Broadway [version of] *Hair* was the "most dismaying low of the . . . season." It was "vulgar, perverted, tasteless, cheap, cynical, offensive, and generally lousy, and everybody connected with it should be washed in strong soap and hung up to dry in the sun."⁹²

Regardless of the fact that *Hair* was perhaps never fully accepted by the Broadway elite, the show proved appealing to mainstream audiences and even worked to attract the new ones that Broadway had been courting since the birth of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s.

Because of its youthful orientation, its topical themes, and its interracial cast, the show attracted a significant number of young people and a greater proportion of African-Americans than attended most Broadway shows. Horn notes,

⁹² Horn, 1991: 87.

A little more than four months after opening night at the Biltmore, *New York* magazine's George Nash conducted an informal sampling of *Hair*'s patrons. Forty-six percent were under [30], only 13 percent were [50] and over, and 7 percent were black, all of them under [30]. The trend toward youthful audiences continued. Following the Nash survey, the *Wall Street Journal* reported the outcome of a similar head count taken in June 1969. The *Journal*'s tally revealed that one half of *Hair*'s audience was between the ages of [18] and [25], as compared to 3 percent for other Broadway productions.⁹³

Indeed, some informants for this project—as well as a number of colleagues and friends—remember seeing *Hair* on Broadway as adolescents, and also recall that among teens, the musical had a reputation that set it apart from most Broadway shows.

Risa Freeman, a colleague who was in high school during the period that *Hair* was running at the Biltmore, remembers that she rarely, if ever, went to see Broadway shows, but that she saw *Hair* “because *that* was cool.”⁹⁴ Likewise, Nina Machlin Dayton, an informant who, as a teenager, enjoyed the musical so much that she took a job working at the Biltmore concession stand after school, remembers that the show had such a strong impact on her in part because “the characters [in *Hair*] were very appealing to me, they were closer to my own age, they were what I wanted to be. Cool. They were cool.”⁹⁵

There is, in fact, some indication that *Hair* had an exceptionally strong impact on younger audience members, who were perhaps too young to be involved in particular aspects of the youth movement at the time, but were old enough to understand and to agree with many

⁹³ *Ibid.*: 133-34.

⁹⁴ Personal communication with Risa Freeman, 16 February 2000.

⁹⁵ Personal communication with Nina Machlin Dayton, 28 July 1999.

of its objectives. Dayton notes, for example, that she identified with the musical on a number of levels:

I was only 13 in 1969. I think my view of [the '60s] was sort of rosy because I was—I don't think I was involved in the negative—there were a lot of drug burnouts and a lot of down things about the end of the '60s. But I do think I see it kind of clearly. . . . One thing I remember a lot of about *Hair* was that they did a lot of extracurricular stuff, like they would be on television shows, and they were a lot more public. They were at Earth Day, and rallies, and that kind of thing. . . . And I think at the age of 13 ½ it was sort of—it was terribly appealing, these really cool, really good-looking, appealing people. . . . So [I] went [to see the show]. And sat in the third row, and my life changed. . . . I have spent a lot of time in the intervening years thinking about that and wondering why that is. It really was very much like falling in love, but it wasn't falling in love with a person—it was just so cool, and the music of course is fantastic. I've seen a lot of shows that I've loved. I mean, really, really loved. But this—maybe because it was so different, maybe because of the rock music, [it] spoke to me. . . . It was about me.⁹⁶

Likewise, André Balog, a colleague who was 13 when he saw *Hair* in London, remembers that seeing the show made him decide to move to the United States. He explains why the show remains strong in his memory, over 30 years later:

Specifically as a gay person, [*Hair*] meant something to me. I thought the world would be like that. Not so much that I was personally in sync with the hippie movement. I was, in fact, a bit of a snob. But I thought the inclusiveness and openness would bode well for gay people. It was the anti-establishment qualities that affected me. I thought these people were signaling a change—I sadly admit that I was wrong. But I really thought that the family would be over, the nuclear family—and that people would live in large, friendly groups.⁹⁷

For all of its appeal, *Hair* was nevertheless quite controversial for its time and worked to offend some members of both conservative and liberal factions. Some regional

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Personal communication with André Balog, 2 March 2000.

companies—notably those in Chattanooga and Boston—were subject to public outcry and were banned.⁹⁸ Although the Biltmore production of *Hair* was never the target of any full-scale protests by the right or the left, it is clear that the show occasionally worked to offend. In 1970, newspapers reported on a much-publicized visit to the show by the Apollo 13 astronauts James A. Lovell, Jr. and John L. Swigert, Jr. The astronauts and their entourage reportedly walked out of the show before the first-act intermission, having taken umbrage at what they perceived as an unpatriotic treatment of the American flag during the number “Don’t Put It Down.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Horn, 1991: 101-03.

⁹⁹ Green 1970. Due to the regular inclusion of topical references and some actors’ penchant for improvisation, *Hair* changed from preview period to closing during its run at the Biltmore. Thus, the published versions of the musical are widely felt by its creators and devotees to be somewhat inaccurate. Yet according to Nina Machlin Dayton, who as a teenager worked at the refreshment stand at the Biltmore, and thus watched the show countless times, the sketch in question was performed by three men: the actor who plays Berger, the actor who plays Woof, and a male member of the “tribe” (chorus). She describes the scene as follows: The scene opens with the tribe member standing motionless on stage, wrapped in an American flag. Berger, and then Woof, address the tribe member, who at first does not respond, and finally does with the chant, “Om mane padme om.” Berger and Woof get under the flag with the tribe member, and then re-emerge as the band begins to vamp the beginning of the song “Don’t Put It Down.” Berger and Woof being to speak in southern accents and to satirize “true-blue all-American flag worship.” Woof states, “Folding the flag is taking care of the nation.” Berger and the tribe member respond with, “Take care, nation!” Woof states, “Folding the flag is putting the nation to bed for the night.” Berger and the tribe member follow with, “G’night, nation!” Berger and the tribe member then cradle Woof in the outstretched flag as he states, “I’m falling through a hole in the flag.” He slips, falls backward, and is caught and gently swung, as in a hammock, by the flag as he shouts, “Heeeeeeelp!” He then stands and the three men begin to fold the flag in regulation manner. Berger announces, “It’s a beautiful day in Selma, Alabama, y’all,” just before beginning the song. Dayton notes, “As they sing, they continue to fold the flag. In the next scene, Berger imitates a woman who eventually gets mugged and raped by the other two, acting as criminals. He holds the folded flag as his purse, which the thieves try to steal from him. But at no time does the flag actually touch the floor. This is how the scene was every time that I saw it. . . . There was an article I read recently . . . that suggested that the whole astronauts thing was a publicity stunt. Who knows? There really was nothing offensive about the scene, although if one were a flag-waving conservative one would probably feel made fun of” (personal communication with Nina Machlin Dayton, 17 February 2000).

Marjorie LiPari, a member of the original cast, says that traditional reactions to the decidedly non-traditional musical were not entirely out of the ordinary:

The show had an impact that was palpable. And you know, I always waited for someone to go “Hmph!” and walk out. And to me that was a successful show. It happened frequently. It was not like 15 people got up, but maybe two.¹⁰⁰

Rado, on the other hand, feels that while some might have been offended by subject matter that was relatively candid for a Broadway musical, others were unhappy that the subject matter was not frank enough:

I had the feeling that the intellectual side of the counterculture did not really respond well to *Hair*. . . . [T]hey thought it either didn’t depict it well or—it was compared to Archie comics. . . . [T]hey thought it was too pandering or simple, or didn’t express the left sentiment in exactly the right way.¹⁰¹

Indeed, there are some indications that various social and political groups reacted negatively to *Hair*. An article covering a Central Park concert sponsored by Michael Butler in celebration of the Biltmore production’s second anniversary makes mention of a group who attended the celebration in protest:

On the Mall, the promoters of “Hair” were celebrating the show’s second birthday with a free spectacle at the bandshell, and . . . the New York Provos were handing out leaflets branding “Hair” as a culture ripoff and inviting followers to the cast’s own private party at the Four Seasons afterwards. “With all the green power ‘Hair’ promoters have taken in, has any of it come back to the people?” the leaflets asked.¹⁰²

Such reactions notwithstanding, the Broadway representation of the growing youth culture was seen by many as a largely positive endeavor. Bill Compton, an active member of the anti-war

¹⁰⁰ Personal communication with Marjorie LiPari. 15 December 1998.

¹⁰¹ Personal communication with James Rado. 16 January 1999.

¹⁰² Aronowitz. 1970.

movement during the mid- to late-60s, argues, “I guess [*Hair*] is a little sugary. You know, romantic in a sense. . . . [But] I don’t think *Hair* was written for us. I think *Hair* was written to educate the masses about us.”¹⁰³ Indeed, Bordman observes, “for many staid, older playgoers in the audience, *Hair* allowed a brief, vicarious participation in the protest movements of the sixties.”¹⁰⁴

Hair’s position in time might, in part, explain its broad appeal. By 1968, the youth culture that the musical was depicting had been active, observable, and growing in number for some time; by 1968, a Broadway musical about hippies—while perhaps entertaining and informative to some—would likely not have been particularly foreign or shocking to many, despite the much-publicized (and ultimately very brief, darkly-lit) nude scene that ended the first act. Similarly, the many political and social messages in the show were no different than those espoused by the actual new left; thus audience members who attended *Hair* would likely have been familiar with such messages by 1968, regardless of whether or not they agreed with them. As one anonymous journalist—writing in 1969 about *Hair* and other theatrical depictions of youth culture that were running in New York at the time—noted sardonically,

Even hawks, let alone parrots, have learned to deplore Viet Nam by now, so this particular arsenal of invective doesn’t stir up a[n] . . . audience as visibly as it once did. Time was when playgoers would weep on their armrests at the old “We won’t go” non-fight pep talk.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Personal communication with Bill Compotn. 18 October 1998.

¹⁰⁴ Bordman. 1992: 659.

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous article in *Time* magazine. 1969: 78.

Perhaps more important to *Hair*'s success was the simple fact that it was the first musical of its kind. Because it was unique, and because it opened at a point when youth culture had not yet become quite as commodified as it soon would, *Hair* seems to have been more regularly lauded for its crossover appeal than it was criticized for "selling out."

Occasional comments in the extensive press that covered the Broadway run of *Hair* indicate that the show's commercial side rankled with a few. For example, one anonymous journalist wrote, at the end of an otherwise highly positive review of the show for the *New Yorker*,

Sometimes *Hair* is disturbingly commercial—the hippie turned into just another marketable product. (For example, Wig City, in conjunction with the show, already has produced an instant male-hippie kit, complete with wig, beads, bells, incense, etc., for \$29.95).¹⁰⁶

Similarly, Jim Cowdery, a friend who was in college at the time that *Hair* was running on Broadway, notes that he was averse to the idea of seeing the musical, since "the very notion of a Broadway show about hippies just struck me as cheap and commercial—there was just something that seemed so cheesy about it."¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, a majority of informants for this project—whether involved in the original Broadway production or not—seem to hold the musical in particularly high esteem. Further, the exceptions above notwithstanding, historical documents and personal interviews with those who were involved in or who witnessed the original production indicate that the commercial aspects of *Hair* were not seen to conflict with its messages. In fact, for the most

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous review in *The New Yorker*, 1968.

¹⁰⁷ Personal communication with Jim Cowdery, 1 March 2000.

part, the actors and creative staff who were involved in *Hair* and who were interviewed for this project argue that their work on the musical—which, they all acknowledge, was ultimately as commercial as any other Broadway production—worked to reaffirm, or even to significantly strengthen, their social and political ideals.

James Rado notes that although the alternative casting employed by *Hair*'s creative team yielded a very diverse company whose members varied in terms of professional experience and lifestyle, the themes of the show were topical enough that many of the cast members came to believe firmly in what they were depicting:

I know that the kids who came to be in *Hair*—a lot of them probably were not actors *per se*. Some were. I mean, we had people like Diane Keaton. . . . [But] I think the immediacy of the material—that it was about present-day kids, the present youth movement, [made] it very easy for them to identify with the theme. . . . I think I found the actors coming to believe—and the audience came to believe—that what they were seeing onstage were actual hippies. They were not, necessarily. But they became that. You know, it was very easy for them to identify with the causes and what it was about.¹⁰⁸

Mosco, too, notes that integrating the personal with the political was not hard since the musical reflected so many countercultural concerns and featured such a diverse cast:

We were a cross-section of what was out there in New York, probably in the country, probably in the world—politically and emotionally of that generation. They way each one of us thought reflected somebody somewhere. We were almost prototypes of what was going on.¹⁰⁹

The experience of being in the show worked not only to reaffirm, but in some cases to change the ideals of some of the actors. One of the actors to acknowledge that he was

¹⁰⁸ Personal communication with James Rado, 16 January 1999.

¹⁰⁹ Personal communication with Natalie Mosco, 3 January 1999.

profoundly affected by his work in *Hair* was Walter Michael Harris, the member of a family of Off Broadway actors who, at 16, was one of the youngest members of the cast. Harris recalls that after 11 months in the show as a member of the tribe, he gave notice and left New York for San Francisco, “in pursuit of the hippie ideal: I went into *Hair* an actor, and came out a hippie.”¹¹⁰ He argues that the commercial aspect of *Hair* did not subtract from its messages, which helped to change the course of his life:

I approached *Hair* initially from a “commercial” career point of view and was utterly, completely transformed by it. During my year with *Hair* I developed a sense of mission about my life which never left. I reached the point where I could no longer justify playing a hippie on stage—I had to go out and try to live the life.¹¹¹

MacRae, too, notes that being in the show was influential enough that she subsequently became very selective in the kind of acting work she would accept:

What happened was that I became very idealistic about the war and what I chose to do . . . so I would not go out for jobs that I couldn’t believe in. I turned down *Promises, Promises*. They asked me to do it in San Francisco and I went to see it, and I was like, “ick.” I was very naïve. I was young and impressionable and I thought, “Oh, I don’t want to do a show where she’s in love with a married man.” I became really idealistic. And I think it was to my detriment because I could have probably done some wonderful roles and maybe learned from those roles. But I was trying to live a particular type of lifestyle, and I could not in good conscience do things that I did not really want to do.¹¹²

It is important to note that *Hair* did not transform the ideals and political views of the entire cast—MacRae notes that for some, it was “just a job,” and LiPari argues that the musical worked to fortify, not to change, her ideology:

¹¹⁰ Personal communication with Walter Michael Harris. 7 October 1998.

¹¹¹ Internet posting, hair-list@lists.jabberwocky.com, 15 October 1999.

¹¹² Personal communication with Heather MacRae. 5 December 1998.

I was just being, and that was what the subculture was supposed to do. It was fighting tooth over nail to just be present. . . . [So] I went in the way I went in and came out the same way.¹¹³

But MacRae, among others, notes that the show's political and social statements were ones that often influenced the actors in their daily lives:

The difference [between *Hair* and other shows] was that especially with *Hair*—because it was in the period it was being performed in—most of us were in our 20s in that era. . . . We would go to protest meetings, we would perform as a group. I guess the only thing you could liken it to now is AIDS—all the Broadway shows appear in AIDS benefits and have a cause. But the cause in that day was the war, the anti-war movement. . . . And it was very much—we were all very much committed to that. . . . You could not really separate it. I mean, of course it was a show. [But] some people had a problem separating the reality of their working on a show and the reality of their life. . . . *Hair* was definitely an all-encompassing thing. . . . It hit at such a tumultuous time in our history. When we were singing about—you know, “LBJ took the IRT”—we meant it. We were participating in those things. . . . I was very different by the end. I definitely got very caught up in the movement, especially in terms of the anti-war movement and really believing in it.¹¹⁴

MacRae notes that while being a part of the original cast of *Hair* was, on the whole, a highly positive experience, the original Broadway company experienced many of the same negative aspects that the actual counterculture began to experience by the end of the decade:

There were people that took drugs backstage. I never did. How could you work? I had to be—I had to have my wits about me. But there were people that would drop acid and go onstage. It was kinda scary. Just very scary. But that was definitely part of the culture. . . . Some of the [actors] were very undisciplined, and they were like, “Hey, man, I’m living this lifestyle and now you’re telling me I have to do *this*?” That created some problems. There was lots of stuff going on backstage. There was a person [we] called The Phantom who would slash people’s clothes. It was a very volatile kind of thing. They never found who it was. . . . And there were some bizarre things that went on. . . . You know,

¹¹³ Personal communication with Marjorie LiPari. 15 December 1998.

¹¹⁴ Personal communication with Heather MacRae. 5 December 1998.

people having sex in dressing room 1, which was the big hangout. I remember when I first joined the cast, I walked into dressing room 1, to hang out with everybody, and I saw somebody shooting up, giving themselves a shot, and I asked what it was and they said, "Well, vitamins." A lot of them got hooked a little bit on these vitamin B-12 shots that had speed in them. When they were in their preview period, because they were so tired, they had this Doctor Mitchum come in. So there were—in addition to the wonderful love, peace, hippie thing, there was also a more sinister side.¹¹⁵

VI. *After Hair*

Although *Hair* generated a lot of excitement and seems to have influenced, or at least affirmed, the ideals of many people, the show, like the youth movements it depicted, did not exert the type of lasting influence that some expected it would. The musical had some secondary influence on other Broadway musicals, which will be discussed in later chapters. But in general, rather than paving the way for a new style of musical, *Hair* was so reflective of its era that in some ways it proved unable to transcend it.

Hair did exert some immediate influence on New York theater. In the years after it first opened in 1967 at the Public Theater, a spate of theatrical productions billed as rock musicals appeared on, Off, and Off Off Broadway. These musicals seemed to follow two different directions, both musically and conceptually speaking. The most successful of musicals blended new popular music genres with traditional theatrical structures, and thus, arguably, showed more of an influence from musicals like *Bye Bye Birdie* than from *Hair*. A chief example was

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the Off Broadway musical *Your Own Thing*, which opened on 13 January 1968,¹¹⁶ at the time that *Hair* was running at the Cheetah.

Your Own Thing was very much a product of its time, but was not nearly as experimental a venture as was *Hair*. For its time, *Your Own Thing* was, like *Hair*, hugely successful: it ran at Off Broadway's Orpheum Theater for almost 1000 performances, won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical in 1968, and spawned multiple touring companies and a London production. Also like *Hair*, *Your Own Thing* employed rock instrumentation throughout (drums and an electric organ, guitar, and bass), but unlike MacDermot's rather diverse score, Hal Hester and Danny Apolinar's music for *Your Own Thing* took fewer risks. The songs—largely composed in major keys, with bright, busy orchestrations, fast tempos, and upbeat, straightforward lyrics—are most reminiscent of the *Billboard*-charting music of the Monkees, a benign pop-rock group that was formed in 1966 by executives at NBC for use in a television show based loosely on the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*. As stated in the liner notes of the original cast recording for *Your Own Thing*, “the show spoke for what it was pleased to call ‘the Now Generation,’ but there was nothing in it to scare Grandma.”

This comment is applicable not only to the score, but to the plot of *Your Own Thing*. Loosely based on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *Your Own Thing* involves the antics of the twin-brother-and-sister rock duo Viola and Sebastian. When their boat sinks at the start of the show, they are separated, but both land in Illyria (in this case, modern-day New York City).

¹¹⁶ Larkin, 1995: 4611.

Viola, mistaken for a boy, meets Orson, the manager of a shaggy-haired rock group called the Apocalypse, which is made up of four musicians who perform under the aliases of Death, War, Famine, and Disease. When Disease gets drafted, Orson hires Viola as a replacement. Viola and Orson develop romantic feelings for one another; this throws Orson into a state of sexual confusion, which only increases when he meets Sebastian (since the boat wreck, mistaken for a girl), and confuses him with Viola. Eventually, all is resolved and the characters live happily ever after.

Despite occasional mention of the war and some lighthearted topical references, *Your Own Thing* did not tackle nearly the number of social and political issues that *Hair* did (although it did reflect some relatively open views about sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular). Instead, the show ignored the uglier political and social issues of the 1960s in favor of depicting the freewheeling, whimsical aspects of the era. The musical was also much more plot-based, and was directed in more of a traditional fashion, with, for example, few if any breaks to the fourth wall, and an emphasis on the mistaken identity and fast-moving antics that one expects of French farce.

Although *Your Own Thing* was the first rock musical to follow the success of *Hair*, it remained distinct enough that the two musicals were never compared too closely. In this respect, *Your Own Thing* is unique among rock musicals that opened in New York around the turn of the decade. New York producers, in a scramble to capitalize on the success of *Hair*, began, by 1969, to bring to the stage a number of shows that closely emulated or even directly referenced *Hair*, through the use of experimental direction, rock instrumentation, a disregard

of concise narrative, an emphasis on the politics of the new left and the social mores of the counterculture, and—what seemed to become a requisite for many plays and musicals at the time—nude scenes, whether justified by the plot or not.

While the most successful musicals staged in New York are bound to yield imitations, and sometimes even major trends—for example, the many spare, character-driven, confessional pieces that appeared on and Off Broadway in the years after *A Chorus Line* opened in 1975—the rock musicals offered in the years after *Hair* opened at the Biltmore were occasionally successful (*Godspell* and *Grease*, for example), but were more often critical and commercial failures. As John Lahr forecast in an editorial strongly supporting the use of rock music on the theatrical stage, “the commercial success of the rock musical is assurance that there will be more of them. But formula imitations will bring a quick death for an explosive new dimension on the musical stage.”¹¹⁷

In fact, something of a rock musical backlash began in the New York press approximately one year after *Hair* opened at the Biltmore, when Off Broadway became host to a number of new rock musicals that borrowed liberally from *Hair*. One, *Salvation*, was a revue that pitted the social mores of contemporary youth movements against those of older generations. The other, *Stomp*, was billed as a “multimedia protest rock musical,” and opened the 1969-1970 season in limited run at Joseph Papp’s Public Theater. Although the commercial success of both productions indicates that the public did not necessarily agree with the critics, many of the latter began to show signs that their patience for *Hair* imitations was coming to an end.

¹¹⁷ Lahr, 1969: 57.

Salvation, which opened at the Village Gate in concert form before moving to the Jan Hus Theater on East 74th Street in September 1969, was well-received by a handful of critics, but was often compared unfavorably to *Hair*; Barnes, who liked both productions, noted in his review:

The musical, with book, music, and lyrics by Peter Link and C.C. Courtney (who also act in the show) is clearly a “Son of Hair.” Here there is also a non-book, a popularized pop-rock score and a theme that doodles around young, almost-hippie people, with their sex, their drugs, and their longings to be touched. “Salvation” does challenge comparison with “Hair,” and from that comparison it emerges a clear second best.¹¹⁸

A problem that many critics had with *Salvation* was one they would also have with *Stomp*, which opened at the Public Theater in November of 1969.

Although *Hair* had managed to escape being labeled “too commercial” by a majority of journalists, *Salvation* and *Stomp* seemed to strike a number of critics as superficial. Robert Sealy, writing for *The Episcopal New Yorker*, bashed *Salvation* not for its anti-Christian sentiment, but what he saw as an attempt on part of the producers to package the show for a self-congratulating mainstream middle class audience. Noting that “everything in this sad show—including the indignation—is borrowed,” he writes:

The audience at “Salvation” . . . were rich; they were middle-aged; they were uneasy; and they were gulled. Certainly these were not despicable people; they had standards, the imbecilities and indignities they witnessed and suffered through could by no possible casuistry be thought applicable or deserved. Yet they sat there, reacting like drugged rats to a buzzer: Vietnam, H.L. Hunt, President Nixon, the Pope, the popular words for fornication, sodomy, fellatio, etc. In their heart of hearts, they must have felt ashamed and queasy, but this was the rhythm of the day, this was being with it, grooving, swinging, doncha-know. Being with it! They should live so long! Seven dollars a ticket . . . to crowd into an Off Broadway basement . . . for barely eighty minutes of show time during

¹¹⁸ Barnes. 1969.

which not one second is anything more than stale, factitious routine. And they emerge, faintly smiling, thinking they have walked that last mile over the bridge of the “generation gap.” “I am cleansed, I am pure, I am young again. This is what they want. This is what our children want.” Horsefeathers.¹¹⁹

Stomp, like *Salvation*, seemed offend the sensibilities of a number of critics, who again compared the show to *Hair*, and generally agreed that the show was not as effective or as intelligent as its predecessor. Subject to much publicity before its opening, *Stomp* was developed by a group of young graduates and dropouts from the University of Texas who called themselves the Combine. The group made it a practice to live together in their work-space, and thus they lived communally in the Public Theater in the weeks before and during the run of the show.¹²⁰

Like *Hair*, *Stomp* incorporated a number of experimental influences; in a nod to environmental theater—in which the fourth wall is ignored and the audience is placed in the center of the action—spectators were seated in bleachers or on the floor in a big circle surrounding the actors, who often interacted with them during the performance. The plotless show, more performance art than musical theater, featured film clips, light shows, and, at the end, a huge piece of translucent plastic that symbolized flowing, unpolluted water, and that was dappled with lighting effects and pulled over the entire audience.

Stomp emulated *Hair* in its attempt to cover a broad number of topical social and political issues; unlike *Hair*, however, the show struck many critics as repetitive and uninspired, and the Combine as superficial.

¹¹⁹ Sealy. 1970.

¹²⁰ Mishkin. 1969.

Protest is much more dangerous and complicated than holding placards which read “Fuck the Establishment.” “Stomp’s” homespun earnestness never convinces us of its liberation. . . . The Combine fears being strangled by society, but the tepid caterwauling of their songs does not evoke that experience. Unlike “Hair”, whose outrage created a genuine (and creative) tension between the values of the audience and the ones the musical argued to establish, “Stomp” has to plant reaction in its audience. A performer who is part of the audience castigates the action like a maiden aunt: “What makes you think you invented revolution!” Although the ploy works for some in the audience, it betrays the softness at the core of “Stomp”: self-congratulatory when it should be uncompromising, sentimental when it must be scathing.¹²¹

It is possible that at least from the critics’ perspective, by this point rock musicals had become too deeply enmeshed with political and social protest for their own good.

Although rock’s connection to social protest was important to the success of *Hair*, the turn of the decade saw youth culture and its accompanying music become increasingly commercial. Further, the social upheavals of the 1960s were followed by a number of events in the early 1970s—the continuation of the war in Vietnam, the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, the subsequent Kent State and Jackson State shootings, the Watergate scandal—that added to a feeling of deep disillusionment in this country. In early 1970, the rock lyric was heralded among some in theater circles as an important and highly effective new “vehicle for emotional expression, philosophical debate, political activism—you name it, the rock lyric can and does express it daily from audio sources and from the stage.”¹²² Yet by the early 1970s, it seems that audiences had joined the critics in tiring of theater that offered strong political and social statements.

¹²¹ Lahr, 1969.

¹²² Guernsey, 1970: 28.

It is also possible, MacDermot cynically suggests, that such statements were never anything but a fad, at least on Broadway, where “people . . . go to theater . . . to have their values reinforced,” and that *Hair* was appreciated by many spectators despite and not because of its subject matter:

[*Hair*] is an exception to the rule. People thought it was—you know, a comment on the society, which it really—well, it is, but it was such an outrageous commentary that people didn’t have to digest it. And they never did digest it. The Broadway establishment never did. They don’t know what *Hair*’s about. They don’t want to.¹²³

MacDermot notes later, however, that perhaps a more likely reason that rock musicals quickly fell out of vogue was an economic one. Noting that after the success of *Hair*, greed took over and led to a greater interest in rushing rock musicals to the stage than in producing strong, interesting work, MacDermot states, “When you lose a couple of million bucks on Broadway, you are not asked back fast, if at all.”¹²⁴

It should be noted that there have been a number of successful rock musicals to open in New York in the years since *Hair*. The nostalgic *Grease*, which affectionately recalled the innocence of the 1950s, featured a rock ‘n’ roll score that Broadway composers had deemed impossible during the 1950s themselves. The musical opened Off Broadway in 1972 and ran at the Eden Theater for 128 performances before moving to Broadway’s Broadhurst for 3388 performances and becoming, for its time, the longest-running show in Broadway history.¹²⁵ The all-black, soul-tinged, “vastly overamplified” musical *The Wiz* transcended tepid reviews to become a huge commercial hit when it opened at the Majestic Theater in 1975.¹²⁶ And the rock

¹²³ Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Suskin. 1992: 571.

¹²⁶ Bordman. 1992: 683.

musical *Rent*, which opened Off Broadway to critical raves and quickly moved to Broadway's Nederlander Theater in 1996, continues its successful commercial run at the time of this writing.

Nevertheless, a majority of musicals that have experimented with rock music on or Off Broadway have not fared as well. As early as 1979, Salzman, writing on the current state of the American musical theater, would announce the death of the rock musical. Yet he adds, "the rock influence has [nevertheless] spread—as the jazz influence did earlier—and is widely used [on the musical stage] in a modified, fused form."¹²⁷ Indeed, as rock music continued to grow and diversify, the American musical began to reflect particular aspects of the popular genre in its framework, and to disregard others. Rock's influences on the American musical—electric instrumentation, increases in volume, singing styles that are both rawer and more reliant on amplification than those of the past—are generally seen by mainstream critics as more negative than they are positive contributions to the form, and in fact are occasionally implicated as the culprits responsible for an inability to return to the golden era of the American musical.

Bordman, for example, notes,

In healthier days, Broadway had responded quickly and fruitfully to new musical idioms . . . but once rock and roll established itself as the dominant popular musical style, it hurried on to a more metallic, throbbing form, often bellicose and almost always deafening. . . . Inevitably, Broadway had to make some response. Its initial stabs, most notably with *Hair* and *Your Own Thing*, were in many ways satisfying and hopeful. But rock quickly grew more assertive, and not just in its sound. Many of the leading rock groups composed their own songs and were reluctant to sing anything else, particularly if songs did not originate with fellow rock performers or composers. The youngsters

¹²⁷ Salzman, 1979: 243.

who ran away with the field also seemed to have little knowledge of or interest in musical theater. . . . As rock music spread out pervasively across the land, Broadway composers and lyricists had to adopt or adapt bits and pieces of its style: the insistent rhythms and newer modulations of its music, the disheartening banality of its lyrics. Orchestrators added electronic instruments to pit bands, in part to allow for smaller . . . less costly orchestras. And that probably also helped promote one of rock's most identifiable signatures: its employment of ubiquitous miking and blaring amplification.¹²⁸

In the over 30 years since *Hair* opened, then, the Broadway and Off Broadway shows that have been labeled “rock musicals” are, more often than not, musicals that incorporate some aspects of rock music into their frameworks, but disregard aspects that do not translate successfully to the theatrical stage.

Arguably, such an absorption process indicates that *Hair* has indeed exerted a lasting influence on the American musical theater, just not one that was expected or anticipated. But despite their mutual influences, rock music and the musical theater have continued to develop their own specific performance aesthetics, and audience expectations that differ markedly from one another. Thus, while musical theater might borrow from rock music and vice-versa, attempts at any true merger continue to be problematic, and thus fail more often than they succeed. In the following chapters, further problems inherent in blending rock music and musical theater will be detailed.

¹²⁸ Bordman, 1992: 643-4.

Chapter II

Rock music, musical theater, and linear narrative: The failure of the conceptual rock musical

I think if you explain the story line too much, it demeans all the other things in the music.

—Pete Townshend, rock musician and composer, on *Tommy*

It had no plot line. That worried me a little. I see now it should have worried me more.

—Adela Holzer, producer, on *Dude*

As noted in chapter 1, rock musicals that were staged in New York City in the years following *Hair* developed into two general types. The first type, here termed “structurally traditional rock musicals,” reflects more of an influence from the lighthearted throwback *Bye Bye Birdie* than it does from the comparatively innovative and experimental *Hair*. Structurally traditional rock musicals—examples of which include, among others, *Your Own Thing* (1968), *Grease* (1972), and *The Wiz* (1975)—typically feature upbeat plots, a relatively strong linear narrative, and scores consisting of rock- and pop-influenced songs that intermingled with more traditional theater fare. The structurally traditional rock musical has, on the whole, fared far better than the second type, here termed the “conceptual rock musical.” Conceptual rock musicals dominated New York’s commercial stage in the years following *Hair*. Their collective inability to win the favor of critics and audiences contributed to a rapid demise in enthusiasm for rock musicals in general and conceptual rock musicals in particular among theater producers, who began, for the most part, to shy away from such projects by the mid-1970s. In this chapter, a discussion about the influence exerted on conceptual rock musicals

by trends in rock music during the early 1970s will be followed by a consideration of difficulties commonly encountered in the conception and staging of the conceptual rock musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), *Rainbow* (1972), *Dude* (1972), *Via Galactica* (1972), *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* (1974), and *The Who's Tommy* (1993).

The failure of the conceptual rock musical to win favor with theater critics and audiences is indicative of the fact that particular trends in rock music, even those that would seem to lend themselves most easily to theatrical adaptation, simply do not translate effectively to the musical stage. Although this study is not devoted to a detailed examination of historical trends in rock music, certain developments that took place between the mid-to-late 1960s and the early 1970s do warrant some examination. During this period, technological advances allowed for both the development of the concept album and for increasingly spectacular rock concerts; these developments exerted influence on conceptual rock musicals that were staged in New York City, while simultaneously contributing, in part, to their commercial or critical failures.

As early as the mid-1960s many rock groups and solo acts began to devote less time to giving live performances and more to mastering rapidly developing studio technology, in the interests of making increasingly sophisticated sound recordings. This shift from the concert hall to the recording studio was instigated in both the United States and England at around the same time. In 1966, the Beach Boys released their commercially disappointing but highly innovative album *Pet Sounds*, which had apparently been inspired by the Beatles' 1965 effort, *Rubber Soul*.¹ Also in 1966, the Beatles, who had retreated to the studio after tiring of

¹ MacDonald. 1994: 171.

“trudg[ing] around the world churning out underrehearsed sets to audiences screaming too loudly to notice how bad they were,”² released their own studio effort, *Revolver*.

These recordings, among others that would soon follow, indicated that rock music was being taken in new directions by musicians who had an interest in attaining greater artistic control over their work; the increased time spent in recording studios indeed spurred an unprecedented period of artistic control for rock musicians by the early 1970s. Whereas many groups had already been composing and arranging their own music, experience in recording studios allowed musicians to be “less inclined to follow the aesthetic predilections and administrative recommendations of record producers,” and more inclined “to do without the expense of a middleman record producer and [instead] . . . take full responsibility for the production of the recording.”³

A familiarity with the workings of the recording studio, combined with advances in recording technology and greater artistic control, allowed rock musicians to move beyond the perceived limitations of the popular sound recording. From its inception, rock music had been largely oriented around the 45-rpm single record, with the LP traditionally viewed as “an aggregate of . . . discrete songs . . . included because they are likely to be commercially successful in a different context (i.e., being released singly) or because they happen to be, currently, the entire repertoire of the recording artist.”⁴ By the mid-1960s, however, many rock musicians began to turn their attention away from single records. MacDonald writes,

While 1966 produced many futuristic singles, the new focus of competition was the LP, seen as the natural format for an idiom bursting its commercial and creative limits. In the months before The Beatles began *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, a queue of artists stepped up to roll back the

² *Ibid.*

³ Kealy, 1982: 105.

⁴ Branscomb, 1993: 29.

perceived limits of the pop album. The Rolling Stones' *Aftermath*, the Who's *A Quick One*, Bob Dylan's epic *Blonde on Blonde*, The Byrds' *Fifth Dimension*, and The Mothers of Invention's *Freak Out* all opened new vistas, setting fresh standards of achievement.⁵

At this time, then, the LP made an important transition, from merely a medium upon which a number of independently conceived songs could be arranged, to a potentially fully integrated work, in which all songs could be conceptually related.

Such efforts on the part of rock musicians have commonly become known as concept albums, the birth of which is regularly traced to the mid-1960s. Although the question as to which rock group was responsible for the first concept album is a matter for debate among many rock aficionados, the Beatles' 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*—the musical adaptation of which will be discussed later in this chapter—is most often cited as the first of its kind, and is without question one of the most influential. Within a year its release, concept albums by different rock groups in the U.S. and England began to appear with increasing regularity. These concept albums developed in a number of directions, as different groups explored the potential for large-scale structure. British bands including Procol Harum, the Moody Blues, and Pink Floyd exhibited a common interest in creating large-scale, multimovement, instrumental soundscapes intended to evoke particular moods or atmospheres.⁶ Other bands focused on thematic connections: Alice Cooper's *Billion Dollar Babies* (1973), for example, can be read as an album-length exploration of decay in moral,

⁵ MacDonald, 1994: 171. In his own footnote to this remark, MacDonald cites, as examples of "futuristic singles," the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," the Byrds' "Eight Miles High," the Yardbirds' "Shapes of Things," the Lovin' Spoonful's "Summer in the City," the Who's "I'm a Boy," the Four Tops' "Reach Out I'll Be There," the Supremes' "Love Is Here and Now You're Gone," the Easybeats' "Friday on My Mind," Cream's "I Feel Free," and the Rolling Stones' "Have You Seen Your Mother, Baby, Standing in the Shadow?"

⁶ Macan, 1997: 21.

social, and physical manifestations. Still other bands attempted to portray specific characters in their concept albums; these albums became known, by the late 1960s, as rock operas.

The term “rock opera” is a somewhat elusive one, for a number of reasons. While many rock operas feature particular characters, they tend to differ from traditional operas in that they almost never adhere to any sort of linear plot line; further, while rock operas may be defined as operatic works in which the musical idiom is rock,

Such works have little direct connection to the opera as traditionally understood. They do not use operatically trained singers; the sound is amplified; some of the more interesting examples were never intended for live performance.⁷

Adding to the confusing nature of the term is the fact that historians and critics seem unsure as to when, exactly, it was first coined, and by whom. The Who’s *Tommy*, which was released in 1969 and will be discussed later in this chapter, is often cited as the first rock opera and has certainly become one of the best-known. Yet Rockwell notes that the term was first applied by the little-known British band Nirvana to its 1967 concept album, *The Story of Simon Simopath: A Science Fiction Pantomime*.⁸ Still others, including surviving members of the band itself, argue that the British group the Pretty Things were responsible for the first rock opera, with the release of their 1968 character study, *S. F. Sorrow*.⁹

The development of album-length works, coupled with advances in technology, contributed to new trends in live performance, as rock musicians worked to match their grandiose studio efforts with increasingly large, spectacular, and, some would argue, pretentious concerts. Through the early 1970s, such bands and solo artists as David Bowie,

⁷ Rockwell. 1992: 1365.

⁸ Rockwell. 1992: 1365.

⁹ Strauss. 1998: E5.

Alice Cooper, and Pink Floyd developed various stage personae and/or elaborate lighting, scenery, and prop displays for use during performances that were staged in ever-larger venues.

Such trends would seem to have lent themselves toward more successful adaptations of rock music for use on the musical stage, especially since, coupled with the success of *Hair*, they rendered invalid the argument that rock music was too simple to carry a full-length musical. Further, the early 1970s marked the beginning of an era in which advances in technology brought musicals and rock concerts a few steps closer to one another. Coinciding with the arrival on Broadway of rock-influenced works by Lloyd Webber and Rice in the early 1970s, the approach to spectacle in the commercial theater began a significant transformation that would only intensify through the following decade.

Bordman writes that by the 1970s, with the increased use of new technologies in the commercial theater,

spectacle [began to differ] from nineteenth-century spectacle in important ways. Gone were the elaborately painted settings (regularly whisked into the flies or pulled into the wings to create an applauded "transformation scene"), gone were casts of a hundred or more, and gone were rank upon rank of gorgeous girls in eye-popping costumes. Rather, the new spectacles were architecturally and electronically conceived, relying on movable towers and bridges, frequently loaded with electric lights and other apparatus, and on what Hollywood terms "special effects."¹⁰

Just as the ability to stage increasingly theatrical and technologically challenging concerts proved both attractive and lucrative to many rock musicians, the chance to bring similar productions to the Broadway stage proved tempting to theater personnel. Many of the staged rock musicals developed through the early 1970s reflected trends in rock music performance

¹⁰ Bordman. 1992: 665.

by becoming more and more excessive and conceptual, often at the expense of plot and character development, or even intelligibility.

I. *Rainbow*, *Dude* and *Via Galactica*

Three such musicals were developed by members of *Hair*'s creative team and staged on or Off Broadway in the early 1970s. Flush with success and newly embroiled in a personal feud that put a temporary end to their collaboration,¹¹ James Rado and Gerome Ragni began developing separate projects after *Hair* opened at the Biltmore Theater. Rado, with his brother Ted, wrote the book, music, and lyrics for *Rainbow*, while Ragni enlisted *Hair* composer Galt MacDermot for his new musical, *Dude*. Concurrently, MacDermot began work on the musical *Via Galactica*, which had been conceived, and was to be directed, by Peter Hall.

The early 1970s saw the continuation, particularly Off Off Broadway, of the struggle for new, socially meaningful theatrical forms characterized in part by "group-mime, carefully choreographed and non-individualized performances, [and an avoidance of] linear plot development";¹² it is important to note that the post-*Hair* commercial projects by Ragni, Rado, and MacDermot were, in part, further attempts to bring Off Off Broadway uptown, thereby challenging from within the many theatrical conventions imposed by the commercial theater. While their work on *Hair* was successful enough to imply that such struggles should and could be sustained, the post-*Hair* musicals ultimately became victims of the very system they were attempting to reform: MacDermot argues that in the greedy scramble to follow the success of *Hair* with similar musicals, professionalism was lost.¹³ Unfortunately, this lack of

¹¹ Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

¹² Guernsey, 1971: 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*

professionalism did not go unnoticed by Broadway critics and producers, and the post-*Hair* musicals by Rado, Ragni, and MacDermot helped not to permanently bring elements of the fringe theater to the mainstream, but rather to again divide these theatrical realms in New York City by the mid-1970s .

Although all three musicals were commercial failures, the Rado brothers' *Rainbow* proved to be the most critically successful and the least spectacular of the lot: it received mixed reviews, while *Dude* and *Via Galactica* were roundly and rather viciously panned. Although *Rainbow* was originally intended for Broadway, financial problems led to a run at Off Broadway's Orpheum Theater,¹⁴ where the musical opened on 18 December 1972. Like *Hair*, *Rainbow* was perceived by some critics to be a revue, since it featured a whopping 42 musical numbers, not all of which related to its very thin plot.

The musical score seems to have been the strongest element in *Rainbow*; many critics who panned the show nevertheless note that they found the music highly enjoyable.¹⁵ It was *Rainbow*'s plot, or lack thereof, that seemed most problematic for both critics and audience members. Even Clive Barnes, who gave the musical one of its most positive reviews, seemed a bit bemused by the convoluted story line:

The music and lyrics [for *Rainbow*] are by [James] Rado. and for the book he has been assisted, but perhaps not enough, by his brother, Ted Rado. . . . *Rainbow* almost literally takes off from where *Hair* ended. At the end of *Hair*, Claude . . . is killed in Vietnam. In *Rainbow*, someone called simply Man has been killed in Vietnam, and comes over the other side into Rainbow land. Rainbow land is the kind of place that perhaps only Judy Garland could fully appreciate. It seems to be a radio station of sorts . . . obsessed, but not too intently, with preparing commercials for such soap products as Oxydol. . . . There is a Mother, and a Father, and Jesus, and Buddha, a Stripper, a Wizard, a Girl, her Lesbian twin, a President and a First Lady. . . . The Man, accompanied by his Rainbow Room of cronies, goes to Washington and there

¹⁴ Personal communication with Nina Machlin Dayton. 28 July 1999.

¹⁵ See for example Kerr, 1973: AR1.

sees the President. "Why was I killed in Vietnam, Mr. President," he asks plaintively. Mr. President, a good guy at heart, replies, "If it was my fault, forgive me." Yes, well.¹⁶

There is some indication that *Rainbow* fared poorly with audiences as a result of unfortunate timing. In panning the musical, Walter Kerr writes that while he thoroughly enjoyed much of act one, he became "seriously uncomfortable" during the second act, wherein Man and his friends confront the President, who is so moved by their pleas to end the war that he instantly does so; unfortunately, *Rainbow*'s opening night coincided with the resumption of bombing in North Vietnam after the breaking off of the peace talks, and Kerr admits that this event soured his enjoyment of the musical.¹⁷ It is possible that many theatergoers shared his sentiments.

By contrast, Nina Machlin Dayton, who befriended a number of *Hair* alumni during her years working at the Biltmore Theater, and who attended many rehearsals and performances of *Rainbow*, remembers that while *Rainbow*'s timing was indeed unfortunate, its loose structure was the most likely contributor to its early demise:

Rainbow was 42 really engaging songs with little plot and unusual lyrics. . . . I loved it. It was the kind of show [where you] went, "I don't have a clue what this is about, but I like it!" It was really outside, and I think that's what its problem was. It meant a lot to those who developed it, but the plot seemed not to translate to the average theatergoer. . . . This outsideness has always been difficult for the mainstream. It's like jazz fusion—not everybody can relate.¹⁸

Rainbow failed to find an audience, and closed after 48 performances on 28 January 1973.¹⁹

Perhaps because *Rainbow* was staged in a relatively small Off Broadway theater on a far more modest budget, it escaped the vindictiveness with which critics discussed *Dude* and

¹⁶ Barnes. 1972.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Personal communication with Nina Machlin Dayton. 28 July 1999.

¹⁹ Guernsey. 1973: 389.

Via Galactica, both of which opened on Broadway in the autumn of 1972. Whereas Dayton remembers *Rainbow* as “sweet,” “unassuming,” and somehow “purer” than the Broadway rock musicals that would follow it,²⁰ *Dude* and *Via Galactica* were spectacular, expensive productions that ultimately seemed to reflect more of an interest in obscure concepts and stage effects than they did in making much sense. The results were bleak; theater historian Ken Mandelbaum argues that the “back-to-back awfulness” of these musicals worked to almost single-handedly “put [an] end to the idea that rock would ‘save’ the Broadway musical,” and proved that “people were not willing to stand for overproduced nonsense just because it had a rock beat.”²¹

Like *Hair*, Ragni and MacDermot’s *Dude* began as a series of ideas and observations that Ragni scribbled into the notebooks he habitually carried around with him. Between 1968 and 1971, Ragni amassed some 2000 pages of notes for the musical from which he fashioned lyrics for 50 songs that were then set by MacDermot. In 1971, the producers Adela and Peter Holzer agreed to finance *Dude*, provided that Ragni pare his notes into a workable script.²²

Although no one involved with the production seemed clear, during its development, as to what *Dude* was actually about, the Holzers remained convinced that the musical would succeed, and thus set about fulfilling Ragni’s outlandish and often very expensive demands. Although they rejected his request for the release of hundreds of live butterflies each night during performances, they did secure a theater that could be significantly redesigned to fit the needs of the production, with the stipulation that they pay to restore it to its original condition after the musical closed. Thus, the interior of the Broadway Theater was gutted and

²⁰ Personal communication with Nina Machlin Dayton, 19 June 2000.

²¹ Mandelbaum, 1991: 24.

²² Bosworth, 1972: D5.

refurbished for the then-exorbitant fee of \$110,000.²³ The orchestra seats were torn out, and the house was converted into a theater-in-the-round, “so that [*Dude*’s] symbolic characters could descend on wires from symbolic heaven or roam all over the symbolic earth in search of truth, climbing a ‘mountain’ in the balcony aisles or wandering the deep ‘forest’ of the orchestra pit area.”²⁴ Watt, in his review of the show, describes the finished set:

The Broadway has been converted into an arena theater, the seats sloping down from mezzanine level to a matted round playing area, which is flanked by other seats and beyond which still more seats rise on the former stage. The band is spread out, brass and woodwinds on two levels at one side wall and strings far across against the other wall. There are also runways and lots of gear, including a block-and-tackle arrangement to transport players high into the air, even up through a hole in the ceiling itself. This cluttered environment is dripping with microphones, many hanging over the scene like shiny tears, others hand-held with long chords trickling down the aisles and still others planted in aisle railings. . . . [T]he entire auditorium becomes a playground for the cast, whose voices bark, shriek, and occasionally purr grandly from the many speakers.²⁵

Designing the set for the production proved highly challenging. In attempts at invoking a forest, Ragni had requested live plants and animals, all of which were deemed by the producers impossible to acquire, let alone maintain. Instead, paper flowers adorned the interior of the theater, and its floor was covered with two tons of topsoil and peat moss. The soil, however, proved difficult to work with during rehearsals and early previews. It dirtied the costumes and constricted the throats of the actors, many of whom were regularly required to roll around on the stage floor immediately prior to singing musical numbers. The topsoil also generated a thick layer of dust, which covered audience members and caused much sneezing and coughing, as well as an occluded view of the stage. In an attempt to tame the dust, stagehands tried to water the soil, which led, of course, to a muddy mess that made the actors

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Guernsey. 1973: 9.

²⁵ Watt. 1972.

even filthier and more uncomfortable. When the cast threatened to complain to Equity, the soil was replaced with felt, and finally with shredded army blankets.²⁶

Finally, in keeping with the environmental concept of the production, the seat locations were renamed. The best seats (seven dollars) became “foothills”; seats further from the stage were divided into sections labeled “trees,” “mountains,” and “valleys.”²⁷ Like the top soil, this tactic failed, since ultimately it worked more to confuse and annoy visitors to the box office than it did to help audience members feel that they were an important part of the production.²⁸

For all of its high-concept spectacle, *Dude* lacked any semblance of cohesive plot. As a result, early previews of the musical proved disastrous: many of the audience members who did not simply walk out of *Dude* in mid-production were apparently infuriated by the musical; reports of early previews note outraged spectators booing loudly and shouting “ripoff!” at the stage.²⁹ After the third calamitous preview, the production was halted. The director, Rocco Bufano, was fired, and Tom O’Horgan was called in for a three-week emergency stint during which, it was hoped, he could rescue the production. “The audience thirsts for a story in *Dude*. . . . For one tiny thread to connect your gorgeous songs,” O’Horgan was quoted as telling the discouraged cast.³⁰ He and the cast struggled to make sense of the production, while Ragni went back to work on his script.

Attempts to repair the musical proved futile. In his history of Broadway musical flops, Mandelbaum calls *Dude*, which finally opened on 9 October 1972, “perhaps the most

²⁶ Anonymous article in *The New Yorker*, dated 23 September 1972.

²⁷ Mandelbaum, 1991: 22.

²⁸ Anonymous article in *The New Yorker*, dated 23 September 1972. The article notes that according to a rather agitated box office employee, the foot hills corresponded with the mezzanine seats, while the valleys were seats in what was left of the orchestra area.

²⁹ Bosworth, 1972: D5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

incomprehensible show ever presented on a Broadway stage,”³¹ and this seems to be the sentiment of many people involved in or witness to the production. MacDermot, who composed the music, confides,

There was no book to *Dude*. . . . I never knew what it was about. It was supposed to be about a guy traveling around America. But there was no semblance of traveling. . . . [Just] a lot of sand on the ground. Gerry was a brilliant guy, but on *Dude* he lost his way totally.³²

Interestingly, the songs for *Dude*, which have been recorded, function together in much the way those on a rock concept album from the time would: framed at the beginning and end by two instrumental pieces (“The Highway Life: Going” and “The Highway Life: Coming”), the songs are all stylistically or thematically related. MacDermot’s instrumentation prominently features the fiddle, jew’s harp, steel guitar, banjo, and harmonica, and thus reflects a strong country-and-western influence throughout. A great number of the songs make reference to, or are sung by, the title character, and most feature coming-of-age and good-vs.-evil themes, as well as frequent reference to physical or spiritual travel.

While the songs from *Dude* may make for enjoyable listening, the lack of narrative connecting them served to frustrate rather than to impress critics, for whom loosely connected renditions of overamplified songs, while perhaps at home in a concert setting, were simply not enough to support a million-dollar theatrical production. Mandelbaum argues that the songs from *Dude* fail to function as proper theater music, since they “could have been sung in any order or by any ‘character’ with the same result.”³³ Indeed, while some critics voiced an appreciation of MacDermot’s songs, a majority were clearly confounded by the musical, as can be evidenced by the fact that almost all of them describe its incoherent plot somewhat

³¹ Mandelbaum, 1991: 22.

³² Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

³³ Mandelbaum, 1991: 23.

differently, from an Adam and Eve-like parable to an allegory about adolescence. Mandelbaum comes closest to describing the plot of *Dude* as it had been finalized by opening night:

Dude, subtitled *The Highway Life*, seemed to be about Dude, who represented Everyman, and his temptation by Zero, who represented Satan. God, here called #33, ultimately won out and gave Dude back his innocence.³⁴

Dude's lack of cohesive plot, coupled with what was perceived to be a tremendous waste of money spent to remodel a Broadway theater for no good reason, prompted most critics to trounce *Dude* with scathing notices. Watts echoed a number of critics in commenting disappointedly on the fact that MacDermot's music for the show was almost impossible to hear clearly, due to an overamplified sound system and Ragni's insistence on breaking up the orchestra and placing different sections of it in various parts of the theater. Gottfried called the musical "incoherent, childish, and boring, and . . . very noisy about it,"³⁵ while Kroll wrote,

This show . . . was a stupid mess, a fake, "multi-media" idiocy that suppurated gruesomely on the ramps, catwalks, causeways, columns, trapezes, trapdoors, and waterholes of the rebuilt Broadway Theater. It's the first time I ever felt sorry for a theater.³⁶

Apparently, audiences felt much the same way. *Dude* closed after 16 performances at a loss of \$800,000, making it one of the largest and most costly flops of its time.

Following on the heels of *Dude* was *Via Galactica*, a futuristic rock musical conceived and directed by Peter Hall, with lyrics by Christopher Gore and Judith Ross, and a score by Galt MacDermot. *Via Galactica* served as the inaugural production of the Uris Theatre; unfortunately for those associated with the production, the new 1000-seat Broadway

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Gottfried, 1972.

³⁶ Kroll, 1972.

house was given far more praise than the musical itself. Like *Dude*, *Via Galactica* received almost unanimous pans when it opened on 28 November 1972.

While *Via Galactica* was apparently slightly more coherent than *Dude*, it seemed to suffer from almost all of the same problems: a convoluted concept, a sound system that could not handle the amplified instrumentation, too much emphasis on elaborate staging and special effects, and not enough emphasis on a coherent story. Mandelbaum writes,

Via Galactica told its story of a band of nonconformists on an asteroid one thousand years in the future with such appurtenances as six large trampolines (to help the actors simulate the weightlessness of space), laser beams, and a flying spacecraft. The complexities of the production, not helped by the fact that *Via Galactica* was the first show booked into the new Uris Theatre, were so enormous that the show's textual problems took a back seat. (The show's original title, *Up!*, had to be abandoned when the producers realized that the marquee would contain an unwanted pun if it read "*Up!* Uris.")

Indeed, prior to the musical's premiere, Hall wrote in his diary that although the technical aspects of *Via Galactica* were rapidly improving, the overall production was becoming "thinner and less worthwhile" by the day, due in part to a script that "was never right and still isn't."³⁷

To make matters worse, the amplification problems that plagued *Dude* affected this production, as well. Guernsey writes,

The orchestra was playing so loudly at the performance I attended that it was hard to hear what was being sung. People in the balcony began shouting to the orchestra to tone down so they could hear the words.³⁸

While little could be done about the sound, attempts were made to clarify the plot of *Via Galactica*: synopses were printed and inserted into the programs during the preview period.³⁹

³⁷ Goodwin. 1984: 20-21.

³⁸ Guernsey. 1973: 10.

³⁹ Mandelbaum. 1991: 23.

The plot summaries could not save *Via Galactica* from the critics. In his review for *The New York Times*, Walter Kerr noted of the musical, “I would call the text childish but children are clearer.”⁴⁰ For the same newspaper, Barnes indicated that while the show was spectacular and the set “classy,”

the story is appallingly weak, and I cannot see why you should have to be bored with it. . . . Presumably everyone thought that with a truly sumptuous and adventurous staging, Mr. MacDermot’s music would do the trick. This was a miscalculation. . . . The well-publicized use of trampolines, to suggest weightlessness, suggests nothing more than people pointlessly bouncing up and down on trampolines. The mechanical space garbage cart (looking not at all futuristic incidentally) is all too clearly chained to the stage, and the attacking space ship from earth looks like a displaced lighting fitting. . . . The trampolines should have gone, but with the trampolines would also have gone the show’s one small claim to innovation.⁴¹

Via Galactica lost even more money than *Dude* (\$900,000), and closed after seven performances.⁴²

Ken Mandelbaum, who attended both productions, remembers that *Via Galactica* was a bit more appealing than *Dude*, due in large part to clearer and more engaging direction, a few diverting special effects, and despite the painfully loud volumes, “some attractive music” in the score. Nevertheless, he argues that although

Via Galactica was more interesting [than *Dude*]. . . . [But] it was [still] stupid and made no sense. . . . It had some elaborate effects—trampolines and things. But you can’t have a good show if the story is incoherent. . . . [T]hese shows did not interest the audience in any way. They had no narrative or emotional content whatsoever that could pull an audience in, and no musical can succeed without that.⁴³

Musicals like *Dude* and *Via Galactica*, then, failed as a result of their creators’ overzealous emphasis on dense concepts and spectacle, and their subsequent lack of

⁴⁰ Kerr, 1972a.

⁴¹ Barnes, 1972.

⁴² Guernsey, 1973: 7 and 343.

⁴³ Personal communication with Ken Mandelbaum, 3 August 1998.

coherence. In a review essay about *Dude*, Walter Kerr identified a number of recurring problems that had begun to burden most conceptual rock musicals by the early 1970s, and that would only continue to do so. Comparing conceptual rock musicals like *Dude* to so many “transplanted rock concerts,” Kerr wonders “why so much money should have been spent to transform another kind of house into yet one more mini-Madison Square Garden,” and argues,

Rock musicals, if they are to sustain themselves as genuine theater pieces rather than arena concerts, are going to have to meet the obligations earlier musicals have accepted always with difficulty, often with pain. Music *is* the ultimate making of any musical. But the music must have something to stand on, something other than its own beat to move it, something to demand one particular song rather than another at a particular moment, hopefully something in the way of wit to keep it company. Unless the score does rest on a structure, you might as well listen to it at home.⁴⁴

While conceptual rock musicals that were originally conceived for the stage often proved to be too abstract and convoluted for their own good, those adapted from concept albums proved just as problematic in similar respects: imposing additional structure on a property that was not meant to have any can be just as awkward as staging a musical with no structure at all.

Tom O’Horgan argues that although such adaptations are risky, the logic behind them is simple: basing a theatrical event upon a popular rock concept album, it was believed, would work, as *Hair* had, to draw new, young audiences to theaters; further, the fact that the music was already familiar and had proven commercially successful would only add to a musical’s potential for success.⁴⁵ Yet such logic has proven faulty. While the practice of adapting literary works and popular films for the musical stage is historically quite common, and in many cases has yielded commercially and critically successful productions, the practice of adapting

⁴⁴ Kerr, 1972.

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Tom O’Horgan, 4 May 2000.

concept albums to the musical stage has proven especially challenging, both in terms of execution and reception.

The stage adaptations of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and *Tommy* are all cases in point. These musicals were expected to succeed in part because the recordings they were based on had proven so successful; what their creators did not anticipate, however, was the fact that by imposing their own visions on a popular concept album, they were necessarily denying the interpretations of many fans of the album on the one hand, while often failing to attain the narrative clarity required of successful theatrical productions on the other. Although the stage adaptations of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and *Tommy* had slightly different receptions—with the first a middling commercial hit and a critical flop, the second a critical and commercial flop, and third a middling commercial hit and a huge critical success—none of these productions was as successful as had been anticipated, in large part because none could transcend its own status as a sound recording.

II. *Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell*

The first Broadway rock musical to be adapted from a popular concept album was the greatly hyped and highly controversial rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which opened at the Mark Hellinger Theater on 12 October 1971.⁴⁶ Dubbed by *Variety* at the time of its Broadway premiere “the biggest all-media parlay in show business history,”⁴⁷ the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice collaboration retold the story of the last week in the life of Jesus

⁴⁶ Guernsey, 1972: 315.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: 1.

Christ. One of the more thematically straightforward concept albums to emerge at the time, *Jesus Christ Superstar* tackled subject matter that was both compelling and familiar to much of the Western world. While theatrical stagings of *Jesus Christ Superstar* have often proven more challenging than successful, the concept album was wildly popular upon its 1970 release, and remains internationally known.

Lloyd Webber and Rice began their collaboration in 1965 with a musical based on the life of the Victorian doctor and philanthropist Thomas John Bernardo. When this project failed to garner the interest of producers, the two set to work on a rock cantata for children as a favor for a schoolteacher friend. This piece, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, became popular in England, and was soon being presented by children in schools around the country.⁴⁸ The success of *Joseph* earned Lloyd Webber and Rice a publishing contract and an agent, and thus the opportunity to develop further projects.⁴⁹

After attempts to write a musical based on the life of Richard the Lionhearted proved fruitless, Lloyd Webber and Rice returned to a suggestion, made years prior to Lloyd Webber by an Anglican minister, for a musical about the life of Jesus that “the modern youth could identify with.”⁵⁰ The two decided that instead of simply setting the Gospels to music, they would attempt to explore the humanity of Jesus and his followers. The musical would place emphasis on Jesus’ relationship with Judas and would feature a decidedly modern score.

Although interested in developing their idea for the stage, they quickly gave up hopes of finding a producer who would finance such a project. According to Lloyd Webber,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

nobody would put it on stage. I mean, every single producer in London said, "You have to be joking. This is the worst idea in history."⁵¹

Their plans to develop a staged musical quashed, Rice and Lloyd Webber began instead to court the music industry in hopes of developing *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a concept album. Armed with a recording of "Superstar," the only song yet written for the project, they were rejected by a variety of recording executives before finding interest among employees at MCA-Decca.

At the time, MCA-Decca was a catalogue company specializing in the packaging and repackaging of former releases. It represented only one successful rock group: the Who. The commercial success of the Who's recent release of their own rock opera, *Tommy*, had made executives eager to develop similar projects in hopes of strengthening the company's standing in the rock market; members of the company's English and Australian offices had been scouting for rock musicians who might succeed in the United States. In November 1969, while in England, one of MCA-Decca's vice presidents took interest in "Superstar" and brought a copy back to New York, where executives agreed to back the as-yet unwritten *Jesus Christ Superstar* contingent upon the advance release of "Superstar" as a single. A successful single, it was hoped, would generate interest in the concept album and stimulate sales once it was complete.⁵²

"Superstar," recorded by Murray Head and the Trinidad Singers, was released internationally in early December 1969.⁵³ Despite strong sales in South America and the predominantly Catholic countries of Western Europe, the single was banned by the BBC and thus sold poorly in the United Kingdom. The song was largely ignored in the States, as well.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Denisoff and Romanowski. 1991: 204.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

It crept onto the *Billboard* Hot-100 charts at 99 in late January 1970 and remained on the charts for four weeks, peaking only at number 74.⁵⁴ Although disappointed with the outcome, MCA-Decca executives deemed these numbers worth a further risk and agreed to record the entire album.

Rumors and press reports about the development of *Jesus Christ Superstar* indicated that Marianne Faithfull, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono were being considered as potential lead singers for the concept album; despite Rice and Lloyd Webber's reported interest in casting Lennon as Jesus, MCA-Decca insisted that his "own superstar status would detract from the part itself,"⁵⁵ and ultimately, the solo parts were cast to rock musicians and actors with lower profiles. Ian Gillan, who had recently replaced Rod Evans as the lead singer for the British hard rock group Deep Purple, was cast as Jesus; Murray Head was retained as Judas; and Yvonne Elliman, a singer discovered by Lloyd Webber during a visit to a local nightclub, was cast as Mary Magdalene.⁵⁶

While the single from *Jesus Christ Superstar* failed to garner much critical or commercial attention in the United States, the finished album was a great success. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was previewed for the American press on 27 October 1970 at St. Peter's Lutheran Church on Lexington Avenue in New York City, following an aggressive promotional campaign; two weeks earlier, personnel from three FM radio stations in New York had been invited to a special preview of the record in hopes that cuts from the album would receive ample airplay.⁵⁷ The efforts on the part of MCA-Decca proved worthwhile. *Jesus Christ*

⁵⁴ Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 205.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Nassour and Broderick, 1973: 48.

⁵⁷ In Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 207, and Nassour and Broderick, 1973: 67, the premiere of the record for the American press is misidentified as 27 October 1971; the premiere date was actually in October 1970, as evidenced by the strong presence of the album on the *Billboard* album charts in November of that year.

Superstar was almost unanimously praised by critics, and sales of the album soared. The album quickly went gold, spent 65 weeks on the *Billboard* album charts, including three weeks at number one,⁵⁸ and spawned two hit singles in “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” and the re-released “Superstar.”⁵⁹

The success of the concept album piqued the interest of the young rock impresario Robert Stigwood. Convinced of the potential power behind the merger of rock music and such visual media as film and theater, Stigwood, an innovator in the technique of cross-promotion, “understood better than anyone else that you could take a musical vehicle and build on it by promoting the music so that it got better known than the play or movie.”⁶⁰ The future producer of the blockbuster musical films *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, Stigwood, who had initially turned down the *Superstar* property, began to eye it with new interest. Noting that MCA owned the recorded version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* but had failed to secure the performing rights,⁶¹ Stigwood waited until Rice and Lloyd Webber’s contracts with the record company were up for renegotiation and courted the two with a promise to finance a staged production of their rock opera. Rice and Lloyd Webber accepted his offer, and Stigwood invested millions into the property in preparation for its Broadway premiere. The director Frank Corsaro was chosen to adapt the rock opera for the stage. Shortly after casting had begun, Corsaro was injured in an automobile accident, and was quickly replaced by Tom

⁵⁸ Whitburn, 1995: 367.

⁵⁹ After the release of the concept album, “Superstar” re-entered the charts on 8 May 1971 and remained for eight weeks, peaking at number 14. “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” was represented on the *Billboard* top-40 charts by two artists simultaneously: The original version by Yvonne Elliman charted for six weeks beginning on 22 May 1971, and peaked at 28. Two weeks prior, on 8 May 1971, Helen Reddy’s version of the song entered the charts for a nine-week stretch; this version peaked at 9. (Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 203-07.)

⁶⁰ *Forbes*, 10 July 1978, p. 42.

⁶¹ Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 209.

O'Horgan. Opening night for the musical was tentatively set for 27 October 1971, exactly one year from the date that the concept album had been released in the United States.⁶²

When interviewed about the potential success of the Broadway production, Stigwood forecast an unusually long run of five years.⁶³ Although such enthusiastic assertions are perhaps expected of a producer who discusses his own property, there was ample reason to believe that the Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* would surpass *Hair* as the most commercially successful rock musical to be staged in New York City. The concept album had become so popular that within half a year of its initial release, unofficial concert versions were cropping up all over the United States in churches, arenas, and school auditoriums.⁶⁴ In hopes of maintaining control over his property, Stigwood sued many of these companies, and launched two of his own traveling concert versions of the opera. These sold out across the country, and grossed approximately \$3,500,000 by October, 1971.⁶⁵

The success of the album and concert versions worked to generate a great deal of advance publicity for the Broadway adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Despite little in the way of advertising, the staged version of the rock opera enjoyed an unprecedented advance sale of tickets. By the time of its premiere, the show, which cost a reported \$700,000 to stage, had already sold \$1,200,000 worth of tickets, making *Jesus Christ Superstar* a commercial hit before it had officially opened.⁶⁶ Further, despite the rock opera's obvious basis in ancient history, its theme, like that of *Hair*, was proving to be quite timely, since Christian revivalism had begun to weave its way into popular culture by the turn of the decade.

⁶² Nassour and Broderick, 1973: 99-100.

⁶³ Anonymous article in *Variety*, 13 October 1971: 48.

⁶⁴ Nassour and Broderick, 1973: 95.

⁶⁵ Anonymous article in *Variety*, 1971: 48.

⁶⁶ Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 210.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many young Americans retreated from the increasingly volatile realm of left-wing politics toward a cultivation of the self in communes, cults, or various “new age” explorations.⁶⁷ An increased interest in the therapeutic powers of spirituality led to a surge of evangelical Christian groups throughout North America. Despite widely diverse approaches and agendas, these groups became known collectively as the “Jesus movement” or “Jesus revolution,” and their adherents as “Jesus freaks.”⁶⁸ While not, perhaps, as enduring or as resonant as the hippie movement that preceded it, the Jesus movement was both reflected in and influenced by youth culture and popular music in the early 1970s. Morrow writes,

One key medium young enthusiasts for Jesus use to spread the message—whether they may be along the reactionary to radical religious line—is that central cultural and artistic voice of the now generation—rock music. In the past year Jesus has moved to a position of prominence on the Top 40. . . . Among the Jesus movement converts are such important popular music figures as Johnny Cash, Eric Clapton, Paul Stookey (of Peter, Paul, and Mary), Jeremy Spencer (of Fleetwood Mac), Kris Kristofferson, and Rita Coolidge. . . . Certainly one major reason for this huge Jesus revival is His legitimization to the youth culture through appearances in songs by rock artists.⁶⁹

The revived interest in Christianity that resonated in popular culture was also reflected to some extent on the theatrical stage. Half a year before the Broadway premiere of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell* (music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, book by John-Michael Tebelak) opened Off Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theater on 17 May 1971. This musical, which featured a cast of ten actors, 15 rock-influenced musical numbers, and rock instrumentation (keyboards, guitar, bass guitar, percussion), had originated at Café La MaMa in March of the same year.

⁶⁷ Isserman and Kazin, 1989: repr. in Griffith, 1992: 491.

⁶⁸ Hinnells, 1995: 250.

⁶⁹ Morrow, 1973: 155-56.

While conceptual in nature, *Godspell* ultimately functions as a conventional revue, made contemporary due to a mellow, largely acoustic score that is reflective of Schwartz's admiration for the then up-and-coming singer-songwriters Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, James Taylor, Paul Simon, and Cat Stevens.⁷⁰ Unlike previous rock musicals to tackle religious themes—for example, *Hair*, *Salvation*, and *Stomp*—*Godspell* emphasized an innocent and almost entirely positive approach to Christianity, which has surely added to its popularity and endurance.

In keeping with the Christian revivalism of the time, *Godspell* presents a decidedly contemporary Jesus. In the original production, Jesus appeared as part-hippie and part-ragged clown, with red nose, suspenders, a heart painted on his face, and a Superman tee-shirt;⁷¹ emphasis is placed, in *Godspell*, on an approachable and loving savior, who is less a god than he is a cherished friend. Summoned early in act one of *Godspell* by a similarly ragtag St. John the Baptist, who functions here as Jesus' good friend and teaching assistant, Jesus appears to an ensemble of lost souls in need of spiritual direction.

Godspell makes no attempt to recount the life of Jesus, although the crucifixion serves as the climax of the piece. Rather, the revue is based on parables from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, enacted by the ensemble in a series of topical, humorous, and energetic skits, each of which is punctuated by a song. The conclusion of each song effectively ends each sketch and allows for introduction of the next one. Despite the crucifixion scene at the end of *Godspell*, the musical concludes on a resoundingly positive note. Although saddened by the

⁷⁰ Personal communication with Stephen Schwartz, 26 January 1999.

⁷¹ Barnes, 1971. The film, like the original Off Broadway production, was set in an urban playground and featured Jesus in clown garb; the April 2000 revival of the musical, performed in Manhattan by the Third Eye Repertory Company, featured a cast in contemporary dress, with Jesus and Saint John the Baptist in blue jeans, white tee-shirts, and tennis shoes.

loss of their friend and teacher, the ensemble is rejuvenated; joyously repeating the sung line “Long live God,” and reprising the number “Day by Day,” the they have clearly resolved to live by Jesus’s teachings.

At the time of its premiere at the Cherry Lane Theater, *Godspell* was compared unfavorably with the concept album version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which Kerr argued was “a much more ambitious, musically complex . . . superior piece of work.”⁷² Nevertheless, of the two staged works, and in fact of all staged rock-influenced musicals to open at the time, *Godspell* became far and away the most successful. Although given tepid reviews in *The New York Times* by both Kerr and Clive Barnes, who found it a bit too cloying for their tastes, *Godspell* proved hugely popular with audiences. It ran at the Cherry Lane for 2124 performances before being moved to Broadway’s Broadhurst Theater for another 567,⁷³ and spawned a hit single in the song “Day by Day,” which peaked at number 13 on the Billboard top 40 in the spring of 1972.⁷⁴ Due in large part to its simple setting and structure, its many topical references (which can be easily updated), and its unflinching and uncomplicated embrace of Christianity, the revue is still regularly revived by both amateur and professional theater companies all over the world.⁷⁵

While *Godspell* quietly became popular enough with audiences to enjoy an extraordinarily lengthy run, the Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was unable

⁷² Kerr, 1971.

⁷³ Suskin, 1992: 537.

⁷⁴ Whitburn, 1996: 256.

⁷⁵ *Godspell* is a favorite among church groups, schools, and local theater groups: James Brundage, a colleague who was a teenager in Ashtabula, Ohio through the 1970s, recalls, “I was impressed that young folks in my hometown were all excited about doing a production of *Godspell*. The grass-roots enthusiasm about an emphatically Christian rock musical indicated that its theological stance must have been mainstream enough to be acceptable to small-town Midwesterners, and that they had no problem with Biblical characters singing like pop stars—in fact, they loved it.”[personal communication, 11 July 2000.]

to do the same. For all of its hype, its unprecedented advance in ticket sales, and its automatic hit status, *Jesus Christ Superstar* never became the long-running commercial success that Stigwood anticipated. While the responses of informants who remember seeing the show are hotly mixed, with many recalling that they greatly enjoyed the show, and just as many recalling that they hated it passionately,⁷⁶ the mixed-to-poor reviews clearly hurt the production. Although it enjoyed a strong run for eight months as a result of its huge advance, tickets sales declined sharply after it was reviewed,⁷⁷ and the show closed after a run of under 21 months (711 performances, a majority of which offered a large number of discounted tickets).⁷⁸

A predominant problem encountered in adapting *Jesus Christ Superstar* for the stage lies in the fact that since the rock opera was composed as a sound recording, Rice and Lloyd Webber were not required to rely upon the narrative devices required of musical theater. Rice recalls,

We were forced to do it on record . . . [so] we had to . . . grab the audience with sound alone. We had to ditch the book, that was the best thing. I think if we'd had the show staged in the theater straight away . . . we'd have put in a long boring book and there would have been scenes—you know, Jesus saying, "Hello, Judas, good to see you, sit down here." It would have been awful, and the music would not have been as dynamic and contemporary. . . . [But] we never gave a thought to things like motivation, characterization, or even plausibility of staging it.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Such extreme responses to this staging correspond with those recorded in a description of the preview period and opening night performance in Nassour and Broderick 1973, pp. 134-79.

⁷⁷ Suskin. 1992: 594

⁷⁸ Nassour and Broderick, 1973: 212. Many Broadway and Off Broadway shows that do not sell out release the unsold tickets to the Theatre Development Fund, which makes them available to the public at TKTS booths located in the Times Square area and the financial district of Manhattan. These booths sell day-of-performance theater tickets at significantly reduced prices.

⁷⁹ *Great Performances*, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Aired 8:00 PM on PBS, 5 April 2000.

Their need for a traditional musical theater book negated, Rice and Lloyd Webber developed their rock opera more conceptually than they might have had they created the work for the stage.

More interested in using their rock opera to ask questions than to provide answers, Rice and Lloyd Webber took liberties with their subject matter, and thus developed characters whose thoughts, opinions, motivations, and actions were fictionalized. Hence, in the concept album, Judas becomes a deeply conflicted and sympathetic man whose betrayal of Jesus was compelled by the fear that He and the apostles were going too far. Mary Magdalene, who is not mentioned in the New Testament by name until the day of resurrection, is combined, in the rock opera, with the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus's feet to the chagrin of Simon in Luke 7:36-50. Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus becomes interpretable as a sexual one. Herod, barely mentioned in the Bible, is given a private meeting with Jesus. Pontius Pilate's wife Procula, who in Matthew 28:19 has a prophetic dream and warns her husband to treat Jesus kindly, is not mentioned in the rock opera; the dream, as well as the solo song describing it, are given to Pilate.

Like the creators of *Godspell*, Rice and Lloyd Webber took a decidedly modern approach in developing the character of Jesus, whose lyrics in the rock opera suggest not divinity but a slew of human characteristics, including fear, doubt, irritability, and a possible libido. Rice notes,

We had been well-coached in the mechanics of Christianity and its legends and beliefs. That was drummed into us at school. They treated the legends, so we decided to treat the bloke as a man. . . . I find Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels as a God as a very unrealistic figure. . . . The same is true . . . for Judas, who

is portrayed just as a sort of cardboard cut-out figure of evil. . . . We tried to make them both human beings.⁸⁰

Lloyd Webber avers:

The premise of the whole thing really comes from that Bob Dylan line, "Did Judas Iscariot have God on his side?" We approached it from a sort of humanist view. Rather than actually telling the story of the last six days of the life of Jesus Christ, it was actually trying to examine *why* it was that Judas betrayed somebody he clearly loved. . . . What we were trying to do was to show how [Jesus] was . . . reacting to circumstances that may have arguably spun out of his own control.⁸¹

The result of such liberties is a rock opera that places far more emphasis on the possible thoughts and motivations of its characters than it does on their placement in time and space.

While such an approach may make for compelling listening, it has proven problematic in stage adaptations, since a cycle of high-energy songs that describe little more than characters' states of mind can ultimately make for an uninteresting evening at the theater.

O'Horgan notes,

Jesus Christ Superstar [had] a theatrical concept. It just was not very theatrically constructed. So you had to create things to happen. When I first attacked the piece with Andrew [Lloyd Webber], he said he would write some other numbers that would help make it flow a little better, but he didn't, so we just had to create [visual] things that would work with the music and make it understandable.⁸²

Because this piece has little in the way of dramatic progress, directors are somewhat limited in ways that they can stage it: one can either create a spectacular production, in hopes that excessive visual stimulus will compensate for the lack of action and narrative flow, as in the case of the O'Horgan production. On the other hand, as in the case of the 2000 Broadway revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, one can scale down the spectacle and place emphasis on

⁸⁰ Nassour and Broderick. 1973: 37-38.

⁸¹ *Great Performances*, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Aired 8:00 PM on PBS. 5 April 2000.

⁸² Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan. 4 May 2000.

the actors; this approach is problematic since characters are given little to do, aside from standing on stage and exuding intensity. Unfortunately, both approaches can result in unengaging productions.

The original Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was criticized in large part because of O'Horgan's spectacular approach, which theater historian Ken Mandelbaum notes was perceived by many critics as "hokey and overproduced and claptrappy."⁸³ Such an approach, O'Horgan maintains, was necessary, due to the rock opera's narrative and dramaturgical shortcomings. Convinced that there was "nothing in Rice and [Lloyd] Webber's highly romantic score that would support an even slightly realistic presentation," and hoping that the success of the album would "bring people into the theater who would never, under any circumstances, consider entering one," he decided to take a "mystic, metaphysical approach," and thus to compensate for the rock opera's lack of activity and narrative flow with a grandiose concept comprised of spectacular scenery, special effects, and costumes.⁸⁴ He recalls,

I had gone to the natural history museum and there was a whole thing about insects when I was in the process of putting [*Jesus Christ Superstar*] together. So I thought maybe I would do this piece as if a further civilization of evolved insects looked back at this primitive society's myth and decided to make a version of it. Now, I don't think anybody ever got that. [But] . . . if you look at the costumes, for instance, Judas is [resurrected as] a butterfly, and Christ comes up out of the ground in a chrysalis and it breaks open and becomes a great moth.⁸⁵

Simmer describes some of the visual aspects of the production:

As the audience entered, the proscenium was filled with a huge, solid wall. The show began as the wall slowly fell backwards (hinged at the bottom) and, as it lowered, the cast appeared from behind the wall, climbing over the top. When

⁸³ Personal communication with Ken Mandelbaum, 3 August 1998.

⁸⁴ Nassour and Broderick, 1973: 209.

⁸⁵ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 4 May 2000.

the wall had lowered far enough, the cast members rushed down the slope, straight toward the spectators. The wall touched ground just as the cast reached the front of the stage, and served as the stage floor for the rest of the performance. The beginning set the tone for the entire production. Entrances were particularly spectacular. Characters flew down from the ceiling or rose out of the floor. Caiphas [*sic*] and his priests floated down to the stage on a large bridge made of bleached bones. Jesus himself first appeared rising out of a huge chalice wearing a vast Lurex robe. The crowds on Palm Sunday, instead of carrying palms, sported translucent, protozoa-like symbols. And there were many different kinds of special effects, including laser beams and smoke and wind machines.⁸⁶

Inadvertently serving as the forerunner for many Broadway musicals to come, O'Horgan's production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was thus a busy, colorful extravaganza that relied heavily on scenery, costumes, and innovative special effects.

O'Horgan's vision and his grandiose staging did not impress a majority of the critics, who found the production to be too gaudy, or too dramaturgically slim, or both, for their tastes. Kerr argued that the worst aspect of the Broadway adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* lay in "the unbelievable vulgarity of Mr O'Horgan's imagination,"⁸⁷ and Scholem noted that it was

an elaborate, flamboyant, exotically mounted show, but not an engrossing one. The staging, scenery, special effects, and music often swallow up the little dramatic conflict *Jesus Christ Superstar* is able to generate. There are spectacular songs and scenes that are moving, but as a totality this offering failed to sweep up an audience or at times even to involve it.⁸⁸

While the stage adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* might have failed to engage some spectators, it did succeed in angering a number of religious groups, many of whom proved less offended by the original album than they were by the perceived vulgarity of the staging and visual depictions of many of the characters.

⁸⁶ Simmer, 1977: 64.

⁸⁷ Kerr, 1971a.

⁸⁸ Scholem, 1971.

Although a handful of clergy members had initially condemned the hit single “Superstar” when it debuted in the United States in 1969, the finished concept album was never the subject of organized protest, much to the surprise of Decca’s public relations director.⁸⁹ In fact, the album was embraced by many Christian leaders, who reasoned that any recording that helped to inform young people about Jesus should be accepted and encouraged. In a May 1971 article for the religion section of *The Newark Evening News*, Pearson wrote of *Jesus Christ Superstar*,

[The album] is being welcomed with open arms by clergy who in the past had had difficulty reaching youth. The story of Christ, they contend, is reaching hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions of young people . . . [the] human aspect of Christ . . . is being cited as the most significant part of the album. “Because ‘Superstar’ approaches Jesus on the level of His humanity yet does not foreclose the possibility of his [*sic*] deity, it has met with an enthusiastic reception by many young people both inside and outside the church,” wrote Richard E. Koenig, pastor at Amherst, Smith, and the University of Massachusetts. Another theologian warned that the success of “Superstar” is not going to mean that young people will be flocking to churches in droves, filled with religious fervor. He said that the album will not bring the young to the church, but in some cases, might bring the church or at least the idea of Christ to the young.⁹⁰

Although the staged version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was lyrically identical to the concept album, its reception was markedly different in that it was the subject of organized protest. From the time of its premiere, picketers representing a number of different religious groups gathered outside of the Hellinger Theater with signs protesting the depictions of various characters. The American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation league of B’nai B’rith expressed concern over what they perceived to be a stereotypical depiction of the

⁸⁹ Nassour and Broderick, 1972: 34-35, 177.

⁹⁰ Pearson, 1971.

Jewish high priests as Christ killers,⁹¹ while Catholic and Baptist groups protested the sympathetic depiction of Judas and what they perceived to be a denial of Jesus' divinity.

O'Horgan argues that such protests were simply a result of the fact that a staged musical, unlike a recording, exists in a specific location, and that his production was therefore simply more easily targeted than a sound recording:

what happened with *Jesus Christ Superstar* was that a lot of people who wouldn't even look at it or come to see it were offended that it existed, [so] there was *always* somebody picketing in front of the theater . . . [whereas] people who bought records wanted to buy the records. It wasn't being foisted off on anybody.⁹²

While O'Horgan's assertions may be correct, evidence indicates the more likely possibility that the album's lack of visual stimulus allowed aspects of the story to remain open to interpretation, while the visual aspects employed in the stage version offended the sensibilities of more people.

Huffman argues that the success of the concept album was largely due to its ambiguousness:

Works like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which "ask the right questions" but allow each individual to provide his own answers, will be appropriated by nearly all—the atheist, the agnostic, and the believer. Only the indifferent will remain unimpressed; only the devout and the aesthetically critical may be offended. Since *Superstar* is basically neutral, it can profit from nearly everyone's inertia.⁹³

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 4 May 2000.

⁹³ Huffman, 1971: 266.

The O'Horgan adaptation of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, on the other hand, combined evocative music with a stage production that was, for many, too heavy handed. Bender writes,

Superstar's vulgarity is less in the realm of religious than of theatrical taste. Serious Lloyd Webber and Rice fans, in fact, may well be advised to open a new chapter in the age of McLuhan by turning down a chance at the show "because I loved the record." On LP, *Jesus Christ Superstar* is abstract intimate, capable of subtly engaging the mind and the imagination. Director O'Horgan's frenetic Broadway incarnation is rarely any of those things.⁹⁴

Indeed, Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest and the author of *Human Like Me, Jesus*, argues that he took exception not to the score of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but to the ways that the characters appeared and behaved in O'Horgan's stage adaptation:

The Jews seem to be guilty, once again, of causing Jesus' death. Jewish priests are seen in ominous, gargoyle-like costumes straight out of medieval caricatures. . . . Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber had something interesting. . . . Tom O'Horgan has changed all that inexplicably. A clean, unambiguous concept is now a muddled, religiously controversial show. The sharp intrusion of sex—again and again and again—into the show can only focus attention on Jesus' own sexuality. Is he Gay? Bisexual? Straight? Asexual? . . . The sexuality of Jesus will undoubtedly comprise the Exhibit A controversy about the show. He and Mary Magdalene fondle and kiss each other; I felt an implicit acceptance of the fact that they have enjoyed intercourse. The exposure of this side of Jesus' humanity drew cheers from the audience, perhaps in reaction against the celibate Jesus . . . who has been used as a major argument against sex outside of (and before) wedlock as well as against homosexuality. Jesus as a human being . . . may be far overdue in our puritanical, sexually hypocritical society. Yet I feel that his sexuality was not handled with sensitivity or with taste in this gaudily inhuman parody.⁹⁵

Although they were present for many of the rehearsals for the Broadway production, the negative reviews of and religious controversy surrounding the production compelled Rice and Lloyd Webber to state shortly after the production opened that they were unhappy with the finished product, having envisioned a simpler and more intimate production.⁹⁶ Kerr, too,

⁹⁴ Bender, et. al., 1971.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Nassour and Broderick, 1972: 209. Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 23 February 1999.

argued in his review of the rock opera that “all that had to be done with it was [to] put it on a stage baldly . . . and, after establishing a few simple traffic directions, let it sing for itself.”⁹⁷ Yet less spectacular productions of this musical have proven as disappointing as O’Horgan’s staging.

The recent Broadway revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which opened in April 2000 at the Ford Center for the Performing Arts, is a case in point. Simpler and more straightforward than the original, the revival places emphasis on the actors: with the exception of a wide variety of contemporary costumes, some graffiti-scrawled pillars, and a huge video screen that drops from the wings to record a rather grotesque close-up of Jesus’s bloody face as he is crucified in the final scene, the production is nowhere near as busy as the first. Nevertheless, its utter lack of spectacle yields a disappointing and problematic production. Field notes I recorded after attending a preview of the revival indicate problems with this scaled-down production:

The first number, “Heaven on Their Minds,” is sung by Judas, alone onstage. As he sings, he bends at the waist a lot to indicate passion and emotion. He also occasionally raises his fist or runs a few steps in one direction or another when he’s *really* worked up. This number is the entire production in a nutshell: no one has anything to do a great deal of the time. What you get from *listening* to this rock opera is a clear idea of its intended message: Jesus, Mary, Pilate, and especially Judas were conflicted and scared and ultimately very human; they had doubts and the potential for making mistakes, which in this case just happened to change the world. But this music interprets how these figures *felt*, so what you get onstage is a bunch of songs delivered center stage as characters think their way through the last days of Jesus’ life. There are attempts, here, to compensate for the lack of action through the use of different levels: there is a small bridge that rises and falls above the stage, which is sort of effective the first, but not the 90th, time. The pillars have extensions built into them so that the cast can scale them, which they do every time a large group of people shows up on stage for a scene. There is much pantomiming and gesticulating along with the songs while actors stand rooted to the ground.

⁹⁷ Kerr, 1971a.

During the song “This Jesus Must Die,” the priests stand in a cluster on the bridge, showing concern over the Jesus problem by rubbing their chins and walking around in little circles. The result is the reverse of what one would expect: the show is more one-dimensional than the record.⁹⁸

Like its predecessor, the revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar* has received mixed-to-poor notices; tellingly, many of these reviews focus on just how difficult this piece is to stage. Lyons, for example, panned the revival, noting that it is “the same old thing—a glitzy album . . . dressed up as a musical”;⁹⁹ Brantley, who also panned the show, notes sympathetically that

Jesus Christ Superstar . . . has never been easy to translate into visual terms. . . . [It] works better as a chain of virtuosic songs than as a sustained piece of theater. It doesn’t fully follow through on most of its themes, and the disjunctiveness is much more evident in performance.¹⁰⁰

Like the critics, audience members questioned at random during the intermission and after the curtain call at the preview performance I attended were largely unimpressed by the production, and poor ticket sales reflected the tepid response: the revival closed on 3 September 2000.

Contributing to the problematic stagings of *Jesus Christ Superstar* are inevitable comparisons with the original recording, of which the pristine quality and vocal performances are both impossible to replicate in a live theater. Such problems plagued both the original production and the recent revival. O’Horgan notes that for all of its special effects, the greatest challenge in staging the original production lay in the realm of sound design, which posed problems that were never fully resolved. The rock opera’s instrumentation emphasizes electric instruments, especially bass and guitar, which tend to overpower singing voices; while such problems are perhaps easily rectified in a recording studio, they proved problematic in the

⁹⁸ Excerpt from original field notes, recorded 12 April 2000.

⁹⁹ Lyons, 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Brantley, 2000.

Hellinger, a pre-war Broadway theater that was not designed for amplified sound. O'Horgan remembers some of the attempts he and his staff made to balance the sound in the theater:

I decided to enclose the orchestra, and the conductor had a plastic bowl over him, because you could never balance [the sound. . . . The idea] was to enclose [the orchestra] and make it into a recording studio. Everybody hated it, so they ripped it open before we opened. . . . I said to Stigwood, "Stiggy, you spent your life in the recording business, you *must* have the right sound person to do this." So he got two of his guys, and he put in a system that was extraordinary. They spent days trying to solve the acoustical problem, but what they were really doing was just taking out notes that were overamplified, and as a consequence, they ended up with a bland, nothing sound. So that went on for two weeks or three weeks of previews. And eventually we all threw up our hands and we got *another* sound guy . . . to put in another system. Which worked better but was still not right.¹⁰¹

Adding to the problems with sound quality was the issue of how to properly amplify the singers so that they might be heard over the electric accompaniment. O'Horgan remembers,

Back when I was doing *Superstar* and *Hair* and those things, wireless mikes were almost unknown. We might have used one or two, and everybody else had these hand mikes with long chords. As a consequence, my choreography had to be done very carefully, otherwise you would weave a basket, which was often the case.¹⁰²

While the use of hand-held microphones worked well in *Hair*, with its contemporary setting and emphasis on the youth culture, their presence in the biblical setting of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was not quite as convincing. O'Horgan thus decided to disguise all of the microphones. Such a move was mocked by critics, who often reflected frustration at the visual and aural results. Kane writes, for example,

the orchestra is entirely covered over by an iron grid, the actors carry hand mikes whenever they sing, and the resultant sound issues painfully from two vast speakers on either side of the stage. . . . Someone, . . . presumably Tom O'Horgan, decided that hand mikes would be incongruous in AD 33, so they are disguised as hand-mirrors, sceptres, fans. . . . Judas has his disguised as a length of rope, and for the first half of the show I looked forward to the

¹⁰¹ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 4 May 2000.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

moment in the second half when . . . Judas would hang himself with his own mike cord. It was not to be. . . . Barry Dennen . . . obviously felt the need of both hands in the role of Pontius Pilate; so his mike is grafted on to an ornamental breastplate and gilded in an attempt to camouflage it as a decoration. The ungainly result resembles a misplaced phallus with the unfortunate habit of wagging erratically whenever Mr. Dennen gets excited, so that only one in every three words is delivered squarely into the mike. With so many characters carrying their own amplification while nimbly dodging and manipulating the cables that snake off into the wings, the dramatic mystery of Christ's last seven days is quite submerged in the more immediate suspense of who is going to come to grief first.¹⁰³

Although sound design has improved markedly over the past 30 years, it remains a problematic aspect of many theatrical productions. Problems arise especially in rock musicals, whose designers are often faced with the task of creating systems that will allow for both the loud volume expected of rock performance and the clarity of voice necessary in the musical theater.

Personal field notes recorded after attending a performance of the April 2000 revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar* make such problems clear:

The balance in the theater kept alternating between the orchestra and the singers. In other words, when there was music playing but no singers (as in the interludes, incidental music, etc.), the amplification in the pit was suddenly jacked up so that the sound became very loud through the house. When someone started to sing, the sound in the pit was suddenly and drastically turned down and muted. The overall effect was as if some guy was sitting in some booth somewhere with his hand on a gigantic volume dial, aimlessly twisting it to and fro through the entire musical.¹⁰⁴

Despite efforts to mute the accompaniment during the show, a number of audience members I questioned complained that the volume was still uncomfortably loud, and that they could not understand many of the words. The poor sound quality, combined with the rock opera's lack of adherence to historic detail, caused those theatergoers who were unfamiliar with the score to be lost as to what was happening onstage, despite the familiar subject matter. The sound

¹⁰³ Kane, 1972.

¹⁰⁴ Excerpt from original field notes, recorded 12 April 2000.

design had obviously not been altered by opening night; in his review, Brantley employed the same simile when describing the show's "aggressive but uncertain amplification of the orchestra, which sometimes suggests someone is fiddling idly with a volume knob."¹⁰⁵

While problems with amplification apply to staged rock musicals in general, those based on popular sound recordings face an additional problem: they are almost always compared unfavorably with the original. As Kane wisely noted in his review of the O'Horgan production,

Jesus Christ Superstar has acquainted its audience with every number it has, making it one of the few Broadway shows where the audience comes into the theater humming the tunes. This means . . . that the show has to sound better than the record, but not radically different for fear of disappointing the audience.¹⁰⁶

As O'Horgan notes above, a theater sound system that could emulate a pristine, well-balanced studio recording was impossible at the time; a further problem with any staged production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* lies in the fact that, with few exceptions, the actors are bound to differ from those who sang on the album.¹⁰⁷ While a more thorough examination of rock and musical theater performance will be the subject of chapter 5, the difference must be examined briefly here, as it applies to this rock opera.

Whereas the sound recording of *Jesus Christ Superstar* features singers whose wide-ranging voices often reflect the raw, gritty vocal quality expected of hard rock and heavy metal, staged productions rarely feature singers who are willing force their voices in the same ways over a long period of time. The album version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was recorded

¹⁰⁵ Brantley, 2000.

¹⁰⁶ Kane, 1972.

¹⁰⁷ The chief exception was Yvonne Elliman, who originated the role of Mary Magdalene on the sound recording, on the stage, and in Norman Jewison's 1973 film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

in a studio in 60 sessions over a six-month period,¹⁰⁸ thus presumably allowing singers ample rest-time between takes. Actors featured in live productions, however, do not enjoy similar luxuries, and those in more demanding roles are often prone to injury. For example, Jeff Fenholt, who created the role of Jesus on Broadway and years later served briefly as the lead singer of the heavy metal group Black Sabbath, proved unable to sustain the vocal power featured on the album version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*; after straining his voice, he was temporarily hospitalized with a broken blood vessel soon after rehearsals for the musical began.¹⁰⁹

In order to protect themselves, actors in *Jesus Christ Superstar* often take a more careful, subdued approach to the performance of songs. While muted approaches can help to preserve voices, they can also be disappointing to those who are familiar with the raw vocal power displayed on the album. Barnes notes of the original production that although the company was strong, the performances nevertheless “played second fiddle to the memories of the record album.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, at the revival, many theatergoers who said that they were very familiar with the album felt that the voices featured in the staged version paled in comparison. Judy Ng, an acquaintance who identifies *Jesus Christ Superstar* as one of her favorite records, says that she avoided the stage production since she was greatly displeased by the film:

I could barely watch the screen version.¹¹¹ . . . [It had] a very different momentum in the way the pieces carried the story to the end. Perhaps because the singers had been replaced on the screen version, and the song versions

¹⁰⁸ Nassour and Broderick, 1972: 48, 62.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 118.

¹¹⁰ Barnes, 1971.

¹¹¹ Written descriptions of the film indicate that it, like the stage version, was a commercial disappointment. Accounts by Nassour and Broderick and by Denisoff and Romanowski gloss over public reception, but the latter note that the film was critically panned and protested by a number of religious groups.

were themselves different. It may have also been because I had heard the album over and over, playing from my stereo, sort of like a familiar old Saturday afternoon radio serial, and suddenly, seeing things on screen that did not go along with my a priori concepts/notions made for an ultimately flat and disappointing translation.¹¹²

While stagings of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in New York City have failed to generate the excitement that the concept album had, reception to the rock opera was, in many respects, reversed in Great Britain. Both the single and the concept album failed to garner much attention in England, and by late 1971, fewer than 300,000 copies of the recording had sold there. Whereas the popularity of the concept album in the United States ultimately seems to have hurt the Broadway run, Jim Sharman's slightly less flamboyant London production (1972) proved hugely successful despite very mixed reviews.¹¹³ While the success of the London production will not be discussed in detail here, it is nevertheless important to note that the staged production was more successful in a country whose population was less familiar with the original album.

III. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road*

For all its shortcomings, *Jesus Christ Superstar* enjoyed the longest run of all post-*Hair* commercial productions by Tom O'Horgan. Due in large part to the poor reviews his direction of *Jesus Christ Superstar* received, followed a year later by his association with the failed *Dude*, O'Horgan "unwittingly developed a reputation as a director who relied solely on splashy effects,"¹¹⁴ and his popularity among Broadway producers slowly began to lapse

¹¹² Personal communication with Judy Ng, 28 April 2000.

¹¹³ Personal communication with Ken Mandelbaum, 3 August 1998; Richards, 1979: 240.

¹¹⁴ Simmer, 1977: 65.

through the early 1970s. Unfortunately, his *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road: A Rock Spectacle* in 1974 did nothing to change his reputation.

This piece was developed in collaboration with Robin Wagner, the set designer for the original Broadway productions of *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Interested, as always, in attracting young people to the theater, O'Horgan and Wagner set out to adapt songs by the Beatles for use in a musical theater format. Convinced, especially after his experience with *Dude*, that musical theater cannot function without the presence of some narrative, no matter how fragmented, O'Horgan set about crafting a loose plot from Lennon-McCartney songs featured on the albums *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Abbey Road*, as well as a handful of B-sides and songs from other Beatles albums.¹¹⁵ O'Horgan notes,

Sgt. Pepper was based on the tunes. We put them together like a tinker-toy set and made sense of it in our own way. We made a script of the songs, and we didn't add [additional dialogue] or change any [lyrics]. Maybe [we changed] genders or something, but basically it was pretty much the songs [with the Beatles'] orchestrations. . . . [We were just] trying to use this music in a different way.¹¹⁶

The resultant story is as follows:

Billy Shears, the hero, is "Mr. Nowhere Man." Maxwell's Hammermen try to entice him into signing a mysterious contract by allowing him to wear the magic spectacles, through which he can see people like Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. When he won't sign the contract, they take the glasses away, and Lucy disappears. He falls in love with Rita, the Meter Maid, but she turns out to be a man. Finally he signs the contract, and Maxwell's Hammermen begin to make him into some sort of superstar, until mayhem breaks out and the Hammermen start to murder everyone. Then the statue of Sgt. Pepper sitting on top of the set comes to life and tells everyone to "get back," restoring everything to normal.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Rights to songs by Harrison and Starr were denied, and were thus not featured in the musical or the subsequent feature film. Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 4 May 2000.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Gaines, 1974: 11.

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road: A Rock Spectacle featured a cast of 32 actors performing 29 Beatles songs before the elaborate scenery, dazzling special effects, and colorful costumes that had by this point become characteristic of O'Horgan's commercial productions. The "rock spectacle" opened Off Broadway at the Beacon Theater, a concert venue, on 17 November 1974; like the many conceptual rock musicals before it, *Sgt. Pepper's* was promptly trounced by theater critics and ignored by rock critics. The production ran for 66 performances before closing on 5 January 1975; the national tour that had been planned for the show after its run at the Beacon was cancelled due to lack of commercial interest.¹¹⁸

O'Horgan acknowledges that adapting Beatles' songs for the stage proved especially problematic for the same reason that the songs were tempting to adapt in the first place: they had become known and beloved the world over. Recognized almost immediately as a landmark album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* quickly went multiplatinum, spent 15 weeks at number one on the Billboard album charts, and remains one of the highest-selling and most influential albums to have been released between 1955 and the present.¹¹⁹ In short, the album is worthy of imitation, but impossible to imitate.

Such a conundrum was not lost on the press; discussing the production in its preview stage, Pacheco writes,

Most of the audience (pubescent and otherwise) . . . come to *Sergeant Pepper* with their own fantasies and images conjured up by the Beatles music, which has for so long been a deeply imbedded part of both our social and personal consciousness. Memories of lovers, experiences, and drug induced "trips" are closely aligned with these songs, especially for those whose budding adolescence was concurrent with the rise of the Beatles. Indeed, so intensely has this music touched us, so phenomenally has it affected our mores and

¹¹⁸ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 4 May 2000.

¹¹⁹ Whitburn, 1995: 29 and 381.

attitudes and shaped a contemporary awareness, that for anyone to attempt to impose a dramatic coherency on these musical classics either borders on boldness or folly.¹²⁰

O'Horgan recalls that he and Wagner had hoped to combat such perceptions by striving not to imitate the Beatles, but rather to offer new interpretations of their songs.¹²¹

These intentions, while perhaps brave, were ultimately ineffective. O'Horgan remembers that critics and audience members alike had a great deal of difficulty with the fact that he and Wagner had re-ordered songs from the original *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and had intermingled them with songs from other albums:

I think that what we did . . . offended Beatles fans. Because we didn't follow the record. Whatever that record was about. . . . We took some songs [out] and put other ones in, and "how dare you!" It was like messing with Bach or something.¹²²

Indeed, in changing the order of songs on the album and intermingling them with other Beatles songs, O'Horgan eliminated its many unifying structures, which are considered by many to be precisely what makes this album innovative in the first place.

Conceived as a unified entity, the Beatles' original album attained landmark status in part because it lacked traditional divisions between the 13 songs, which were unified by the reprise of the opening title song near the end of the album, and through a number of imaginative studio effects. Largely interpreted as a homage to psychedelia, the album also featured an underlying theme of role-playing;¹²³ these themes are detectable not only in the album's songs, but in its packaging: *Sgt. Pepper's* featured elaborate (and now famous) cover art in which the colorfully costumed Beatles posed in front of a collage of images of well-known public

¹²⁰ Pacheco. 1975: 56.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan. 4 May 2000.

¹²³ MacDonald. 1994: 184.

figures that group members had listed as “people they’d most like to have in the audience at [their fictional band’s] imaginary concert.”¹²⁴ In altering the order of the songs on the album, imposing his own vision upon that of the band, and mixing songs from the album with unrelated others, O’Horgan usurped the highly respected efforts of the band to which he was trying to pay homage.

Like staged productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* also suffered from an inability to emulate the pristine quality of well-known sound recordings. Although the Beacon Theater boasted a sound system that was superior to the Broadway houses O’Horgan had struggled to amplify, the sound recordings that this musical was based upon were, like the band that created them, held in extraordinarily high esteem. Summing up the problems with adapting such recordings for the stage in a nutshell, Gottfried, who does not hide his adoration for the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, argues,

However marvelous a sound system one can devise—and O’Horgan put together a fabulous one at the Beacon Theater—what can match “Sergeant Pepper” at full blast on headphones? . . . Musically, the show may well be a tremendous accomplishment in theatrical sound reproduction but it sounds like a floor-shaking performance of Beatles classics by the Doc Severinson band. Incredibly, O’Horgan did not use the original recordings, but tried to duplicate, imitate, and occasionally vary them. . . . [But] no album is better known than this and performances by other people simply sound like copies.¹²⁵

A related criticism launched against *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* was that the music often played second fiddle to O’Horgan’s elaborate staging, which Gussow notes, “leaves very little to the audience’s imagination.”¹²⁶ Gottfried writes,

¹²⁴ Peter Blake, the artist who designed and staged the photography of the cover, discusses his work in the liner notes to the compact disc release of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, EMI Records LTD, 1987, p. 7.

¹²⁵ Gottfried, 1974.

¹²⁶ Gussow, 1974.

The fantasies associated with this music are unlimited, making any stage imitation pathetic. . . . O'Horgan tried to give the songs some theatrical shape, but he wound up with a cheapskate circus. . . . Even [his] familiar giant puppets seem heavy and literal alongside the abstract power of the music. . . . So, "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road" . . . is a clumsy concert with dance movement and Thanksgiving parade props. It is leaden and cheap.¹²⁷

Perhaps the perceived "cheapness" of this production was due, in part, to the fact that while Lennon and McCartney apparently approved of the show and attended performances of it,¹²⁸ the songwriters in fact had no say in the matter, since their songs belonged to the publishers.¹²⁹

As it would arguably contribute to the commercial and critical failure of Stigwood's 1978 film adaptation of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*,¹³⁰ a lack of involvement on the part of the Beatles seems to have hurt O'Horgan's production, which was dismissed by some critics as a crass attempt at profiting from someone else's creativity. Kalem, for example, makes no attempt to disguise his contempt for O'Horgan, whom he sees as a corrupt opportunist:

If a medical dictionary of the theater should ever appear, one entry would be a grotesque disease known as O'Horganitis. Its chief aspect is the metastasis of spectacle over substance. Its subsymptoms are bloat, inanity, hallucination, sexual kinkiness and contagious vulgarity. . . . [I]f one wishes to be mortally infected, the place to go is Manhattan's Beacon Theater where *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* is on germy display. Exploitation is at the core of this show. The idea was to cash in on the popularity of the Beatles. Their songs are probably as original and innocently evocative of the flower-child world of the '60s as they ever were, but here they are trampled under the dreck of Tom O'Horgan's grimagination.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Gottfried, 1974.

¹²⁸ Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 4 May 2000.

¹²⁹ Gaines, 1974: 11.

¹³⁰ Stigwood, who produced the O'Horgan production, purchased the rights and made a film version starring the Bee Gees, Peter Frampton, and other prominent rock and pop groups. The soundtrack to the film yielded a few top-10 hits, the most celebrated and commercially successful being Earth Wind and Fire's "Got to Get You Into My Life." Nevertheless, the film was a huge commercial failure, trounced by critics as cheap, silly, and, in the words of critic David Ansen, bearing "a dangerous resemblance to wallpaper." Ehrenstein and Reed, 1982: 235; Denisoff and Romanowski, 1993: 243-49.

¹³¹ Kalem, 1974.

Despite the bile projected upon it by critics, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* was ultimately no more ridiculous, plot-wise, than the far more endearing and successful animated feature film *Yellow Submarine*, with which the Beatles were directly involved and to which *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* was regularly compared.¹³² What the stage production lacked, however, aside from wide-screen distribution, was any direct involvement by the band.

While the subject of rock on film is too vast to be discussed in any detail here, it must be noted that rock films operate quite differently from rock musicals, and tend, on the whole, to be more successful (failed ventures like *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* notwithstanding). Among other reasons, film appearances are likely to be far more lucrative and less time consuming, and thus rock musicians are more likely to appear in them; cinemas are more capable of replicating the pristine sound of original studio recordings than are many theaters; prerecorded music by original bands is regularly featured on film soundtracks, while the same is traditionally deemed unacceptable in the musical theater, which places value on live performance; tickets to the theater are often decidedly more expensive than those to films, which are thus frequented far more regularly by young people; and unlike stage productions, films can be shown several times a day in theaters across the country or on home videos, while theatrical productions are limited by time, space, and number of performances per week, and are almost never made available for distribution on video cassette.

A final, more subtle difference between rock films and rock musicals lies in the fact that there is less of a correlation between the success of rock films and the cohesion of their

¹³² See for example the reviews by Gaines, Gussow, Probst, and Gottfried.

narratives. Whereas the lack of cohesiveness in works like *Dude* and *Via Galactica* was enough to force theater producers to close their musicals at huge losses, films such as *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, the Led Zeppelin fantasia *The Song Remains the Same*, the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* and *Yellow Submarine*, and the concert films *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter* remain in circulation on video and are claimed as favorites by millions of rock fans; the presence and involvement of the rock musicians themselves, in these films, arguably becomes more important than a compelling story line, which fans who choose to can invent for themselves.¹³³ Considering the widespread popularity of music video, of which the aforementioned films are precursors, the lack of cohesive narrative is arguably preferable: on film, music is not necessarily made secondary to plot and characterization. Rather, more often than in musical theater, visual images, choreography, narrative, and direction can be made secondary to the music itself.¹³⁴

¹³³ As with concept albums, films like *Pink Floyd's The Wall*, told entirely through song and accompanying images, have yielded myriad interpretations, as demonstrated by the reactions of a number of friends and relations, all of whom have seen the film countless times. One friend insists that *The Wall* is "not about anything, to me—I see it as one big music video"; another argues that the film and the concept album from whence it derives is about the onset of madness, and is based on the life of Syd Barrett, an original band-member who suffered a breakdown after the band became successful; finally, my husband argues that the film is both an Oedipal and political allegory, in which the lead character fears becoming his father and is haunted by youthful memories of World War II-era England.

¹³⁴

One theatrical exception was the comparatively successful touring show *Beatlemania*, different productions of which crisscrossed the United States during the mid- to late-1970s. One company appeared on Broadway in 1977 at a time when producers were renting empty Broadway theaters to rock concert promoters. This, perhaps, helps to explain both the show's rather unorthodox Broadway run, as well as its somewhat marginal status as a "true" Broadway production. Despite never officially opening, *Beatlemania* bounced around three different Broadway theaters—the Winter Garden, the Lunt-Fontanne, and the Palace—during its May 1977 to October 1979 run. It should be emphasized that the relative success of the show is due in large part to the fact that unlike *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road*, *Beatlemania* attempted no plot, dialogue, or elaborate stage effects, but instead featured four musicians, dressed and trained to look and sound as much like the original Beatles as possible, who performed a concert of Beatles's songs while a montage of images evoking the mood of the 1960s was projected behind them. As a straightforward homage to the Beatles, then, *Beatlemania*, took fewer risks than *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road*, and was more successful for it.

Hence, while film adaptations of Beatles' songs featuring the Beatles themselves were greatly successful, O'Horgan's attempt to interpret their songs for the stage was not. When *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* folded, O'Horgan retreated to the fringe theater, where he remains active as a director of smaller and less commercial productions. Rock music on Broadway was relegated to the scores of structurally traditional rock musicals like *The Wiz*, a commercial success that opened at Broadway's Majestic Theater on 5 January 1975 (the same day that *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road* closed) and remained for a run of 1672 performances.¹³⁵ Conceptual rock musicals, falling prey to too many poor reviews and responsible for the loss of too much money, fell largely out of fashion by the mid-1970s.

IV. *The Who's Tommy*

Broadway saw the return of the conceptual rock musical with *The Who's Tommy*, which opened at the St. James Theater on 22 April 1993. Although the musical was far better received by critics than was Ken Russell's disjointed and overblown film version of *Tommy*, it nevertheless faltered in its inability to allow rock music to take center stage. Further, despite director Des McAnuff's close association with Pete Townshend and his struggle to remain true to the original piece, the musical was ultimately perceived by many rock fans to be too saccharine for their tastes, while at the same time deterring theatergoers who prefer more traditional fare.

Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Tommy* began life as a late-1960s concept album that became successful enough to spawn a number of different incarnations before landing on

¹³⁵ Guernsey. 1979: 357.

Broadway. Also like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the concept album has proven difficult to translate into visual terms, since its ambiguous, nonlinear story alternately explores the inner life of its central character, or offers loose descriptions of the significant people and events he experiences during his lifetime. *Tommy* differs markedly from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, however, in that its creators had no initial interest in developing a staged production. Rather, *Tommy* was from its inception intended as a concept album designed to challenge the band and broaden its audience; its appellation by the band as a “rock opera” was, Townshend has noted, “a bit facetious.”¹³⁶

Prior to *Tommy*, Townshend’s band, the Who, was known largely as a purveyor of single records. Formed in 1964, the Who enjoyed a string of hits on the singles charts, first in their native England and, later, the United States. Within a few years, however, the band’s interest in singles had begun to flag, and larger-scale works like the 1966 “A Quick One, While He’s Away” had begun to appear on the group’s albums. Townshend recalls that by 1967,

The Who were desperate. . . . We’d had a fun pop-group career, a string of hits all of which were wonderful—we never made a bad record—and suddenly we ran out of songs. I couldn’t come up with the material. . . . I thought, “What I’ll do is I’ll string numbers of three- and four-minute singles together, and hopefully it will create a long enough, sinuous enough, seamless enough wash of music for these new audiences to flow with.”¹³⁷

Townshend thus began revising old songs and writing new ones, with the hopes that he and the Who could record a concept album of songs “that happened to tell a story.”¹³⁸

The result was a double-record album of songs designed to appeal to audiences on a number of levels. Townshend, who at the time was strongly influenced by the writings of

¹³⁶ Hinckley, 1993: 16.

¹³⁷ Pareles, 1993: 18.

¹³⁸ Townshend and Barnes, 1977: 113.

Herman Hesse and the teachings of Meher Baba, notes that while the songs were infused with spiritual and mystical themes, he and the Who nevertheless wanted their album

to appeal on every level. Like a Sufi tale—one of those tales of the dervishes. It's a good story in itself, it's exciting . . . yet at the same time deep down below is a thread. If you're a seeker you get something from it, if you're well along the path you get something from it. . . . That was really what I was trying to aim at with "Tommy" so that even somebody who wasn't interested at all in spiritual matters would still be able to dig it.¹³⁹

The songs on the concept album together tell the disjunct and allegorical story of Tommy Walker, born in England at the end of World War I to a woman whose husband is missing in action. A few years later, Tommy's father, long presumed dead, returns home to find that his wife has taken up with another man. A scuffle ensues and the Walkers kill the suitor in front of young Tommy. In a panic, the Walkers repeatedly tell Tommy that he imagined the entire incident, and must never tell anyone about what he saw.

Traumatized, Tommy instantly becomes deaf, dumb, and blind. He grows up completely sealed off from the outside world, but experiences a complex inner life. He retains a curious ability to perceive himself in the mirror, which he stares into for hours on end. He also has a knack for pinball, which he plays so brilliantly that he becomes national champion despite his inability to see or hear. Tommy's extended family takes advantage of his disabilities. He is sexually molested by his Uncle Ernie and physically abused by his cousin Kevin.

Tommy's parents take him to a variety of doctors and healers, as well as to the Acid Queen, who feeds him LSD in hopes of stimulating a spiritual awakening. Although one specialist determines that Tommy's problems are purely psychological, no one can offer a

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

cure. Eventually, Mrs. Walker's frustrations get the best of her. Tired of watching her son stare into the mirror day after day, she smashes it, inadvertently freeing Tommy from his trance.

Upon regaining his senses, Tommy is heralded as a messiah and he is quickly corrupted by power. He gains many followers, makes public appearances, and opens pinball camps at which visitors are greeted by the opportunistic Uncle Ernie. Once inside, Tommy's followers are told that they will find enlightenment if they cover their eyes, plug their ears, cork their mouths, and play pinball. This process quickly becomes tiresome for the followers, who violently reject Tommy, leaving him isolated once again.

Despite a few accusations of pretentiousness in the press and among fans, *Tommy* became hugely successful in both the United Kingdom and the United States upon release in 1969. The album went double-platinum, spending a total of 47 weeks on the Billboard album charts. It also yielded a number of hit singles, including "Pinball Wizard," "I'm Free," and "See Me, Feel Me," which remain staples of classic rock radio.

Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Tommy* spawned a number of stage renditions in the years following its release. Through 1969, tours by the Who were often devoted to live renditions of the album in its entirety.¹⁴⁰ A poorly-received ballet version of the album was staged by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in 1971.¹⁴¹ The album proved so popular that a second version—recorded by the Who with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Choir, and featuring vocals by Roger Daltrey, Ringo Starr, Richard Harris, and Rod Stewart, among others—was released in 1972. The film version, starring Roger Daltrey, Ann-Margaret, Oliver Reed, Jack Nicholson, and a slew of rock musicians was released in 1975. While none of these renditions proved as successful as the sound recording, the London Symphony

¹⁴⁰ Somma, 1969: 138.

¹⁴¹ Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 214.

Orchestra recording remains in print, while the film, currently available on video and a staple of late-night television, remains something of a campy favorite among classic rock enthusiasts.

Despite many requests for rights to stage *Tommy* as a theatrical presentation, and reports of countless unauthorized stagings in England and America in the years after the release of the album,¹⁴² Townshend initially showed little interest in a musical theater version of his rock opera. In 1991, however, he broke his wrist in a biking accident and was forced to curtail his guitar playing. During the long period of recuperation, he took notice of one request for rights from the Pace Theatrical Group of producers. Deciding that such a project would help keep his mind off his inability to perform, Townshend granted the rights, provided that he had a say in the choice of director. The producers introduced Townshend to Des McAnuff, then artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse and a director known for infusing his work with popular culture in general and rock music in particular. Townshend and McAnuff took to one another, and Townshend agreed to collaborate on a staging of his rock opera.¹⁴³ The initial collaboration proved fruitful: *The Who's Tommy* (so renamed in a nod to the other surviving members of the Who) was a critical triumph, and became the biggest commercial success of the La Jolla Playhouse's ten-year history when it opened there in the summer of 1992.¹⁴⁴

Although musical adaptations of sound recordings have—as this chapter demonstrates—proven disappointing in New York in previous decades, executives at Jujamcyn Theaters had reason to believe that moving the La Jolla production of *Tommy* to one of their Broadway houses would result in further success. Whereas shows like *Jesus Christ*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Pareles, 1993: 5.

¹⁴⁴ Grode, 1993: 29

Superstar had been staged in New York without the benefit of an out-of-town run, *The Who's Tommy* was playing to sold-out houses in Southern California. Further, while *Superstar* was staged a year after the album was released, and was thus likely a victim of overpromotion, *Tommy* was, by the early 1990s, almost 25 years old, and had proven its durability. Finally, the rock opera was a favorite of many baby boomers, who comprised a significant segment of New York's theatergoing public.

Jack Viertel, artistic director at Jujamcyn and one of the men responsible for bringing *Tommy* to Broadway, remembers that *Tommy* appealed to him not only as a businessman, but also as a rock aficionado and member of the baby-boom generation:

[Jujamcyn] did *Tommy* because we loved *Tommy* and thought it was a terrific production. . . . I flew out to [La Jolla to] see it. We didn't have anything to do with financing it out there . . . but I just said, "I ought to see this." . . . I saw it and thought, "this is absolutely great." The audience just *screamed*, you know. I am of the era of *Tommy*. I saw the Who perform *Tommy* at the Psychedelic Supermarket in Boston in 1969. So I just really wanted to do it . . . and so we did it.¹⁴⁵

Moving the acclaimed production from one coast to the other initially seemed to pay off. When it opened on Broadway, *The Who's Tommy* diverged from previous conceptual rock musicals staged in New York by receiving glowing reviews from a majority of theater critics. Perhaps most crucial to the success of a Broadway show at the time, the musical was given particularly emphatic praise by Frank Rich, then the highly influential critic from *The New York Times*. Audiences responded enthusiastically, as well: *The Who's Tommy* set a box office record on Broadway when it sold a total of \$494,897 worth of tickets one day after opening.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Personal communication with Jack Viertel, 20 October 1998.

¹⁴⁶ Fox, 1993.

Many members of New York's theater community were therefore surprised when, in June 1995, the musical suddenly closed after a run of 899 performances.¹⁴⁷ While a two-year run in the early 1990s was certainly not an embarrassment by Broadway standards, it was also not a great success, especially for a show that enjoyed such a strong opening. Jack Viertel notes that the closing of *The Who's Tommy* was the source for much bewilderment in the industry:

It was a terrific production and it turned out to be barely a hit. . . . We thought it would run for 150 years, and it didn't run for 150 years. . . . It ran for two years.¹⁴⁸

In the end, *The Who's Tommy* made just enough money to recoup its initial investment and earn its investors a 10% profit.¹⁴⁹

A number of theories have been offered regarding the closing of *The Who's Tommy*. Some Broadway personnel argued that for all of its connections to the baby-boomer generation, "*Tommy* closed simply because it appealed primarily to younger theatergoers and didn't have enough so-called 'cross-over' to a more general audience," especially since estimates at the time placed over 40% of ticket buyers to Broadway musicals over the age of 50.¹⁵⁰ Scott Zieger, one of the executive producers of *The Who's Tommy*, surmised that a two-pronged marketing approach—aimed at both young people and at Broadway's traditional audience—would have saved the show, but that the producers could not afford two campaigns.¹⁵¹ Still other insiders argued that the producers of *The Who's Tommy* had

¹⁴⁷ Green, 1995: 294.

¹⁴⁸ Personal communication with Jack Viertel, 20 October 1998.

¹⁴⁹ Morehouse, 1995: 37.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

“committed theatrical suicide” by periodically discounting all of their tickets in an attempt to attract a broader audience:

From January 1 to April 30 [1995], during the traditional winter doldrums, the producers . . . offered half-price discounts on advance tickets which had been selling for a top price of \$67.50. . . . Business boomed. But after ticket prices returned to previous levels, sales dropped precipitously. Broadway insiders said many potential audience members—especially the younger, more price-sensitive ones likely to be attracted to *Tommy*—were waiting for another round of deep discounting. “Why would anyone pay full-price when they could have gotten it for half-price?” says veteran producer Arthur Cantor. “You have to have a mix of full and discounted prices in order to survive . . . shows cannot survive on half-price tickets—especially musicals.”¹⁵²

Finally, Jack Viertel, who admits that he remains unsure as to why *The Who's Tommy* did not enjoy a longer tenure on Broadway, hypothesizes that the disappointing run was in large part a result of the fact that Broadway musicals are rarely afforded the “next-big-thing” status that fuels popular culture, and that when they are, public interest often tends to flag too quickly to ensure the long run of any Broadway production:

I think [*The Who's Tommy*] didn't cross over to a traditional theatergoing audience. I also think there is something about the other audience that goes to rock 'n' roll events, which has a very short attention span. I mean, they go to what's hot that minute, and then six weeks later they expect something else to be hot. So the idea of having thought that *Tommy* was hot the day it opened and then thinking about going to see it a year later . . . is just not something—they had moved on. They either saw it or they missed it. If they missed it they were into—you know, they were on their way to a Nine Inch Nails concert.¹⁵³

While all such theories are certainly viable, ample evidence indicates that despite its hearty reception among theater critics and its initial box office records, *The Who's Tommy* disappointed many people who were unable to accept a Broadway version of a classic rock album, no matter how sophisticated, carefully adapted, or Townshend-approved it was.

Despite all attempts on the part of Des McAnuff, who was determined to remain true to the

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Personal communication with Jack Viertel. 20 October 1998.

original concept album,¹⁵⁴ *The Who's Tommy* ultimately became a theatrical production that utilized rock music, whereas the concept album was a rock production that utilized theater. While this distinction is, perhaps, obvious, it is also of great importance in understanding why the musical did not attract a broader audience: no longer “real” rock and never quite “traditional” musical theater, *The Who's Tommy* ultimately worked to alienate members of both camps.

Despite McAnuff's attempts to remain true to the album, *Tommy* changed in some subtle but important ways in its passage from disc to stage. McAnuff and Townshend were faced with the challenge of negotiating *Tommy's* lack of narrative without alienating those critics and ticket-buyers who were fond of the original album. McAnuff touches upon this paradox:

The Who's Tommy was based on the 1969 song-cycle recording . . . [so] there were substantial gaps in the story line that needed to be addressed in order to realize a full theatrical presentation of the piece. The delicacy of the original story . . . was one of the concept album's greatest strengths. It inspired a willing audience to fill in its own personal detail, and the ambiguities and puzzles that the album served up were consistent with Pete [Townshend]'s ambitions to create a spiritual journey. We wanted very badly to preserve the strength of the original recording. At the same time, in order to produce a viable theater piece, we needed to flesh out and expand the original.¹⁵⁵

Rather than foisting additional narrative upon the album in hopes of making it clearer for theatergoers, McAnuff instead chose to take a more visual approach to the stage adaptation, while adding dialogue, new music, or different lyrics only when absolutely necessary. He notes,

The design team for *The Who's Tommy* . . . was called upon to play a role that theatre designers rarely undertake: that of storyteller. In other words, the show's creators weren't simply requiring the design artists to create ambiance,

¹⁵⁴ McAnuff. 1993: 12.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

a sense of period, locale, class, character, and all of the conventional duties usually given to designers—we were asking them to literally help us develop the fundamental narrative throughline. . . . We made a decision to employ stagecraft and . . . a number of different theatrical storytelling techniques to allow the libretto to do what it had done on the initial recording: Advance the piece thematically without expecting it to develop in the manner a conventional musical might. It was our belief that this was crucial if we were going to retain the purity of the original libretto, which had its own unique poetry. Despite the considerably detailed story we expected to tell, we didn't want to clutter *Tommy* up with added recitative.¹⁵⁶

In the manner of the most lavish rock concerts, then, stunning lighting design and colorful slide and video displays were used to help to propel the story line; such an approach allowed *The Who's Tommy* to remain true to the original in many respects. With few exceptions, songs remained both intact and in the order that they appeared on the album. The flow of the music was rarely interrupted with additional dialogue; tiny Sennheiser microphones, worn on the bodies of actors and a vast improvement from the hand-held microphones employed in O'Horgan productions of past decades, contributed to a sound design that allowed for the loud volumes and intricate guitar work expected of classic rock music, and the clarity of voice required of musical theater.¹⁵⁷ Lyrics were only occasionally changed, and the setting was updated from World War I to World War II. Characters were developed and their actions clarified. The characters of abusive Uncle Ernie, sadistic Cousin Kevin, and the drug-touting Acid Queen were significantly toned down, as were any overt references to drug use. A single song—"I Believe My Own Eyes," newly written by Townshend for the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Walker—was added to the Broadway production in hopes of better portraying the emotional lives of Tommy's parents.¹⁵⁸ A decidedly upbeat ending was added, in which Tommy decides that he is not comfortable with

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 19.

¹⁵⁸ Grode, 1993: 29.

his role as a popular idol, explains to his followers that normalcy, and not wealth or power or status, is the ideal. He then returns to his estranged, extended family in hopes of reconciliation. Finally, when the musical moved from La Jolla to Broadway, the title character was altered, due in large part to complaints by Who bassist John Entwistle and lead singer Roger Daltrey that Tommy was too passive a character.

Michael Cerveris, who originated the role in La Jolla and New York, elaborates:

In La Jolla Tommy was totally just a victim of the whole machinery, this pure, innocent spirit that went through the whole experience just kind of being otherworldly and very light, and they realized, partly because of comments from Roger and John . . . that Tommy needed to be responsible for some of what happens. He needed to participate in the whole demagogue machinery, and needed to get off on it more, and become a bit of a rock monster. . . . [So] the really important thing was giving Tommy a dark side.¹⁵⁹

Although the theater press praised these changes and, in the case of Frank Rich, argued that they worked to improve the piece,¹⁶⁰ many rock critics and fans reacted far more negatively.

The rock press and aficionados of the original concept album were most dismayed by the ending added to *The Who's Tommy*. On the original concept album, the ending is vague and open-ended: Tommy is rejected by his followers and is left to an unknown future. The musical, however, concludes as Tommy reconciles with his family, even his abusive cousin and uncle, and forgives them for any mistreatment they inflicted upon him. Such an ending, combined with an overall tendency on the part of the production to tone down references to sex and drug abuse, prompted many rock critics to attack Townshend and McAnuff for bowing to conservative values and pandering to Broadway producers. Pareles, for example, notes angrily that both the new ending and the muted references to sex and drugs ruined the entire piece:

¹⁵⁹ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris, 28 August 1998.

¹⁶⁰ Rich, 1993.

nearly everyone . . . seems to like [*The Who's Tommy*]. Everyone, that is, except people who cared about "Tommy" in the first place. Those sourpusses, with me among them, can hardly believe that the Broadway extravaganza had the chutzpah to bill itself as "The Who's Tommy." . . . [Townshend and McAnuff's] changes turn a blast of spiritual yearning, confusion, and rebellion into a pat on the head for nesters and couch potatoes. . . . Broadway dares not trouble the viewers; "Fiddle About," in which evil Uncle Ernie does nasty things to young Tommy, is a strictly hands-off affair . . . [the musical] seeks neither spiritual fulfillment nor political ferment; the revised goal is domestic comfort. As the [musical] ends . . . everything is settled, the nuclear family is safe, and there's no need for any higher aspiration. . . . "Tommy" on Broadway doesn't mean that rock has prevailed on the Great White Way. . . . [T]he new "Tommy" . . . is a nostalgia trip offering familiar music to an audience that grew up with it: Business as usual built upon a rock opera that once promised more.¹⁶¹

McAnuff has responded angrily to accusations that *The Who's Tommy* sanitizes the album's references to drug and sexual abuse, by noting that since there were small children in the cast, graphic depictions of either type of abuse would be both inappropriate and potentially destructive.¹⁶² Yet few explanations have been offered explaining the decision to change the ending. Michael Cerveris, who originated the title character in *The Who's Tommy*, remembers that the decision to emphasize the power of family was made by Townshend himself, and was never intended to espouse conservatism. Rather, the change was reflective of Townshend's own personal growth, and was meant to add emotional depth to the characters of Tommy and his family. Cerveris does acknowledge, however, that the changes were misconstrued:

I don't know if Pete changed things as much as he finally gave them one answer out of the multitude of answers that they might have had before. . . . At the time he wrote the record, so much of it was about the spiritual journey, finding your way towards meaning through following spiritual gurus and drugs . . . and now at this point in his life he had . . . come to think a little differently about some of those things and to recognize the family story. Now he is a father, and has been for most of the time between now and then, and he sort of

¹⁶¹ Pareles. 1993: 18.

¹⁶² Maslin . 1993: 27.

has come to the conclusion that you can spend your life rejecting everything you grew up with . . . or you can just try to come to terms with it . . . and move on. A lot of people felt like the end of the Broadway show was a cop-out . . . [but] that was not the intention. . . . I think the idea is that Tommy . . . because of his participation in this whole machinery, starts to understand that people can do harmful things without being harmful people, and realizes he has to try and make amends for that, and doesn't know quite what to do except that going home is the way to do it. . . . The show doesn't really end there, it ends after he has confronted everybody and says, essentially, "I don't hate you anymore," but not necessarily "all is forgiven and everything's fine." Then the end of the show is him sitting with his past selves onstage, staring into this empty mirror, and there is no guarantee that it's all gonna be nice and happy for Tommy in the future. People have told me they thought it was such a touchy-feely ending, and I think they didn't think it through to the end. . . . [But] I don't blame them because like I said, it happened awfully fast.¹⁶³

Jessica Swenson, a friend who loved both the album and the film before seeing the musical, notes that the new ending to *The Who's Tommy* did not enhance the production for her:

It just annoyed me. I grew up with the movie, so I was willing to accept the differences that I could understand between the original [album] and the movie, [but here] they just seemed to change it yet again. . . . I didn't need the [story line] to be easier to deal with. I had grown up with it, so I felt like I had my own little ability to follow what was going on. So I didn't like it.¹⁶⁴

She notes further that attempts on the part of the ensemble to add motivation and dimension to the characters bothered her.

Swenson cites in particular the representation of Sally Simpson. In the Who song "Sally Simpson," as performed on the original concept album, the title character is depicted as a young female fan of Tommy's who attends one of his rallies against her father's wishes. In a moment of passion, she leaps onto the stage in an attempt to touch him. In the ensuing scuffle, she is thrown off the stage and her cheek is badly cut. In the musical version, Sally Simpson is made a central part of the plot. Rather than being thrown from the stage by Tommy,

¹⁶³ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris, 28 August 1998.

¹⁶⁴ Personal communication with Jessica Swenson, 18 July 2000.

the musical has her grabbed by security guards who, in obvious reference to the Rodney King beatings, club her severely, instigating Tommy's decision to retreat to the bosom of his family. Swenson notes that of all changes to the rock opera, this scene was the most frustrating for her:

That whole Sally thing? What the fuck was *that*? I couldn't deal with that at all. That was a perfectly adorable little sideline, and they made it part of the plot! I hated that.¹⁶⁵

While additions and changes to the rock musical worked to annoy many fans of the original piece, many theater aficionados who were unfamiliar with the album found such attempts to be lacking; Ken Mandelbaum, for example, argues,

I don't like [*The Who's*] *Tommy*. It's a piece I don't get. . . . Narrative wise, it doesn't make much sense. He did a great job of staging it, Des McAnuff, he made it theatrically exciting, but I don't get the piece. . . . [I think] it was sort of symbolic or metaphoric, but it doesn't make much sense to me.¹⁶⁶

Mandelbaum notes further that despite attempts at enriching the characters for the Broadway production, *The Who's Tommy* ultimately left him, and many others, unmoved:

I think a lot of people felt what I did. . . . they sat there bewildered by this incomprehensible story. It didn't really have much narrative interest, [so] it's very hard to follow that story or get interested in it. And while the production was visually wonderful to look at. . . . I am interested in being emotionally grabbed in some way, on some level—being transported, delighted. I have always felt that emotion is a gigantic factor in the appeal of musicals. People like them because they make them cry, or they make them totally delighted in a way that other works don't really do. *Tommy* didn't have that.¹⁶⁷

Indeed, Grode points out that even critics who heaped the most praise upon the production focused primarily on its innovative stage effects;¹⁶⁸ Stock, too, argues,

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Personal communication with Ken Mandelbaum, 3 August 1998.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Grode, 1993: 29.

The show's sets and lighting out-spectacle all the recent Broadway spectacles, but somehow it doesn't feel like a musical. There isn't a single character that escapes from all those great old tunes to connect emotionally with the audience. . . . When [Roger] Daltrey saw an early version of the show in La Jolla, his first response was "Tommy's got no balls." Apparently the finished product is much improved on that account, but a cipher with balls is still a cipher.¹⁶⁹

A final problem that plagued *The Who's Tommy*, then, is similar to the one that plagued *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road*: The musical featured brilliant special effects, but ultimately suffered, for many, due to the lack of presence of the original band, whose recorded and live performances of the rock opera proved difficult for the cast and pit band to improve upon.

As in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the lyrics and melodies of *The Who's Tommy* survived more or less intact in their passage from album to stage, but in many respects singers and musicians necessarily had to diverge from the sound recording. In order to preserve their voices, actors in the musical could rarely exhibit the raw vocal power that makes singers like Roger Daltrey so distinctive. Cerveris notes that although Townshend worked to give "the company the feeling that we had a legitimate right to stand on the stage and sing these songs," regular comparisons with Roger Daltrey proved one of the most challenging aspects of the role.¹⁷⁰

Similarly, while instrumentation and orchestrations remained mostly the same, with most of the accompaniment on electric guitar, keyboards, traps, and bass, the music of *The Who's Tommy* arrived on Broadway with a handful of necessary alterations. Mark Stewart, who served as lead guitarist in the orchestra pit during the Broadway run, explains:

¹⁶⁹ Stock, 1993: 29.

¹⁷⁰ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris, 28 August 1998; Stock, 1993: 31.

There were some things that were rearranged. . . . Like in the . . . structure of the guitar solo, the elements were all there, but the structure was moved around . . . let's say the original structure [was] A, B, C, D, E. In this case, [it became] A, D, B, C, E. . . . To function in the musical, certain things were moved around or extended. . . . We want to do this on the stage: will the music accommodate this? If not, how can we change it, add to it, subtract to it? So there were modifications, but for the most part [the score] was pretty straight ahead. . . . There was a little more lead playing . . . than there was on the album because [Townshend] was much more of a rhythm guitarist. . . . [But] we certainly were true to the record.¹⁷¹

Despite attempts to remain as true as possible to the original recording, however, the pit band was often cited as offering a pale imitation of the original recording by many rock critics.

In reviewing the musical for *Rolling Stone*, for example, Anthony DeCurtis argues that no matter how aggressive the music, a pit band hired to provide carefully rehearsed accompaniment for a Broadway musical cannot compare with a live rock band:

The lesson *The Who's Tommy* teaches is that in coming to terms with the requirements of the theatrical stage, rock [and] roll must not allow its visceral power, its instinct for anarchy, to be blunted. Take the case of Luther Rix, the orchestra drummer who performed the thankless task of having to reproduce Keith Moon's parts for *The Who's Tommy*. He's a first-rate musician, certainly well-trained, probably, in strict terms, a "better" drummer than Moon. He did everything right, but what he couldn't manage—and was smart enough not even to attempt—was Moon's innate wildness, the vertiginous sense that he might take a song in any direction at any moment, just for the kicks. They can't teach that at the conservatory, just like they can't teach the splendid singers who sang *Tommy's* songs so technically well the yearning, cord-ravaging strain of Roger Daltrey's and Pete Townshend's voices.¹⁷²

The comments of many friends and colleagues who consider themselves fans of the Who indicate that despite attempts of advertising executives, who placed advertisements on rock radio stations and in the music press during previews of *The Who's Tommy*, many rock fans avoided the production out of respect for the original piece. Sandra Mardenfeld, a journalist and former editor at *Playbill* magazine remembers the reactions of her friends to the

¹⁷¹ Personal communication with Mark Stewart. 13 October 1998.

¹⁷² DeCurtis. 1993.

original Broadway cast recording of the musical, which she played for them during the run of the production:

I loved the musical, so I bought the [cast recording] and would play it all the time. But I played it for some of my friends who are rock purists, and they said it sounded like their grandparents singing *Tommy*. They made me turn it off. Needless to say, my friends would not and did not see the production.¹⁷³

While rock fans and the music press thus did not regularly warm to *The Who's Tommy*, it must be noted that the show failed, as well, to appeal to a number of traditional theatergoers, many of whom avoided the production for fear of loud volumes or lewd subject matter. Mardenfeld recalls that although she ended up enjoying the musical, she went only because she had been offered a free ticket, since her tastes in music are decidedly less aggressive.¹⁷⁴ My own memories of the show's reception include many gripes among both theatergoers and theater industry employees, who refused to see the production, regardless of its strong reviews, because of a conviction that the music would be too loud or the subject matter too indelicate.

While some such informants who did see the musical note that they ultimately enjoyed the production, others argued that the musical proved offensive to their sensibilities. Tom D'Ambrosio, a theatrical press agent who represented *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and who notes that he prefers theater music to most rock music, recalls that he disliked *The Who's Tommy* from the moment it began. Describing the musical's surprise beginning, in which the electric guitar-driven overture starts without warning before the house-lights are dimmed, he notes:

I thought from the moment it started . . . before the lights go down and that guitar goes "BANG" and everybody jumps, I immediately [thought], "I am not gonna like this." To me, that assaulted me. That made me so angry. People

¹⁷³ Personal communication with Sandra Mardenfeld, 9 August 2000.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

complain about *Hedwig [and the Angry Inch]* being loud, but I don't think the *purpose* of that show is being loud, and that's what I felt *Tommy* was.¹⁷⁵

Mark Stewart notes that despite efforts to retain the energy of the album, the show was nevertheless subject to complaints from both theater and rock camps:

The standard, stereotypical complaint about *Tommy*—theater people [said], “it wasn't enough theater,” musical people [said], “it was not enough musical,” and rock people [said], “it was not enough rock.” [Everyone thought] it ended up being somewhere in the middle. And I have to say I never saw it. I really wish I had. So I have no idea. [From] where I was sitting, the thing was totally rocking. But you know, I wasn't out front, I wasn't hearing what was coming out of the sound system, I wasn't seeing what was on the stage, and I wasn't hearing a thing.¹⁷⁶

Despite its critical praise and box office records *The Who's Tommy* ultimately faltered for many of the same reasons that previous conceptual rock musicals failed to succeed. In the years since *The Who's Tommy*, only a single conceptual rock musical, Paul Simon's 1998 effort *The Capeman*, which will be discussed at length in chapter 4, has opened; although its score earned praise, and Simon's own recording of the songs from the musical sold well, *The Capeman*, like most conceptual rock musicals before it, closed after mere months, at a huge financial loss.

A chief problem encountered in the adaptation of rock recordings for the stage lies in the fact that sound recordings function very differently in rock and musical theater camps. While recordings of rock music have proven hugely successful since the inception of the genre, original cast recordings of Broadway and Off Broadway musicals have almost always been viewed by the American music industry as comparatively risky ventures, since sound recordings of staged musicals can preserve only one aspect of a multifaceted production. As early as the 1930s, and despite the commercial success of many staged musicals, “record

¹⁷⁵ Personal communication with Tom D'Ambrosio, 17 July 1998.

¹⁷⁶ Personal communication with Mark Stewart, 13 October 1998.

companies weren't convinced that people who flocked to see a Broadway musical would be interested in having an aural record of its music and songs."¹⁷⁷ Although this attitude changed briefly during the 1940s, especially after the success of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*,¹⁷⁸ original cast recordings have usually been viewed as "specialty" items consumed by very small markets.¹⁷⁹ Because such productions are not mass mediated, and only rarely become well-known enough to penetrate a national or international market, original cast recordings are often made more out of an interest among music industry executives in preserving theater music than they are for financial gain.¹⁸⁰

In contrast, recordings of rock music—which have proven commercially successful since the inception of the genre—can and do function as ends in themselves. Gracyk notes that although many rock historians tend to treat rock "performance" and rock "recording" interchangeably, and often emphasize the importance of the former over the latter, it is ultimately the sound recording, and not the live performance, that is of fundamental importance to the history and development of rock music. The genre, he argues, is "a tradition of popular music whose creation and dissemination *centers* on recording technology."¹⁸¹ Indeed, whereas the American musical theater flourished long before the advent of sound recording technology, and continues to function independently of such technology, it is impossible to conceive of rock music without it. Gracyk's argument certainly applies to concept albums; while some are conceivably performed live, as has been demonstrated by groups like the Who and Pink Floyd,

¹⁷⁷ Bergman, et. al., 1981: 396.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Singer reports that at present, the niche audience interested in recordings of new musicals is estimated by music industry executives at about 5000 individuals. 1999: AR5.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Gracyk. 1996: 1. Emphasis mine.

most have been conceived in studios. Works like *Sgt. Pepper's*, much of which would be impossible to reproduce live, are intended for comparatively private, repeated listening.

A related problem encountered in the adaptation of concept albums for the musical stage lies in the fact that while repeated listening might allow such recordings to become familiar, it also allows for, and even encourages, personal interpretation. The success of many concept albums seems due in large part to their lack of linearity and their polysemic nature. A studio effort by a well-known rock group may become the favorite of millions of people, yet its lack of narrative allows for as many personal interpretations of what the songs on the recording signify.

Informal discussions with friends and colleagues about concept albums yield interesting results in this respect, since it is clear that repeated listening to concept albums yields a broad number of unique interpretations. For example, one friend noted that he has always interpreted Pink Floyd's concept album *Animals* as a song cycle of character studies; another friend believes that *Animals* is a study of the "seamy undersides of humanity"; a third noted that he had never thought much about the thematic connections in *Animals*, but had instead taken pleasure in finding a number of recurring musical motifs that related the songs to one another. These interpretations are unique to my own: I have always interpreted *Animals* as a commentary on oppressive governments and the people who suffer under them.

Concept albums, then, allow listeners to indulge in what Frith describes as one of the greatest pleasures of pop music: "To read images into the lyrics that may not be there."¹⁸² To this end, a number of respondents note that they had no interest in seeing any sort of visual adaptation of favorite concept albums. One respondent noted,

¹⁸² Frith, 1996: 7.

Music is not a visual thing for me. I prefer to sit and listen. Let the mind wonder and wander. I suppose there are many exceptions to this, but if the album is good and works as a piece on its own, why muck it up with mediocre images?¹⁸³

The conceptual rock musical, whether derived from a familiar concept album or modeled after contemporary trends in rock music, proves problematic precisely because musical theater relies on linear narrative, visual stimulus, and character development, while concept albums tend to function most successfully without them. While the cases of *Rainbow*, *Dude*, and *Via Galactica* prove that a lack of linear narrative and an overemphasis on spectacle can be challenging in the theatrical realm, the foisting of additional narrative and characterization upon familiar concept albums prove—in the cases of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road*, and *The Who's Tommy*—to be just as problematic.

¹⁸³ Personal communication with Connie Schlier. 28 April 2000.

Chapter III

The Impact of Economics on Theatrical Production in New York City and Beyond: the 1970s to the Present

Directly and more subtly, theatrical economics translates into theatrical style, unless one is thinking of closet drama put on for a few recondite friends.

—Arthur Miller

The conceptual rock musicals detailed in chapter 2 are but a few examples of many attempts to merge rock music and the musical theater during the 1970s. Following the much-anticipated, ultimately disappointing productions of *Dude, Via Galactica*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* early in the decade came a glut of poorly received, sparsely attended, long-since-forgotten Broadway rock musicals, including the Andy Warhol-produced *Man on the Moon*, with book, music, and lyrics by “Papa” John Phillips (1975); *Lieutenant* (1975), a rock opera about the My Lai massacre that folded after nine performances; *The Rocky Horror Show* (1975), a hit in London and Los Angeles that closed less than a month after opening at the Belasco Theatre;¹ *Rockabye Hamlet*, an adaptation of the Shakespeare tragedy that featured numbers such as “The Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Boogie” and “He Got It in the Ear” (1976); and *Got Tu Go Disco*, a disco version of *Cinderella* that opened at the Minskoff Theatre in late June 1979 and closed by the first of July.²

¹ This production, as well as a more successful Broadway revival that opened in November 2000 will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6 of this study.

² All titles, dates, and run information from Bordman, 1992: 683-99.

Despite the small number of rock musicals to become surprise hits on Broadway in the 1970s, including *Grease* (1972) and *The Wiz* (1975), the string of often highly publicized and costly failures helped convince many members of New York's theater industry that with few exceptions, a successful rock musical was a contradiction in terms. As the 1970s progressed and the number of Broadway rock musical fatalities climbed, producers grew increasingly wary of anything labeled a "rock musical" or a "rock opera," and the appearance of such properties on Broadway diminished significantly towards the end of the decade. By 1979, Eric Salzman would announce the death of this musical subgenre,³ thereby echoing Ethan Mordden, who in 1976 had made the same declaration in his rambling *Better Foot Forward: the History of American Musical Theatre*.⁴

Such proclamations, however, are misleading. In fact, while rock musicals never revolutionized the American musical theater, they certainly never disappeared entirely, either. Rather, over the past 30 years, rock musicals, like musical theater in general, have reacted to a number of dramatic changes that have taken place in the economics of theatrical production, both in New York and across the country. Such a reaction has been two-pronged, and applies not only to rock musicals, but to musical theater in general. In recent decades, with few exceptions, smaller, less expensive, more experimental theatrical productions have retreated to Off and OffOff Broadway, or to regional theaters, while Broadway has grown increasingly expensive and spectacular. This chapter examines the ways that economics have influenced

³ Salzman. 1979: 243.

⁴ Mordden. 1976: 309-15.

the development of the American musical in general, and explores the ways that such economic developments have influenced musical theater's relationship with rock and popular music since the 1970s.

I. The 1970s

The notion that the rock musical was “dead” by the end of the 1970s is a misconception resulting from music theater historians' collective habit of tracking Broadway trends and ignoring the many smaller, more modest musicals that are staged at Off and Off Off Broadway theaters during any given season. Such an oversight is particularly problematic when it comes to rock musicals, which, with a few notable exceptions, have always fit more comfortably in smaller theaters that cater to more selective audiences than they have on the Broadway stage. Since their inception in the late 1960s, most rock musicals have originated Off or Off Off Broadway, transferring to Broadway only after exceptionally strong ticket sales justified producers' attempts to court wider audiences.

In fact, through the 1970s, amid the many rock musicals to fail on Broadway, there were countless smaller, less expensive, and less hyped rock musicals that were mounted Off and Off Off Broadway. At worst, these shows, like their Broadway counterparts, were critical and commercial failures that closed quickly. For example, *The House of Leather*, a rock musical about a Civil War-era New Orleans whorehouse, opened at La MaMa E.T.C. in

March of 1970 and closed on the very same evening.⁵ A similar fate befell *The Ballad of Johnny Pot*—a 1971 rock musical at Theater Four that envisioned Johnny Appleseed as a marijuana seed-sprinkling hippie who dreamed of sharing his passion for cannabis with the entire world—despite its producers' attempts to boost a slumping post-review box office by offering a free performance. While the free production was a huge success, few seemed interested in actually purchasing tickets to this musical, which folded two weeks after it opened.⁶

Amid all of these failed rock musicals, however, there were also a handful of Off and Off Off Broadway rock musicals that never became as well-known as *Hair*, but nevertheless enjoyed commercial success and critical admiration. Amid the climbing number of rock musical flops and rare, monumental successes that regularly earn citations in music theater histories, a number of modest hits have been overlooked. These include Gretchen Ford and Nancy Cryer's *The Last Sweet Days of Isaac* (1970), a two-character musical comprising two vignettes that explored the mass media's relationship to the nature of reality, which ran at the East Side Playhouse for 485 performances⁷; Gary William Friedman and Will Holt's *The Me Nobody Knows*, a musical about the lives of underprivileged children in New York City that opened at the Orpheum Theater in May of 1970 and moved to the Helen Hayes Theater for a modest run eight months later;⁸ Elizabeth Swados's *Runaways*, a collage of monologues,

⁵ Guernsey, 1970: 361

⁶ Guernsey, 1971: 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 321.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 301.

songs, and sketches based on the experiences of teen runaways, which was a hit at the Public Theater before moving to Broadway for an additional eight months in 1978;⁹ and Ford and Cryer's *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road* (1978), also at the Public, which examined the impact of women's liberation on a female pop singer approaching middle age.¹⁰

There may have been many more Off and Off Off Broadway rock musicals to enjoy mild success during this decade than can be discussed here. During the 1970s, few Off and Off Off Broadway musicals were recorded, and most of those are no longer in print. Further, the fragmentation of the popular music market at this time, combined with the many rock musicals to flop during the decade, influenced the ways in which rock musicals were promoted.

If the 1960s had seen rock 'n' roll rapidly mature into rock, the 1970s saw rock music's growing commercialization and fragmentation, as the music industry channeled the rapidly developing genre into increasingly specialized markets.¹¹ Such partitioning influenced both the ways in which the producers of rock musicals marketed their properties and the ways these properties were described in the press. Whereas a seemingly endless number of productions featuring social commentary, youthful jargon, loose formats, and electric instruments were labeled "rock operas" or "rock musicals" in the late 1960s, these broad terms became less popular in the 1970s, especially after so many properties bearing this description fared poorly at the box office.

⁹ Guernsey, 1978: 398.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 399.

¹¹ For a discussion of rock's maturation and fragmentation, see part three of Ennis, 1992.

Through the 1970s, producers and creators of rock musicals responded to the increasing fragmentation of the popular music market and the dwindling success of previous rock musicals or rock operas in one of two ways. The first was to attach a new, specialized descriptor to a rock musical; hence the appearance both on and Off Broadway of, among others, the “folk-rock musical” *Tarot* in 1970 and the “new 50s rock ‘n’ roll musical” *Grease* in 1972.¹² More often than not, however, producers attempted to dissociate themselves from previous rock musical flops by avoiding descriptors altogether. Thus, many musicals that would certainly have been labeled “rock operas” or “rock musicals” at the close of the 1960s due to their emphasis on youthful themes, topical jargon, experimental form, amplification, and electric instrumentation were simply billed as “musicals” by the early 1970s.

The fragmentation of the popular music market coincided with the dawn of a new era for New York theater. While, during the 1960s, the Off and Off Off Broadway realms exerted strong influence on what was seen as a creatively stagnant Broadway, the turn of the decade saw the beginnings of a reverse trend. Although successful Off and Off Off Broadway productions continued to transfer to Broadway, the rising costs of real estate and production forced many of New York’s Off and Off Off Broadway companies to turn slowly away from an emphasis on innovation and toward an emphasis on remaining financially stable by both appealing to broader audiences and raising ticket prices.¹³ As a result, while Off and Off Off

¹² Barnes, 1970; Richards, 1979: 169.

¹³ Guernsey, 1972: 29 and 1973: 25.

Broadway remained less commercial than Broadway, the distinctions between these realms began to blur during the decade.¹⁴

The 1970s saw the beginnings of a trend toward the increasingly commercial in all divisions of New York theater, but these changes were very gradual. The decade thus remained kinder than later ones would to theatrical productions with limited appeal, especially those mounted Off and Off Off Broadway. While reports of rising costs in all realms were appearing even as the decade began,¹⁵ theater personnel like the Off Broadway producer Joseph Papp were nevertheless able to afford to take risks with an impressive number of new works.

Theater personnel in the Off and Off Off Broadway realms could also afford to fail more gracefully during this decade. Whereas the collapse of too many rock spectacles on Broadway led to a cruel backlash among theater critics and worked to drive the likes of such talents as Galt MacDermot and Tom O'Horgan from the commercial realm, Off and Off Off Broadway flops from this period largely escaped such ramifications. In contrast to high-profile flops like *Dude* and *Via Galactica*, which are still cited among industry members and music theater experts as some of the most laughable disasters in Broadway history, shows like *Rainbow*, *The Ballad of Johnny Pot*, and *The House of Leather*, among the many others that opened Off or Off Off Broadway, were merely given negative reviews and, once closed, quickly forgotten. While they might well have been just as poorly conceived as some of their

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1978: 25.

¹⁵ See for example *Ibid.*, 1971: 29.

Broadway counterparts, these productions escaped similar ridicule, perhaps because they were far cheaper to produce and housed in theatrical realms where bigger risks and more eclectic material were both expected and more readily accepted.

II. The 1980s

The comparative freedom, during the 1970s, to produce risky theatrical pieces was due in part to the fact that theatrical production was quite different from what it would become only a few years later. Despite the fact that real estate and production costs had begun to rise by the 1970s, this nevertheless remained a decade in which it was relatively cheap to produce theatrical productions and was, as a result, somewhat less devastating to producers when productions failed. In the 1980s, risks would become harder to take.

According to Rosenberg and Harburg, “the rising costs of a labor-intensive business (both blue and white collar), the tax burdens of city and state, the demands of individual and corporate investors in shows, and the rising expense of new technologies” all erupted at the turn of the decade and “soared far beyond the general rate of inflation.”¹⁶ George Wachtel, director of research for the League of American Theaters and Producers, notes that between 1980 and 1982, production costs on Broadway increased by a whopping 62%, while the costs of operation rose by 45%.¹⁷ Such inflation had a particular impact on Broadway musicals, which are generally more expensive to produce than dramas.

¹⁶ Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 18.

Rosenberg and Harburg note further that rising costs coincided with the development of a new division of labor and power among the creators of Broadway musicals:

Cost management by a single strong executive, the producer, ceased to be the norm. Instead, three corporate roles took on joint responsibility for controlling costs: they [were] the newly dominant directors; . . . multiproducers; and . . . more powerful company managers. . . . This overall organizational change . . . led to a decentralized and usually less effective mode of cost control in musicals than in the past.¹⁸

In addition, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the increased unionization of Broadway, as musicians, stagehands, carpenters, electricians, actors, directors, press agents, lighting designers, and choreographers all struggled for higher wages, better benefits, and healthier working conditions. While unionization was necessary for the protection of industry members who were traditionally underpaid and overworked, unions are unfortunately often the victims of finger-pointing and resentment within the industry, since increased unionization has contributed to the rising costs of production.¹⁹

Rising costs did not influence the number of musical productions offered on Broadway in any given season; interestingly, the average number of musicals has not changed significantly since the early 1930s, although there has been a slight downward trend in recent years. Likewise, the ratio of flops to hits per season has hardly changed: over 70% of musicals to open on Broadway between the 1930s and the early 1990s have closed without recouping their initial investments.²⁰ What began to change on Broadway in the 1980s were the stakes,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 18-23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 12.

which would become much higher, as new musicals emphasizing the technologically spectacular would help to uproot theatrical production from its local confines and transform it into international big business.

As noted in chapter 2, the approach to staged spectacle began to change with the rise of new technology and the influence of the cinema on the American theater. Whereas past musical productions emphasized elaborate costumes, scantily-clad dancing girls, and immense casts, the rise of technology led to shows that eschewed such emphases in favor of the latest in mechanically produced stage effects. In this respect, despite their tepid receptions, Tom O'Horgan's technologically progressive Broadway musicals exerted a strong and lasting influence. Whereas the staging of *Jesus Christ Superstar* ultimately hurt O'Horgan's career, the reputations of Tim Rice and especially Andrew Lloyd Webber would be built on such spectacles during the 1980s.

The Rise of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh

The work of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber became more popular as the 1970s progressed. Their first collaboration, the succinct children's oratorio *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, was developed into a full-scale production for the Edinburgh Festival in 1972 and was first staged in New York for a limited run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1976. Despite publicly acknowledging their disappointment with the staged

version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*,²¹ the composer and lyricist collaborated again with producer Robert Stigwood on *Evita* late in the decade. This successful musical, which originated in London before opening in New York, served as catalyst for a wave of British musicals, many by Lloyd Webber, that would dominate Broadway through the 1980s and exert a multifaceted influence there in the 1990s.

Evita was loosely based on the meteoric rise and untimely death of Eva Perón, wife of the Argentine dictator Juan Perón. As they did with *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Rice and Lloyd Webber took some wild liberties with their subject matter: the actions of the title character—depicted as a cold, power-hungry opportunist who slept her way out of the slums of Buenos Aires and into the upper echelons of Argentine society—were constantly commented upon and criticized, most often by the musical's narrator, Che Guevara, with whom *Evita* sings a duet in the second act. As they had with their first rock opera, Rice and Lloyd Webber released *Evita* as a sound recording before adapting it for the stage. First made available in the UK in 1976, the recorded version of *Evita* circulated for two years before the premiere of the stage version.

Evita was not nearly as rock-influenced as its predecessor; the musical borrowed instead from a wide variety of genres including the waltz, tango, and military march. The recorded version of *Evita* nevertheless featured a number of elements that reflected Lloyd Webber's interest in, and appreciation for, rock and popular genres, including the electric

²¹ Nassour and Broderick, 1972: 209. Personal communication with Tom O'Horgan, 23 February 1999.

guitar and bass-driven introduction, the rhythm-and-blues-based “The Lady’s Got Potential,” and the synthesizer-driven and obviously disco-influenced “Buenos Aires.” Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, prominent popular singers were cast in the leading roles. On the sound recording, the role of Evita was sung by the pop singer Julie Covington and the role of Che by Colm Wilkinson, the former lead singer for the 1960s Northern Irish rhythm-and-blues band the Witnesses, who in the 1980s would create the role of Jean Valjean in the Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg musical *Les Misérables*.²²

While Covington’s version of “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” was a number-one hit in the United Kingdom in 1977,²³ the studio recording of *Evita* was never as internationally successful as that of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In fact, whereas *Superstar* remains most successful as a sound recording, *Evita* transcended its initial status to become most internationally known as a stage musical. Harold Prince’s celebrated adaptation of *Evita* opened at London’s Prince Edward Theatre in 1978 and ran for nearly eight years; the New York production, which opened at the Broadway Theater in September 1979, defied mixed reviews and ran for nearly four years.²⁴ Subsequent productions opened in major cities across the globe, and the musical has since enjoyed a number of international revivals.²⁵

There are a number of possible reasons for the fact that *Evita* functioned more successfully as a stage musical than as a sound recording, while the reverse is true of *Jesus*

²² Larkin. 1994: 4535.

²³ *Ibid.*: 1375.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Evita* was one of the biggest hits of the 1989 theater season in Bombay and recently enjoyed a major revival that toured the United Kingdom in 1995. Rosenberg and Harburg. 1993: 61; Larkin. 1994: 1375.

Christ Superstar. First, although Lloyd Webber and Rice were alternately accused of depicting Eva Perón too sympathetically on the one hand and too harshly on the other,²⁶ the subject matter of this musical was nowhere near as controversial as that of its predecessor. *Evita* also featured a much clearer linear narrative. Whereas *Superstar* emphasized the inner lives of characters, and thus was somewhat dramaturgically limited, *Evita*, for all of its historical flights of fancy, employed a narrator, who not only commented regularly upon Eva Perón's actions but also helped keep focus on the events depicted during the musical.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by the time it reached the stage, *Evita* featured little in the way of rock influence and was thus likely more accessible to a broader number of theatergoers than was *Superstar*. In the process of adapting *Evita* for the stage, Lloyd Webber teamed with Hershy Kay to reorchestrate the musical.²⁷ and consequently, most of the rock elements were excised. The stage version offered horns and bowed string instruments in place of the squealing electric guitars and the synthesizer formerly featured in the introduction and "Buenos Aires," respectively, and the thumping disco beat used in the latter song was relaxed; rapidly strummed acoustic guitars were featured more prominently than electric ones in an attempt to evoke a more Latin flavor; and the rhythm-and-blues-based "The Lady's Got Potential" was deleted from the show.

Even further, the use of popular singers in prominent roles was downplayed somewhat in London and entirely in New York. In the former production, the only pop singer featured in

²⁶ Kerr, 1979a.

²⁷ Kerr, 1979.

a prominent role was David Essex as Che; the stage actress Elaine Paige played Eva, and Joss Ackland played Perón. The latter production featured no popular singers at all. Rather, the music theater denizens Patty LuPone, Bob Gunton, and Mandy Patinkin originated the roles of Eva, Perón, and Che, respectively.

What most distinguishes *Evita* from *Jesus Christ Superstar* is the fact that the former was one of the first to be franchised. Walsh explains,

After the artistic failure of Tom O'Horgan's wayward Broadway production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1971 . . . Lloyd Webber vowed to maintain iron control over all aspects of his productions, a vow he has kept. There would be no reinterpreting by contrary or recalcitrant directors; once the look of the show was settled on, that would be that. No matter where in the world it is playing, each production of a Lloyd Webber show looks exactly the same as its Broadway or West End incarnation. What you saw before is what you get again. The word is franchise, and . . . Lloyd Webber's personal and artistic fortunes have been built on it.²⁸

It is *Evita*, then, and not *Jesus Christ Superstar*, that established Andrew Lloyd Webber as one of the most powerful composers in the theater industry. Due to its international success as a stage production, *Evita* became the last musical that Lloyd Webber felt the need to release as a sound recording prior to adapting for the stage. *Evita*, however, marked only the first stage of Lloyd Webber's influence on the musical theater.

Evita's impact paled in comparison with that of Lloyd Webber's next project, which was his first without Tim Rice. *Cats* would become the first in a long line of what have since become known as "megamusicals," a term that Burston defines as follows:

²⁸ Walsh, 2000: 9.

Megamusicals are stage productions conceived and produced in a style born in [the 1980s], and are exemplified by but not limited to the long-running successes of *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *Miss Saigon*. . . . Megamusicals . . . share a number of essential criteria which set them apart from other music theater productions. . . . These include, first, markets characterised by rapid global expansion and marked internal growth since 1980s. . . . Second, megamusicals are produced and controlled by a select and specific group of highly capitalised, globally competent and now often transnational players. . . . The megamusical's third and most distinctive characteristic is its cultivation of specific commercial, technical, and aesthetic models of production. This has ensured the replication of any given show with unprecedented meticulousness across a greater number of international venues than was common to the field of theatrical production even fifteen years ago.²⁹

Cats is remarkable not for its artistry, but rather because it would serve as the prototype for later megamusicals, which would in turn dominate Broadway through the 1980s and early 1990s.

Cats is essentially a cycle of poems from T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, set to music by Lloyd Webber and held together with a paper-thin plot: at the beginning of the musical, the godlike cat Old Deuteronomy announces that by the close of the evening, one cat will be selected to go to cat heaven (here called "the heaviside layer") to be reborn. The musical concludes as the down-and-out Grizabella sings the musical's best-known song, "Memory," before being awarded the dubious honor of ascending into the heaviside layer on a hydraulically mechanized spaceship that serves as the musical's most elaborate stage effect. What falls between the introduction and the conclusion is a revue of songs and dances in styles

²⁹ Burston. 1998: 205-06.

ranging from swing, English dancehall, operetta, and rock, performed by a cast dressed as cats.

In the wake of the international success of *Evita*, Lloyd Webber, teamed with influential Canadian theater producer Cameron Mackintosh, recruited an impressive team to help him bring this new musical to the stage. The creative staff enlisted to work on *Cats* included the esteemed Royal Shakespeare Company director Trevor Nunn, the assistant director and choreographer Gillian Lynne, and the set and costume designer John Napier. *Cats* opened at the New London Theatre in the West End on 11 May 1981, and at the Winter Garden Theater on Broadway on 7 October 1982.³⁰

While many musicals fail to win audiences due to a lack of plot or a reliance on spectacle, *Cats*' revue-like form and stunning visuals proved assets to the production. The show's impressive costumes, makeup design, and innovative set—which extended into the auditorium and allowed audience members to enjoy a cat's-eye view of a (decidedly sanitary) garbage dump filled with oversized candy wrappers, soda cans, and worn-out shoes—arguably won more critical praise and sold more tickets than did the music itself. As the critic Frank Rich notes, “*Cats* proved as no production had before that there was an infinite tourist audience for a theatrical attraction (as opposed to, say, a circus, Las Vegas revue, or Radio City Music Hall pageant) in which spectacle trumped . . . content and no English was required for comprehension, whether by young children or foreign visitors.”³¹

³⁰ Larkin, 1994: 745.

³¹ Rich, 1998: 7.

Indeed, *Cats* holds records as the longest-running musical in the history of both the West End (where it closed in May 2002 after a 21-year run) and Broadway (where it closed in September 2000 after an 18-year run).³² It is also the most internationally profitable theatrical venture in history.³³ In the past two decades, the musical has opened in 26 countries and over 300 cities worldwide and has spawned numerous national and international touring companies. In North America alone, *Cats* is estimated to have been seen by over 35 million people.³⁴

The success of *Cats* made Mackintosh and Lloyd Webber remarkably powerful on both sides of the Atlantic. Either working individually or in tandem, the two would be responsible for a number of megamusicals that would open through the 1980s and into the 1990s in New York, London, and, via franchise, around the world. Megamusicals to attain worldwide success in the wake of *Cats* include Schönberg and Boublil's *Les Misérables* (1987) and *Miss Saigon* (1991), and Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988), all of which were produced either by Mackintosh or by Mackintosh and Lloyd Webber's production company, The Really Useful Group, LTD (now owned solely by Lloyd Webber).

³² Information courtesy of Jim Randolph at Bill Evans and Associates theatrical press agency.

³³ Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 59.

³⁴ Information courtesy of The Really Useful Company, LTD. and Jim Randolph at Bill Evans and Associates theatrical press agency.

The Stylistic Impact of the Megamusical

Auslander notes that a franchised live performance “takes on the defining characteristics of a mass medium: it makes the same text available simultaneously to a large number of participants distributed widely in space.”³⁵ Indeed, the rise of the megamusical has brought musical theater in general a step closer to the mass media, not only in the ways that it is produced, but in terms of its aesthetic makeup.

Megamusicals are often criticized for attracting audiences by placing spectacle over content. In this context, the term “spectacle” is most often used to refer to the visual aspects of a theatrical production. Especially in recent decades, the term frequently refers to scenic technology that has become sophisticated enough to allow the simulation of special effects previously only possible on film. Regularly cited examples include the spaceship that ascends at the end *Cats*; the chandelier that seems to crash into the audience at the end of act I of *The Phantom of the Opera*; the helicopter that lands onstage and takes off again during the evacuation scene in *Miss Saigon*; and the pyrotechnic transformation of Beast into Handsome Prince at the end of the stage version of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*.³⁶ Yet what is perhaps most significant here is the way in which both the mass media and past rock musicals have influenced the aural aesthetics of the musical theater in general and the megamusical in particular.

³⁵ Auslander, 1997: 5.

³⁶ See for example Kerr, 1982; Canby, 1994; Rich, 1998; and Walsh, 2000.

As has been noted elsewhere in this work, such early rock musicals as *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* are often cited as the culprits responsible for what has since become a widespread reliance on microphones and amplification in the musical theater. Such blame is partly warranted. Rock musicals introduced electric instruments to Broadway orchestra pits, and thus created the need for new ways to transport singing voices from the stage to the audience without the risk of permanent damage to the performer. Yet while electronic instruments and amplification might have been established on Broadway via the rock musical, it is the megamusical that is responsible for the now widespread use of the radio microphone.

Whereas rock musicals staged in the 1960s and 1970s relied on unwieldy, aurally inconsistent hand-held microphones, radio microphones are smaller and not hindered by electrical chords, and can thus be concealed in the wigs or costumes of each performer. All of the microphones are controlled by the sound designer, who balances the amplified voices and the sounds emanating from the orchestra pit at a “sound board” that is usually placed in the rear of the theater. The sound board is equipped with devices that allow the designer to add reverberation or to change the balance of individual radio microphones.³⁷ The amplified sound that emanates from the stage is transmitted to the audience via speakers that are positioned in various locations throughout the auditorium of the theater.³⁸

This innovation in sound has had a number of important ramifications. Perhaps the most obvious is the relative liberation of actors, who were once required to hover around standing

³⁷ Burston, 1998: 207.

³⁸ Holland, 1998.

microphones or to sing into hand-held ones, while being ever-mindful of potentially entangling extension cords. Yet advent of the radio microphone has had other implications, as Jonathan Burston explains:

To begin with, the amplification of each performer allows for a general increase in sound levels from the pit, as individual voices no longer rely on their own volume-generating capacities in order to compete successfully with orchestras' higher volume levels. Because voice volume levels are now mixed "from the board," every musical input—from the stage and from the pit—can be louder, and generally is. Volume in the megamusical has become "cinema-sized," now attaining the same levels of output one expects to hear at *Jurassic Park* or *Independence Day*. Further, this new higher volume level means that singers often no longer send the sound of their own voices out to the majority of the audience. Instead, they are usually expected to project only as far as the first five or six rows of the auditorium.³⁹

Radio microphones have had a somewhat less immediately obvious, but nevertheless important, impact on the musical theater soundscape: they have helped to alter that which is expected of the Broadway singer.

Steve Sweetland, a New York-based voice teacher who counts a number of Broadway performers among his students, notes that although radio microphones are used to protect singers from strain, reliance on such technology nevertheless results in new problems for singers:

Absent the microphone and certainly the body mike, most of the people performing today would not be. . . . Frankly, it's potentially very damaging the way most singers sing today, thinking they are going to be boosted and aided by microphones. They assume they can whisper. They do a TV soundstage performance and crank up the microphones and assume that's going to carry them. But the kind of energy required to do some of these shows eight times a

³⁹ Burston, 1998: 207.

week—they have to put forth whether they are singing and speaking properly or not. That’s where the discrepancy comes in. If they could stay in their little shells it wouldn’t hurt them. But they can’t.⁴⁰

Radio microphones have thus contributed to the decline of the traditional “belter” and the proliferation of singers best equipped not for the stage but for the recording studio.

In the years since the dawn of the megamusical, the recording studio is regularly evoked on the Broadway stage in other respects, as well. Burston notes that advances in sound technology now allow theatrical sound designers to reproduce

a sonic environment identical to that of adult-oriented rock as experienced on FM radio. Here, timbres are carefully “scrubbed” of all surface noise, producing what is often called a “pure” sound, or . . . a “studio sound.” The ability to use devices such as reverberation and balancing for each radio microphone, and the capacity to mix sound levels of individual performers from the board . . . has made the in-theatre production of this “studio sound” possible. Sound design for the musical has thus shifted away from the earlier techniques which enhanced the structural acoustics of a given theatrical venue; away from more traditional arrangements in which musical performers *shared* a smaller number of ambient microphones.⁴¹

Due to advances in sound design, then, the sounds emanating from actors live on stage have been made to sound as if they were prerecorded.

Megamusicals have thus been able to enjoy a sophistication in sound design that rock musicals of the 1960s and 1970s could not, while borrowing liberally from rock and popular music. Burston argues that the sonic aesthetic of the megamusical—a “global” pop-writing and singing style that he labels the “FM sound”—borrows liberally not only from the inoffensive

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Steve Sweetland. 4 March 1999.

⁴¹ Burston. 1998: 208.

pop music of recording artists like Kenny G., Michael Bolton, and Celine Dion, but also from early staged rock musicals:

The FM sound itself can be understood as evolving stylistically from earlier pop-rock musicals like *Godspell* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Like many of today's megamusicals, these shows also took their stylistic cues from popular music radio, and their successes led to the formation of a significant sub-genre within the larger musical tradition. What is important to note, however, is how the aesthetics of this sub-genre have developed more recently. Since *Cats*' arrival in the West End in 1980 and until the recent arrival on Broadway of *Rent* and *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* we have witnessed the evolution of this style of musical away from the sanitised but still occasionally vigorous "rock 'n' roll" sound of the rock musical of the 1970s, towards something more compatible with the aesthetic norms of a more specifically soft rock sound. . . . "The Last Night of the World" [from *Miss Saigon*] is an example of this style. Its referents are clearly the same as those of Dion, for instance, on the title track of her album *Falling Into You*, and similar stylistic influences are also clearly discernable in *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Starlight Express*, and other shows.⁴²

The rock musical's failure to have the impact that the megamusical would a decade later is due in part to the fact that rock music had not yet become fully integrated with the traditional Broadway sound and was thus not yet properly "softened" for theater audiences, as well as to the fact that it preceded the very technology it required.

The successors of rock musicals, and not rock musicals themselves, have exerted the most direct influence on the aural aspects of the musical theater in general. While microphones have been used on the Broadway stage since at least the mid-1960s,⁴³ and have been the subject of hot debate for almost as long,⁴⁴ the sound of musical theater became aesthetically

⁴² *Ibid.*: 208-9.

⁴³ O'Toole. 1995: 4.

⁴⁴ Hewitt. 1970.

standardized only after it became a global business concern. As a result, while amplified productions were once a rarity, Broadway musicals that are *not* wired for sound are now uncommon.

The fact that the rock- and pop-influenced scores typical of 1980s megamusicals have become emblematic of Broadway at present is, perhaps, inevitable. By the time Lloyd Webber reached the height of his influence, rock 'n' roll and its offshoots had predominated for nearly 25 years. Thus, while the style was perhaps easy to ignore in its early years, by the 1980s it had become so widespread and diversified that even the most traditional of theater composers were subject to exposure. Clifford Lee Johnson III, director of the musical theater program at Manhattan Theatre Club, avers,

Pop music shed its tin pan alley veneer almost completely in the '50s and '60s, and a lot of the people working in theater were angry and jealous, so they resisted it . . . so starting in the late '50s and early '60s, there's a whole lost generation of music-theater writers. There were people who tried [to write current popular songs], but [most theater composers] turned against it and tried to maintain that 1920s and '30s jazz beat. They just said, "Theater music is *different*, so you are just going to have to suck on this stupid rhythm forever." There were only miraculous, sporadic crossovers during that time period. But a generation later, you have a group of writers who grew up knowing and understanding rock 'n' roll and pop, and who also know and love the craft of theater music. So they are able to mix the two. Now you hear a lot of . . . writers who write [scores that don't] sound like rock music, for the most part, but you hear chord changes and phrases that sound like at least they are from 1970 or 1980 . . . as opposed to 1920.⁴⁵

It is highly possible that modern theater audiences, like contemporary composers, are more attuned to rock and popular music than they would have been at its inception, and that even

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998.

those who dislike popular genres are now somewhat more accepting of theater music influenced by them.

The megamusical, then, not only offers more sophisticated sound and scenic design than could its predecessors, but also a more thorough blend of popular music and traditional theater fare as well. Whereas rock musicals often feature raw, amplified voices backed by electric instrumentation throughout, rock's influence on megamusicals tends to be comparatively tame: an occasional guitar riff, the use of 12-bar blues form in a single number; an electric guitar, keyboard, or bass guitar intermingled with an otherwise standard pit band; the occasional use of vocal techniques that might be heard on FM radio amid songs otherwise performed by conservatory-trained vocalists.

The Economic Impact of the Megamusical

The franchising of megamusicals allowed theater producers to transcend specific locations, and thus to make musical theater into a huge global business with the potential for unprecedented profit-making. Rising production costs in New York City in the early 1980s and the rise of the megamusical can be seen as mutually influential. Because the cost of production rose ever-higher on the local level, as many musicals grew larger and more reliant on technology, investments became harder to recoup. Producers thus grew increasingly dependent on income generated from touring and international companies, which helped to justify soaring production costs on the local level.

The act of franchising theater thus works in two ways. In the first place, franchises purportedly guarantee that patrons across the world will be able to see an “authentic” Broadway or West End production without having to travel far from their homes.⁴⁶ Burston notes,

The megamusical’s rationalising, industrial logic, including a quality control model implemented and supervised outward from a given metropolitan centre, is understood by many industry insiders to replicate technical and artistic production details with such rigour as to delimit the interpretative agency of performers to a significant new degree. Hence the increasing use by the same insiders of terms like “cloning,” “franchising,” and “McTheatre” to describe the megamusical business.⁴⁷

But the franchising of theater also works to safeguard producers who invest in such spectacles in the first place, since national and foreign productions can help shows that flop on Broadway return investments and ultimately make profits.⁴⁸ Such protection becomes increasingly necessary as production costs climb, since shows that are more expensive to mount take longer to recoup.

While the megamusical was in some respects the logical outcome of higher production costs, the subsequently raised ticket prices reduced the regularity with which local

⁴⁶ During the course of my research, a number of informants have told me that it is not uncommon for producers to open musicals on Broadway, even though they expect them to flop, specifically so that they can launch official Broadway tours, since any reference to Broadway will help to sell more tickets. Connie Schlier, a scenic artist, and Joe Sampson, an actor, both noted that the producers of the film *Footloose* retained rights for a stage version after receiving numerous requests for permission to adapt the film for the stage. Only after deciding to take their stage adaptation on national tour did they choose to open Broadway first so that they could market it as an official Broadway production. Indeed, despite almost universally poor reviews, the musical began a national tour immediately after it opened in New York.

⁴⁷ Burston, 1998: 206.

⁴⁸ Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 59

theatergoers could attend productions.⁴⁹ In fact, during the 1980s, the rising costs of production and the reactions to such costs by theatergoers became something of a double-edged sword: as the cost of production skyrocketed, producers of musical theater became more reliant on the idea of spending more money to make more money, which resulted in higher ticket prices for ever-larger, technology-driven spectacles. Yet while such spectacles proved hugely popular with the city's seemingly inexhaustible tourist supply, many local theatergoers became either less willing or less able to buy increasingly expensive tickets for smaller, more inexpensively produced shows. As Frank Rich asks, "Why pay the same high ticket price for a show, consumers asked, that didn't have a levitating spaceship or a falling chandelier but only good songs, compelling characters, or provocative drama?"⁵⁰ In the shadow of the megamusical, then, the "modest hit" became less of a staple on Broadway during the 1980s.⁵¹

As the 1980s progressed, Off and Off Off Broadway reasserted their positions as foci for the adventurous, cutting-edge theater that Broadway was seen to lack. As early as 1982, Guernsey writes,

The narrowing circumstances of Broadway acceptance . . . are causing the creative baton to be passed elsewhere. . . . An alternative seems to lie in evolving Off Broadway into the principal bearer of creative theater, raising the price of the top ticket to more than \$20 and pushing the production cost well up into six figures, hoping it will become economically feasible to maintain such a theater in the dozens of auditoriums scattered throughout the city. If this sounds like past Broadway mistakes—raise prices and costs and hope for the best—it should serve as a warning to Off Broadway against playing follow-the-leader over the same cliff. Right now, good plays and willing audiences

⁴⁹ Bordman, 1992: 665-66.

⁵⁰ Rich, 1998: 7.

⁵¹ Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 109.

exist in abundance Off Broadway, even at \$14 to \$20 a seat. Whether this will enable Off Broadway to establish an economically stable outlet for its creative energies is still very much an ongoing question.⁵²

Through the 1980s, Off and Off Off Broadway flourished, as they had in the 1960s, by serving as the antidote to the often overproduced, risk-free fare on Broadway.

New York's less commercial realms for theater nevertheless began to change as a result of the pressures of rising production costs. Ticket prices Off Broadway, like those on Broadway, rose progressively through the decade, and many productions began to reflect the sheen of increased commercialism traditionally only expected of Broadway productions. The distinctions between "commercial" and "nonprofit" theater, which had begun to blur in the 1970s, continued to do so through the 1980s; this obscuring of boundaries led to new concerns for Off Broadway in the following decade, which will be discussed below.

⁵² Guernsey. 1982: 21-22.

When Megamusicals Fail: the Case of Carrie

It is important to note that while smaller, less spectacular musicals were becoming harder to launch by this point, they did not recede entirely. Rather, their dwindling numbers were indicative of a period in which rising costs and an interest in tourist attractions caused Broadway to become what many now view as a stale environment in which “risk” translates into “the newest in stage technology.” Indeed, while megamusicals proved highly influential in many economic and stylistic respects, not all have been successful. Through the 1980s, amid the unprecedented success of such long-running and internationally recognized musicals as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*, Broadway was littered with ventures that spared no expense and nevertheless failed to become international phenomena. In fact, while megamusicals were alluring to many investors because of their potential for unprecedented returns, the opposite applies, as well: with megamusicals, the possibility for success becomes greater, but so does the threat of disaster.

The musical *Carrie* is perhaps the most fitting example, here, of ways in which ever-larger productions had the potential to yield increasingly catastrophic results. Stephen King’s 1974 novel about a lonely, telekinetic teen who takes revenge for the cruelties inflicted upon her by her classmates and by her religious fanatic of a mother was adapted for the stage by Lawrence D. Cohen, who had also supplied the screenplay for Brian DePalma’s 1976 film version. Michael Gore composed the music and Dean Pitchford, who would later author the screenplay for the film *Footloose*, wrote the lyrics. *Carrie* ran for three weeks in Stratford,

England, before landing in April 1988 at Broadway's Virginia Theater, the interior of which was painted black for the occasion.⁵³

According to Ken Mandelbaum, whose book *Not Since Carrie: 40 Years of Broadway Musical Flops* not only describes the musical in detail but uses it as the touchstone for all Broadway flops, there was very little about *Carrie* that was not completely inept. Actors cast as high school students appeared to be in their 30s or older and were clad inexplicably in either togas, studded leather jackets, or neon body stockings; the set for Carrie White's home consisted of nothing but a trapdoor and a chair, and that for the high school a series of rotating, mirrored side panels; fire shot from Carrie's hands, lightbulbs exploded over her head, and various grooming items floated around her as she readied for her prom, and yet her telekinesis was never explained or even verbally alluded to; lasers, strobes, smoke, pyrotechnics, and flashing hydraulic lifts abounded and yet the famous prom scene was reduced to a mirror-ball secured to the floor, a small bucket of what was supposed to be pig's blood but by most accounts looked like strawberry jam, and a cast who pretended to be in the throes of electrocution by doing slow-motion cartwheels across the stage. To add to the confusion resulting from poor casting, staging, and costuming, *Carrie* was sung-through, and the lack of dialogue proved additionally befuddling for spectators unfamiliar with the story.⁵⁴

Even before *Carrie* entered its preview period in New York, the musical was grist for the local rumor mill, especially once news broke that Barbara Cook, who played Carrie's

⁵³ Larkin, 1994: 712.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 5-9 and 348-54.

mother, had left the production after its badly received Stratford run after nearly being decapitated by a piece of flying scenery.⁵⁵ Rumors that the first Broadway performance of the musical would be its last were stoked when the curtain at the first preview was delayed for a half-hour. This rumor was quashed as *Carrie* limped towards opening night, but the show was nevertheless subject to further indignities during its preview period. Mandelbaum writes of an audience divided during early performances, the curtain calls of which were greeted with a raucous mix of cheers and boos.⁵⁶ Norma Adler, a former editor at *Playbill* magazine, recalls with the bemused tone typical of informants who saw this musical, “Oh, the night I saw *Carrie*, it got a standing ovation—it was *that bad*.”⁵⁷

Carrie opened on 12 May 1988 to the cruelest of critical pans—Frank Rich compared it with the Hindenberg⁵⁸—and closed after five performances.⁵⁹ *Carrie* thus earned the dubious distinction of surpassing *Dude* and *Via Galactica* as the most memorable and costly flop in Broadway history. The investments that were lost as a result of these flops are indicative of how much more expensive it had become to launch the most spectacular musicals. Whereas the producers of *Dude* were vilified as wasteful and incompetent when that musical lost its \$800,000 investment in 1972, *Carrie* lost \$8 million less than two decades later.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Larkin, 1994: 712.

⁵⁶ Mandelbaum, 1991: 351

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 9; personal communication with Norma Adler, month and day unknown, 1992.

⁵⁸ Rich, 1988.

⁵⁹ Larkin, 1994: 712.

⁶⁰ Mandelbaum, 1991: 351.

While *Carrie* is perhaps the most extreme example, the vogue for megamusicals in general began to show signs of waning by the end of the 1980s, when even the once-seemingly charmed Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice both experienced major disappointments. In 1987, a production of Lloyd Webber's soul-influenced, \$8-million *Starlight Express*, which was a hit in London and in Germany,⁶¹ opened in New York for 761 performances and became the first Lloyd Webber venture on Broadway to fail to recoup its investment;⁶² the musical also failed to catch on in Japan and Australia.⁶³ Lloyd Webber's 1990 *Aspects of Love* fared even worse on Broadway, closing after only 377 performances.⁶⁴ In 1988, *Chess*, Tim Rice's collaboration with former ABBA members Benny Anderson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, also closed at a loss, despite a fair amount of hype and publicity generated by Murray Head's recording of the song "One Night in Bangkok," which reached number 3 on the *Billboard* Top-40 in 1985.⁶⁵

The late 1980s, then, saw Broadway poised for yet another change. By this point, even the most successful megamusicals had begun to outlast their creators, who were having trouble repeating their early successes. As the 1990s progressed, Broadway would become increasingly corporate, and the creation of megamusicals would be taken to new levels, as discussed below.

⁶¹ Gänzl, 1994: 1361.

⁶² Bordman, 1992: 722; Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 28.

⁶³ Gänzl, 1994: 1361.

⁶⁴ Suskin, 1992: 603.

⁶⁵ Whitburn, 1996: 279.

III. Rock Musicals Through the Early 1990s

While the megamusical saw the absorption of current popular music into the Broadway musical during the 1980s, it did not result in the extinction of the usually more aggressively amplified and orchestrated, youth-oriented rock musical. Rather, the occasional rock musical continued to emerge through the 1980s and into the 1990s. As was now typical of the subgenre, those that opened on Broadway usually proved disappointing. While rock and rhythm-and-blues influenced musicals like *Dreamgirls* (1981) and the aforementioned hit megamusicals attracted enthusiastic audiences and enjoyed lengthy runs, self-described rock musicals like *Marlowe* (1981), *The News* (1985), and *Leader of the Pack* (1985) faded quickly from the stage,⁶⁶ while even the much heralded *The Who's Tommy* (1993) closed after only barely recouping its investments. As they had through the 1970s, rock musicals continued to appear more regularly Off and Off Off Broadway, where small, offbeat shows like *Starmites* (1980; revised 1987), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), *Lenny and the Heartbreakers* (1983), *Surrender A Flirtation* (1985), *The River* (1988), Todd Rundgren's *Up Against It* (1989), *Return to the Forbidden Planet* (1991), and *Rent* (1995), among many others, ran to differing degrees of critical and commercial success.

Of the aforementioned list of Off Broadway shows, the last is the one that has proven most successful. *Rent* is the only rock musical in decades to both transfer successfully to Broadway and spawn multiple international productions. As a result of its phenomenal

⁶⁶ Bordman, 1992: 766-79.

success, as well as some stylistic and structural similarities, *Rent* is often compared with *Hair*. Yet these two musicals are ultimately very different, particularly in terms of their marketing and the impact that they have had. A comparison of these musicals, in fact, yields some interesting insights into the ways that economic factors have changed commercial theater in New York City between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, as well as the ways that rock musicals are viewed by many industry members.

Rent (book, music, and lyrics by Jonathan Larson) was originally developed and staged at the New York Theater Workshop on East 4th Street in Manhattan. An updated version of Puccini's *La Bohème*, *Rent* depicted a group of young people squatting in the East Village during the early 1990s. Like *Hair*, the musical attempted to provide a snapshot of a particular place at a particular time and tackled themes that would seem unapproachable by most musical theater standards, including AIDS, heroin addiction, homelessness, and a wide variety of alternative lifestyles. Also like *Hair*, *Rent* featured regular breaks to the fourth wall, did away with elaborate sets, and, rather, featured a sparse, curtainless stage exposed to the wings and set with only a few props. In place of the totem-pole featured in *Hair*, the stage of *Rent* boasted an immense sculpture of junk, wire, and Christmas-tree lights that branched out over the stage. *Rent* was perhaps most similar to *Hair* in its use of amplification and in its musical presentation. It made use of standing microphones set downstage left and right, as well as radio microphones worn conspicuously over each actor's face. The actors were accompanied by a group of rock musicians who were placed not in the orchestra pit but on the stage, where

they sat in a confined structure resembling a huge wooden crate with most of its slats kicked away.

Also like *Hair*, despite themes that might initially strike some as extreme or alienating, *Rent* was able to transcend its subject matter and to appeal to mainstream theater audiences in a number of different ways. First, for all its taboo subjects, *Rent* relies heavily on a number of classic music theater structures and images: the romantic leads, Roger and Mimi, are flanked by two other couples; one, Joanne and Maureen, function primarily as comic relief, while the other, Angel and Tom Collins, are tragic figures. In keeping with tradition, act I closes with a lively, full-size production number, “La Vie Bohème,” during which the entire cast engages in celebratory song and dance and the budding romance between Roger and Mimi is established. Don Summa, who has served as the press agent for *Rent*, notes further,

[*Rent*] is much more traditional than people think in many ways. Structurally, when I went to see *The King and I*, I couldn’t believe it. The first act takes a year, the second act is a day. *Rent* is the opposite. The first act is a day, and the second act is a year. Oh, and the [female lead] coming down a staircase when she [makes her first entrance]. So does Mame. So does Dolly. People don’t think about that, but when [Mimi] comes in she walks down a staircase and that’s her big number. [Larson] knew a lot more about musicals than you would think. Plus, he called it *Rent*. I mean, you know, *clearly* he was thinking about *Hair*.⁶⁷

Further, it is significant that the musical diverges from its source in its conclusion. Whereas *La Bohème* ends as the consumptive Mimi dies in the garret bed of her bereft lover Rodolfo, who bellows her name to no avail, *Rent* features an ending more befitting its traditionally

⁶⁷ Personal communication with Don Summa, 6 October 1998.

upbeat genre: the HIV-positive, heroin addicted Mimi, unconscious and near death in Roger and Mark's East Village squat, is miraculously revived when Roger sings the love song he has composed for her on his electric guitar.

Nods to more traditional musical theater aside, *Rent*'s broad appeal is due in part to the fact that despite the amplification, instrumentation, and thematic material that help define it as a rock musical, the musical's score—like that of *Hair*—borrows from but does not rely too heavily on a variety of different styles, ranging from classic musical theater ballads to salsa to classic rock to rap music. As a result, it is not uncommon for members of the theater industry to refer to Larson as “one of ours,” thus setting him apart from rock or pop musicians who dabble in the musical theater.⁶⁸

While Larson's music has been rejected by many rock fans and musicians who find his score either derivative or not aggressive enough to be “authentic” rock, this very quality proves surprisingly appealing to many theatergoers who identify themselves as ignorant or intolerant of rock music. Mandelbaum notes, for example,

I don't know much about rock at all. I have no rock albums. I mean, I'm really ignorant. I was listening to show music throughout, so I'm a bad one to ask about the real sound of rock because I don't know it. And yet my instinct tells me from what little I do know that . . . *Rent* doesn't sound like rock music. It's pure theater music written by somebody who grew up on rock music, and who brings a certain amount of that sensibility to it, some of that sound. But frankly, I don't think I would have liked it as much as I did if it were really rock music.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998.

⁶⁹ Personal communication with Ken Mandelbaum, 3 August 1998.

Mandelbaum is not alone in this assessment. During the period in which I conducted field research for this project, a number of friends and acquaintances remarked casually that despite initial misgivings about seeing *Rent*, they were inevitably pleased by the musical's accessibility.⁷⁰

Despite the stylistic and thematic similarities that may be drawn between *Hair* and *Rent*, much less risk was involved in moving the latter from Off Broadway to Broadway. In some respects, the comparative lack of gamble was the result of highly atypical momentum generated during *Rent*'s initial run at the New York Theater Workshop. *Rent* outlasted the initial hype, however, as a result of newly savvy marketing and research techniques that would snowball during the period between the musical's premiere on Broadway and the end of the millennium.

As was noted in chapter 1, despite *Hair*'s hit status when it opened Off Broadway in 1967, Michael Butler was rejected by most members of the Broadway establishment in his attempts to bring *Hair* uptown. He finally did so at the risk of finding no larger audience than the one that showed interest in *Hair* when it ran at the Public Theater. By contrast, Broadway's major producers fought feverishly over *Rent* only weeks after it had opened Off Broadway.⁷¹

Even before it entered previews at the New York Theater Workshop in early 1996, *Rent* generated a remarkable amount of hype as the result of a tragic backstage story. After watching the final dress rehearsal of his musical on 24 January 1996, Jonathan Larson died

⁷⁰ Personal communication with, among many others, Barbara Mackenzie, 4 April 1999; Andrew Gans, 31 July 1998; and Tom D'Ambrosio, 17 July 1998.

⁷¹ Kroll, 1996: 57.

of an aortic aneurysm at the age of 35.⁷² The media took great interest in the tragedy. The fact that *Rent*'s many HIV-positive characters juxtaposed youthful vigor with the specter of untimely death made the sudden demise of its composer particularly poignant, and *Rent* therefore became central to countless human-interest stories. The barrage of media attention—combined with strong word-of-mouth and the glowing critics' reviews that appeared after the musical opened Off Broadway on 13 February 1996⁷³—resulted in such a furious demand for tickets that within three weeks of its opening, producers announced that *Rent* would be moving to Broadway.⁷⁴

Rent was quickly restaged at the Nederlander Theater on West 41st Street, where it reopened on 29 April 1996.⁷⁵ That spring, the musical won an impressive array of awards, including the Tony, New York Drama Critics Circle, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, and Drama League awards for best musical, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for drama.⁷⁶ International and touring companies for *Rent* sprang up across the globe, and these reflect the increased interest in theatrical franchising. Whereas different productions of *Hair* were custom-designed to fit the flavor of each individual city, *Rent*'s assistant director Martha Banta notes that according to the wishes of the producers, all productions of *Rent* were designed to be as nearly identical to the Broadway version as possible.⁷⁷

⁷² Lipsky, 1996: 103, 129.

⁷³ Tommasini, 1996: 5.

⁷⁴ Rich, 1996.

⁷⁵ Bordman, 2001: 806.

⁷⁶ Information courtesy of Don Summa, press agent at Richard Kornberg and Associates.

⁷⁷ Personal communication with Martha Banta, 24 November 1998.

Early in its run, there was little question about the fact that despite its tragic foundations, the media blitz surrounding *Rent* was good for business. Shortly after the musical had reopened on Broadway, Istel noted,

In the last few months, I have often wondered what the audience and critical reception of *Rent* would have been if that aneurysm hadn't developed in Larson's aorta. Were that the case . . . the whole endeavor of *Rent* . . . would have been treated as Larson intended it to be, as a work of art, a stage drama, a fiction, a compelling critique of traditional definitions of "family values." It may have been dismissed as facile, derivative, and exploitative of its subject matter, or it may have been seen as a vital, innovative rock opera that heralded a bright future for the composer. Either way, or somewhere in between, the composer's literal presence would have forced critics to actually listen to what he had to say. But in article after article, Larson's real-life tragedy is inextricably linked to the onstage drama. A typical review details the circumstances of Larson's death, mentions the "important" entertainment industry people who were spotted in the audience, and ends with a cursory examination of the musical itself.⁷⁸

Istel is not alone in such an opinion. Although most requested anonymity in making such comments, a number of informants for this project noted that they do not believe that *Rent* would have been as successful had Larson not died just before it began its run.

While the intense hype surrounding the production might well have steered its reception early in its run, the production was nevertheless also buoyed significantly as a result of the application of new advertising and marketing techniques. In the days of *Hair*, a musical's commercial success depended much more on strong reviews and word-of-mouth than on the few local advertisements run for any given production. *Rent*'s move to Broadway

⁷⁸ Istel, 1996: 14.

in the spring of 1996, however, was accompanied by a flurry of both local and international advertising, which had by this point become far more important in the theater industry.

In mid-March 1996 an advertisement consisting of nothing but “a stenciled logo surrounded by a full page of white space” appeared in the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday *New York Times*, as well as on buses, taxi cabs, and billboards throughout the metropolitan area; the minimalist campaign helped to sell three-quarters-of-a-million dollars worth of tickets to the show in three days.⁷⁹ At roughly the same time, a line of clothing inspired by the musical was placed on sale in a special boutique on the second floor of Bloomingdale’s department store in New York,⁸⁰ and fashion spreads featuring the cast of *Rent* appeared in *Newsweek*, *Time Out New York*, and *Rolling Stone* magazines.⁸¹ The advertising blitz boosted sales for the already-hot show; in the short time that it took to move *Rent* from the New York Theatre Workshop to the Nederlander, the musical generated a \$6 million advance.⁸²

While *Hair* became a phenomenon because it was the first musical to successfully merge rock music and Broadway fare, *Rent* succeeded *despite* its affiliation with a musical subgenre that had fared notably poorly in its three decades of existence. Tom Viertel, who has produced Broadway and Off Broadway productions since the mid-1980s, argues that in

⁷⁹ Shapiro, 1996: 52.

⁸⁰ Riedel, 1996: 35.

⁸¹ Kroll, 1996: 54-60; Pluchino, 1996: 14-17; O’Brien, 1996: 54-58.

⁸² Kroll, 1996: 56.

modern marketing campaigns, avoidance of the terms “rock musical” and “rock opera” is crucial to a musical’s success:

I don’t think you would market anything as a rock musical anymore in part because rock is so fragmented. . . . You could describe something as a rock musical back in the days of *Hair*, when rock ‘n’ roll was basically one strain of music. But within three years of *Hair*, it was not one strain of music anymore, and now everything in rock is a niche. . . . [T]here are 27 different types of rock now, no one of which has a very large audience. . . . I have kids who listen to rock, they don’t know anything about rap. It would be hard for me to think of what has achieved *any* popularity lately that employs anything that could remotely be called current rock. *Rent* is a theatrical composer utilizing rock forms. Not that *Rent* doesn’t qualify as a rock musical, I suppose it does. But what we’re hearing is theatrical composers borrowing forms to make a point. Larson didn’t have any currency as a rock writer. He was a theatrical writer.⁸³

Viertel’s opinion is mirrored by that of the press agent for *Rent*, who went to great lengths to avoid labeling the musical during its development.

Don Summa notes that although the theatrical press insists on using labels like “rock musical” and “rock opera,” he opposes applying such terms to *Rent*:

I never like to call *Rent* a rock musical. I really tried to shy away from that. Because for the people who really care about the music and know about the difference between rock music and—they’re not gonna see this as rock music. It certainly has rock motifs, and uses rock rhythms, but, I mean, you have pop, you have gospel, you have blues, you have a tango—this isn’t a rock musical. My problem with “rock musical” is that it doesn’t get the people who like rock to come, and it doesn’t get the people who like musicals to come. So who’s gonna come? People who are interested in rock music aren’t gonna go to Broadway, and people who are interested in musicals don’t care about rock music. That’s why I think *Rent* is successful—because it’s not really a rock musical. The press loves to call it a rock musical or a rock opera. [But]

⁸³ Personal communication with Tom Viertel. 24 November 1998.

for the reasons I mentioned to you, I just didn't think that was gonna sell it to anybody.⁸⁴

Hence, whereas the creators of *Hair* flaunted its rock influence by incorporating the description into its title—and thus inadvertently coining the phrase—those responsible for selling *Rent* made a concerted effort to avoid pigeonholing the musical.

Rosenberg and Harburg note that in most cases, “the real distance between not-Broadway and Broadway is several hundreds of thousands of dollars and a carload of glitz.”⁸⁵ Yet this comment does not apply to *Rent*; since moving to Broadway, *Rent*'s sparse set, comparative lack of spectacle, and relatively low budget worked to its advantage and contributed to its long run in the years since the hype and intensity of the initial advertising campaign waned. Summa notes that *Rent* could withstand dips in attendance that would be seriously detrimental to more expensive shows: “For a show that's so cheap, we could run at 60% and break even, so I'm assuming *Rent*'s gonna run a long time.”⁸⁶

Appropriately enough for its low budget and bohemian themes, *Rent* moved into the Nederlander Theatre, which was in need of renovation and had long gone unused. While the dilapidated theater's fraying carpets, fading and peeling paint, and worn seat covers made it hardly the most sought-after performance space, the Nederlander was deemed the perfect setting for the musical. Expensive renovations were unnecessary. In fact, the auditorium was made even more dilapidated to fit the musical's grungy, downtown aesthetic.

⁸⁴ Personal communication with Don Summa, 6 October 1998.

⁸⁵ Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 92.

⁸⁶ Personal communication with Don Summa, 6 October 1998.

In the years before Times Square was renovated, *Rent* fit perfectly at the Nederlander, in large part because even its exterior and immediate surroundings seemed appropriate for the musical. Summa notes,

The show became, oddly, a better show on Broadway, I have always found, than it was Off Broadway. I think a lot of it had to do with . . . the aura. . . . The show seemed stronger in a Broadway house, and I never thought it would have. Because so much of it seemed—you know, it was performed where it was set. You go [to the East Village], you are on the [same] street . . . but the same thing was true of [41st Street] in a way. This is a block that was not unlike an East Village block—it was kind of run down, it was inhabited by homeless people. There were homeless people who lived in front of that theater. [The theater was chosen] because it was the most like where it was before . . . and the block was the right block.⁸⁷

Ironically, while the Nederlander remains appropriately dilapidated, the renovation of the Times Square area in the years since *Rent* moved uptown has not damaged the musical's appeal.

Mark Sussman notes that during Broadway's mid-1990s "facelift," discussed at length below, *Rent* simply became yet another attraction in a neighborhood that now serves as a theme-park version of New York City's former self:

Currently, we have on Broadway an image of the Other Underworld, that elsewhere, Downtown. In Jonathan Larson's *Rent*, life below 14th Street is thoroughly reified into a high-speed montage of sex, drugs, AIDS, and art relentlessly humanized into an MTV version of Bohemia. . . . Homeless folks fight cops in riot gear. "La Vie Bohème" plays a hip "Downtown" to Times Square's new and improved Uptown. The characters, mostly with wealthy, caring parents, live in upbeat poverty according to the legends of the 1980s and 1990s East Village. . . . AIDS and aesthetics are both neatly contained issues: the AZT goes down easily. The demonstration chant "ACT UP! FIGHT

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

BACK! FIGHT AIDS!” is appropriated as a song lyric, a chorus that doesn’t bear repeating. The Underworld has been placed many limo-lengths away. Safe consumption replaces excessive and illicit consumption. The danger of carnival—which keeps many life-long New Yorkers far away from Times Square on a New Year’s Eve—is being effaced and contained by this new cultural and commercial zoning.⁸⁸

In this respect, *Rent* is very like its predecessor. Just as *Hair* worked in part to appeal to audiences interested in experiencing a subculture vicariously, *Rent* fit into its new surroundings due to its ultimately upbeat, non-threatening approach to squatting, drug addiction, and AIDS; even further, the musical stood as a testament to a lifestyle that waned as the East Village rapidly gentrified during the 1990s.

As many did with *Hair*, a number of critics received *Rent* with myriad ecstatic superlatives and the declaration that it would revitalize the American musical theater. Indicative of a growing fear of taking risks, however, is the fact that despite its huge success, *Rent* differs radically from *Hair* in that it has spawned few imitations on or Off Broadway. Michael Cerveris, who originated the role of Tommy in *The Who’s Tommy*, notes that *Rent* follows too long a line of disasters to convince producers that rock musicals will ever be safe investments:

After *Tommy*, every other thing I was called in for or sent a tape of was some pop or rock opera thing. . . . There’s a lot of that stuff being written, it’s just not getting produced. And one of the reasons it is not being produced is that they look at *Tommy*, which was one of the most successful of those things. It made its money back, but then it closed. *Rent* may make people feel a little safer about [such ventures], but it may not.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Sussman, 1998: 40–41.

⁸⁹ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris, 25 August 1998.

Indeed, the sole attempt to launch a rock musical along the lines of *Rent* was harshly criticized. In early 1999, the New York Theatre Workshop attempted to repeat the success it had with *Rent* by staging Paul Scott Goodman's rock musical adaptation of Jay McInerney's novel *Bright Lights Big City*. Slammed almost universally in the press as a poor imitation of *Rent*, the musical, which will be discussed at greater length in chapters 4 and 5, closed a few weeks short of its limited run.

As the 1990s progressed, changes on Broadway began to exert even more pressure on the ways in which musical theater was developed and produced. The increased presence of corporate producers on Broadway has made the commercial theater more sterile and risk-free than it had been even half a decade prior, and the atmosphere on Broadway has influenced Off Broadway and the regional theater.

IV. The mid- to late-1990s

In the past decade, a number of dramatic changes have taken place, both in New York City's Times Square area and in the commercial theater industry. These changes were spurred by the announcement, in the mid-1990s, that the Walt Disney Company would become active in Times Square as an investor, real estate owner, and theater producer. In the short time since Disney's arrival, Times Square has seen a significant increase in business activity by a variety of entertainment conglomerates.

Whereas the economic and stylistic impact of the megamusical has largely been ignored by scholars—with the excellent work by Burston the sole exception—a great deal of writing has been devoted to the implications of the Times Square renovation;⁹⁰ further, the scholars Nelson and Wickstrom have lent insight into the “Disneyfication” of some of the neighborhood’s entertainment venues, through respective examinations of the first two Disney musicals to appear on Broadway, *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*.⁹¹ Yet little attention has been paid to the overall influence that corporations have exerted on the commercial theater industry itself, both as theater owners and producers.

While this influence has just begun to trickle down, more often than not it reflects the intensification of tendencies that have existed in the theater industry for decades, rather than the sudden introduction of new trends. Thus, despite regular pronouncements by scholars, journalists, and theater industry members about the artistic death of theater on one hand, or its economic rebirth on the other, the long-term effect of major media corporations on the theater remains largely the subject of speculation. This said, few would disagree that the increased role that corporations are playing in the theater industry is changing the ways that productions on Broadway and across the country are developed and produced.

⁹⁰ See, for example, volume 42, no. 1 (1998) of *The Drama Review*, a special issue devoted to exploring the nature of public space in the “new” Times Square.

⁹¹ See Nelson, 1995 and Wickstrom, 1999.

The Renovation of Times Square

Heavy construction in Times Square did not begin until the mid-1990s. Yet despite New York City's then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani's habit of taking full credit for the revitalization of the neighborhood, plans to rebuild Times Square had been in the works since the late 1980s, under the administration of Mayor David Dinkins. The original plan for the neighborhood was to use it as an extension of midtown Manhattan's business district, but this project stalled in the late 1980s when the commercial real-estate market softened.⁹² Times Squares' many commercial theaters had not been part of the original plan for revitalization, but they quickly became central to the revised plan, which envisioned Times Square as a cleaner, more tourist-friendly entertainment district, or as Nelson notes, a "formerly indigenous theatrical district transformed into a romantically idealized tourist version of its former self."⁹³

This revised plan has relied on "a crucial connection between entertainment and retail."⁹⁴ Potential investors were lured with the promise of profit to be found in "linking the theatrical resonance of [Times Square] to its value as a venue for retail and advertising."⁹⁵ The City and the State of New York, hoping to profit from the increase in tourism that the presence of international media companies would bring to the rejuvenated area, began to court the Walt Disney Company.

⁹² Nelson. 1995: 83.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Wickstrom. 1999: 286.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Hoping to elevate Disney's sagging image from a company solely interested in making money into a company respected for fueling the performing arts, Disney CEO Michael Eisner struck a deal with the City of New York in 1994. Disney agreed to spend approximately \$6 million to renovate the New Amsterdam, a huge, 90-year-old theater on 42nd Street that had once been home to the Ziegfeld Follies but had in recent decades fallen into disrepair. Disney would enjoy exclusive use of the New Amsterdam, which it now occupies under a 49-year lease and uses to house the stage version of *The Lion King*.⁹⁶ The City and State agreed to lend Disney an additional \$28 million in low-interest loans in return for 2% of all ticket receipts from the theater.

Because it had agreed to renovate a theater that promised to be costly to maintain, Disney was encouraged to expand its presence in Times Square through the development of other properties, including a Disney store; the ESPN Zone, a dining and sports-related entertainment venue;⁹⁷ a street-level studio for Disney-owned ABC television; and new musicals, which will be developed by Disney's recently-formed theater division and staged in other Broadway theaters.⁹⁸ As was hoped, competing entertainment conglomerates quickly followed Disney's lead into the area. In the late-1990s, such corporations as SFX Entertainment, Cablevision, and News Corporation arrived in Times Square as investors in theatrical properties, real estate owners, and purchasers of advertising space on the well-lit

⁹⁶ Nelson, 1995: 72-74.

⁹⁷ According to the ESPN website (www.ESPN.com), 80% of the ESPN cable network is owned by ABC, a subsidiary of the Disney company; the other 20% is owned by the Hearst Corporation.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

facades of neighborhood buildings, all of which are obliged by zoning laws to advertise as intensely as possible.”⁹⁹

The result has been a remarkable transformation of Times Square. In less than a decade, a once-decaying neighborhood overrun by porn shops and peepshows became a slick, commercialized vacation destination. While critics argue that redevelopment has traded local flavor for new status as a “global crossroads, populated by transnational corporations catering to tourists,”¹⁰⁰ advocates of redevelopment cite a more attractive, visitor-friendly neighborhood; the expulsion of the sex entertainment industry for which Times Square was until recently notorious; and the hundreds of jobs created by the appearance of new theme restaurants, shopping centers, megastores, cinemas, and television studios, all of which now serve alongside the area’s commercial theaters as tourist attractions in their own right.

Inviting corporations into Times Square is not quite as outlandish as it seemed when the deal with Disney was first announced and gripes about Times Square as Disney’s newest theme park began to circulate. In his article *Times Square: Public Space Disneyfied*,” Mark Bell argues that for better or worse, “huge corporations are in the best position to determine the shape and parameters of public spaces and popular performance venues in those spaces.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, by the mid-1990s, real estate values in New York City had skyrocketed to such an extent that both theater maintenance and production had become prohibitively expensive enterprises.

⁹⁹ Sorkin. 1999: 9.

¹⁰⁰ Wickstrom. 1999: 288.

¹⁰¹ Bell. 1998a: 25.

At least from a financial perspective it is perhaps corporations that are most suited to thrive in such a setting. For costs that had become too high for independent producers, corporations could not only afford to renovate theaters, but could also fill those theaters with their own properties. The musical versions of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, for example, each reportedly cost Disney approximately \$15 million: while such a sum is reasonable for a corporation accustomed to gambling four or five times as much on a television or film property, the shows were the two most expensive musicals in Broadway history upon opening in 1994 and 1997, respectively.¹⁰²

The media companies that have helped make Times Square into a revitalized tourist attraction have taken an active role in bringing Broadway—specifically, the Broadway musical—back into the web of popular culture from which it was severed in the 1950s, when rock ‘n’ roll replaced Broadway fare as the dominant popular music genre in the United States.¹⁰³ Building on the pioneering efforts of such producers as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh, entertainment conglomerates that followed Disney into theatrical production have not only begun to purchase or develop their own theatrical properties; they can also market and franchise these properties internationally with relative ease, since most own film production studios from which to borrow material, recording studios in which to record original cast albums, and a variety of national periodicals, television studios, and radio stations from which to advertise productions. Such access to the mass media has extended far

¹⁰² Nelson, 1995: 72; Evans, 17 November 1997: 71.

¹⁰³ See for example Gottfried, 1984: 287.

beyond the reach of Broadway's less moneyed old-guard in the years since the decline of Tin Pan Alley and the printed songsheet. Rather than relying heavily on the annually televised Tony Award ceremonies for national exposure, as theatrical producers have in past decades, shows with corporate backing can now be hyped internationally in myriad ways long before a theatrical property begins its run.

While corporations have built on models introduced by Mackintosh and Lloyd Webber, their reach proves infinitely more powerful, due to the application of a business tactic that many corporations have honed elsewhere and are now applying to their theatrical productions. The tactic, commonly known as "synergy," allows a company to generate stockholder value¹⁰⁴ and revenue by both selling a particular product and simultaneously integrating it into a web of related products. Thus, a company like Disney can use one of its properties, for example the animated film *Beauty and the Beast*, to sell any number of others: *Beauty and the Beast* on video, *Beauty and the Beast*-related rides at Disneyland, *Beauty and the Beast* merchandise at Disney stores, and, now, the musical version of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway, on tour, and in cities across the world.

Synergy allows a company to sell itself along with any product it hawks. The Broadway version of *The Lion King*, for example, can be mentioned in Disney films, advertised on Disney radio stations, or mentioned on Disney's television programs. (In 1999, the musical was central to the plot of an episode of the ABC series *Sports Night*, in which a

¹⁰⁴ See for example the Securities and Exchange Commission file on the Walt Disney Company. <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1001039/0000898430-96-005815.txt>.

cynical, overworked character is given free tickets and finds that she is rejuvenated by the production.) In keeping with the application of synergy to all products, Disney musicals now serve as advertisements for one another. Like the film version, the Broadway staging of *The Lion King* features at least two overt references to *Beauty and the Beast*, which is conveniently playing a few blocks north.

The application of business synergy to the Broadway musical helps explain why a large number of Broadway productions currently under development are stage versions of popular films, many of which combine the technological innovations typical of 1980s megamusicals with familiar titles, characters, plot lines and, in some cases, songs from soundtracks, which are reorchestrated and incorporated directly into a musical's plot. Movies that have recently been or are in the process of being adapted for the Broadway stage—many by those who own rights to the original films—include *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *Summer of '42*, *Moonstruck*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Footloose*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *The Full Monty*, and *The Producers*.¹⁰⁵

The lure of familiarity, it seems, cannot be underestimated. A majority of audience members questioned at productions of both *Footloose* and *Saturday Night Fever* note that they purchased tickets to these shows specifically because they knew and liked the music from the film soundtrack, or because they had seen or even simply heard of the movie. While these two productions did not fare particularly well—both closed at a loss—theater producers

¹⁰⁵ Dominguez. 2001.

nevertheless are finding it safer to invest in familiar titles than to take chances on unknown material. Dominguez writes,

Why are Broadway producers relying so heavily on movies? The reason is simple: With the cost of a play anywhere from \$5 million to \$12 million, it is wise to invest in a property with a proven track record. "We are all looking for brand names," says [producer] Mitchell Maxwell. . . . "The success of 'The Lion King' is something we all want to achieve. There's a built-in knowledge of a title, so you don't have to penetrate the market and make a title known." Marty Bell, co-producer of "The Sweet Smell of Success," agrees: "I think there's a Disney effect in town now, and producers of big musicals are leaning toward known titles because they're pre-sold. Everybody's trying to find a way to be safe in a business you can't be safe in."¹⁰⁶

The lure of familiarity has benefitted at least one rock musical that initially failed on Broadway. Due to the underground success, during the 1970s and 1980s, of the film version of *The Rocky Horror Show*, a 2000 revival of this musical—which borrows more from the film than from the original stage production—enjoyed a longer run than the first Broadway production did when it played at the Biltmore in 1975.

There is some indication that familiarity is in fact becoming expected of musical productions. While walking through Times Square shortly after the premiere of the Broadway version of *The Full Monty*, I encountered a group of British tourists, who were discussing the production. One remarked that although the stage version had been "Americanized" and featured none of the disco hits featured on the motion-picture soundtrack, "it was *still* really good."¹⁰⁷ Familiarity becomes additionally important since a rising number of visitors to New

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Comments of unidentified tourist, recorded Friday 27 September 2000.

York speak little English and are thus necessarily interested in spectacle over content when shopping for a Broadway show. Unsurprisingly, these film adaptations rely on synergy, too: the film sells the musical, the musical sells the film, both sell related merchandise, and the producers profit from all sales.¹⁰⁸

Because they can expand their reach beyond local audiences, corporate producers take advantage of a fact that the commercial theater industry has known for a long time, but with few exceptions has been unable to afford to exploit: theater audiences are no longer as local as they were even 30 years ago. Tom Viertel explains,

They once asked [George Abbott] what the biggest change in theater was during his lifetime and he said, “electricity.” The biggest change in my lifetime is clearly the jet plane. We cater to a tourist audience now that is ever-renewing, which is why something like six or seven of the 70 or so shows that have ever run a thousand performances in Broadway history are all running right now. That’s the first time that’s ever happened. . . . It used to be that when you opened a show 50, 40 years ago . . . the audience was essentially local, except for rare occasions when something would transcend that. When you ran out of local audience, you closed. That’s not so true anymore. . . . It’s true to some degree of non-musical shows, because the tourist audience for them is still small. But in musicals there has become, rather quickly, a tradition of people coming to town, seeing shows, and leaving, and then new people coming to town. . . . So you have this ever-renewing domestic and foreign audience . . . and the possibility of longevity that there never used to be.¹⁰⁹

The integration of musical properties into pre-existing webs of international commerce appears to be working well for Broadway’s corporate producers. Due in large part to the heavy marketing of an already-familiar property, Julie Taymor’s acclaimed staging of

¹⁰⁸ An example may be found in the *Playbill* for the Broadway musical *Footloose*: Opposite a page featuring photographs of cast members is a full-page advertisement for the 15th anniversary edition of the film and its soundtrack.

¹⁰⁹ Personal communication with Tom Viertel, 24 November 1998.

Disney's *The Lion King* generated a \$20 million advance in ticket sales.¹¹⁰ Perhaps more tellingly, the company's less critically acclaimed but equally hyped Broadway productions *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aida* have joined *The Lion King* as fixtures on *Variety*'s weekly list of top-ten best-selling Broadway shows.¹¹¹

The role of the composer in both musical theater and rock music will be discussed at length in chapters 4 and 5, yet it bears noting here that both *Aida* and *The Lion King* feature scores or songs by Elton John, the internationally known recording artist. John's contributions to the musical theater add new weight to Burston's assertion that as it becomes global, the aural aesthetics of musical theater moves closer to the middle-of-the-road pop music heard on FM radio stations. They also add new meaning to Rosenberg's and Harburg's insistence that musicals are no longer *written*, they are *constructed*.¹¹² While many musical theater aficionados shudder to learn that Elton John was never directly involved in rehearsals for the musicals he composed for—he merely set lyrics that Tim Rice faxed to him, faxed his music to Disney, and then showed up at the theaters on opening night¹¹³—John's name on the marquees of Disney's musicals certainly does not seem to have hurt tickets sales.

Just as the advent of the megamusical helped to make musical theater more internationally accessible, the broader reach enjoyed by media companies new to Times Square has in some ways benefitted the commercial theater in general. A 1999 report by the

¹¹⁰ Evans. 24 November 1997: 71.

¹¹¹ http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20001105/en/stage-broadwaytoppers_18.html.

¹¹² Rosenberg and Harburg, 1993: 108.

¹¹³ Witchel. 2000: 7.

League of American Theatres and Producers notes that during both the 1996-97 and 1998-99 theater seasons, Broadway contributed an estimated \$2.8 billion dollars to the city's economy; this number represents a 40% inflation-adjusted increase from the 1991-92 season, which was, despite the recession at the time, itself surprisingly strong.¹¹⁴ Further, the presence of entertainment companies has allowed for the reclamation of a desirable demographic that the musical theater lost when the rise of rock 'n' roll usurped the power of Tin Pan Alley. Due to the increase of youth-oriented marketing and subject matter, as well as of the reduced-rate tickets that corporations can afford to offer, attendance at commercial theaters by people under the age of 20 is finally on the rise after decades of decline.¹¹⁵

The presence of corporations as theater producers has had a less evident but arguably more important influence. Because conglomerates can spend more money to appeal to an ever-widening pool of tourists, they can keep shows open for longer despite even the most scathing criticism. In this respect, corporations are contributing significantly to the decline in power of the local theater critic, who even a decade ago could single-handedly close a show the day after it opened. Theater historian Ken Mandelbaum notes that this trend, which began in the 1980s with the birth of the internationally marketed megamusical, is only increasing at present:

¹¹⁴ <http://www.broadway.org/econ99.html>.

¹¹⁵ Pogrebin. 1998: E3; demographic studies by the League of American Theaters and Producers. 1997 and 1999.

There has never been a bigger divergence between critical and public opinion. In my entire lifetime, probably never in the history of musicals have shows gotten such bad reviews and been so wildly popular.¹¹⁶

While the declining importance of the local critic and the triumph of the corporate musical might not be cause for celebration among aesthetes, it has allowed for a significant boost in employment.

The musical *Footloose* provides an excellent example here. During its out-of-town tryout in Washington, D.C., and again when it opened on Broadway in October 1998, *Footloose* was labeled a “musical chore,” a “flavorless marshmallow of a musical,” and “sickening,” among other unkind and, in the past, fatal appellations.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the musical ran for over 700 performances, due in large part to aggressive marketing on the part of its producers, Cablevision and Dodger Endemol Theatricals.¹¹⁸

Catherine Campbell, a member of the original cast, notes that while company members were aware that *Footloose* is not what many would deem a great work of art, they were nevertheless relieved that the show remained open after the reviews appeared:

There's a lot of audience out there for a show like *Footloose*. . . . Broadway is now like a tourist spot . . . [so] there's room for all kinds of people now. It's not just intellectual, elite people that go to the theater anymore. It's not the Noel Coward set. There's a part of me that misses what it used to be, because I am a person who loves brilliant theater. . . . But I'm not everybody. . . . There's a whole lot of people out there who deserve what *they* want, not just what *we* want. The critics are wrong, because people are still buying tickets to the shows that the critics bombed. . . . I see the joy that people stand up with at the end of the play, and I think, “what a wonderful thing to give to people.”

¹¹⁶ Personal communication with Ken Mandelbaum. 3 August 1998.

¹¹⁷ Rose. 1998: C1; Pogrebin. 1998: 3.

¹¹⁸ Pogrebin. 1998: 3.

... So even though we were killed by critics, it makes it worth it. ... I tell you, 10 to 15 years ago ... if you got bad reviews, you closed the next day. That's what commercialism has done for Broadway: a lot more actors have jobs.¹¹⁹

While not as fully developed or as widely used at present, a few strategies aimed at the further “critic-proofing” of shows have recently been attempted in the commercial theater. In a few cases, corporate producers have revamped struggling musicals in mid-run. *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, for example, made Broadway history by being the first musical to open, then to close for significant recasting and revision, and then to re-open in “new and improved” form to enjoy a longer run than the original version would have allowed.¹²⁰ In other cases, companies have attempted to critic-proof musicals by test-marketing them before they premiere. Tom Viertel notes that with *Ragtime*, for example, the production company Livent (now a subsidiary of SFX-Entertainment), was the first to use focus groups in the development of a musical:

[Livent held] focus groups, asked people what they liked about the show, what they didn't, what they would change. Entire songs were written in order to respond to audience complaints.¹²¹

But for these rare exceptions, most of the approaches that media companies are taking in producing Broadway shows have been used or at least attempted in the theater industry for decades, albeit on smaller scales.

¹¹⁹ Personal communication with Catherine Campbell, 11 November 1998.

¹²⁰ Gold, 1999: 7.

¹²¹ Personal communication with Tom Viertel, 24 November 1998.

Corporate Approaches in Relation to Past Industry Techniques

Long before Disney, Cablevision, and SFX-Entertainment appeared as Broadway producers, the so-called “Big Three” of New York theater (the Shubert, Jujamcyn, and Nederlander organizations) functioned as theater owners and producers, and thus have long made a practice of developing or hand-picking shows to put into their own theaters. Further, in hope of appealing to the largest potential audience, these producers have traditionally relied in some part on familiarity to sell tickets. One can find hundreds of past musicals based on popular novels or stories, for example; while the trend is certainly on the rise, films have inspired stage musicals at least since the 1939 film *Ninotchka* inspired Cole Porter’s 1955 hit *Silk Stockings*,¹²² which itself was made into a film in 1957.

Further, producers have attempted to thwart the power of critics for decades. Long before Lloyd Webber or Disney were developing international marketing campaigns and selling franchised productions to foreign producers to offset the influence that poor reviews might have on local audiences, impresarios such as David Merrick were devising creative and sometimes not-so-savory ways to extend the runs of shows. To take a legendary example, when the Comden and Green musical *Subways Are for Sleeping* opened to pans in 1961, Merrick resorted to false advertising to lure theatergoers:

Merrick found seven men whose names were the same as the seven major New York drama critics and invited them to a preview and dinner. Securing their permission to be quoted, Merrick and his press agent . . . invented the ecstatic paeans (“John Chapman” called *Subways* “the best musical of the century”)

¹²² Mardenfeld. 1999: 21.

that would be attributed to them. They devised an ad with photos of the phonies next to his quote, and a headline reading “7 out of 7 are Ecstatically Unanimous About *Subways are for Sleeping*.” The *Times* and the *Post* killed the ad, but it ran in early editions of the *Herald Tribune*. . . . While the show’s creative team despised such antics, they had to admit that it helped the show stay open.¹²³

Nor is synergy new to the commercial theater. As early as the 1970s, producers like Robert Stigwood were staging properties on Broadway that had already earned international names for themselves in other forms; *Jesus Christ Superstar* is but one example. As noted above, the 1980s megamusical proved even more than *Superstar* had that musicals could be made into international commodities through strategic marketing campaigns aimed at widening audiences. At present, marketing strategies that once set megamusicals apart from other musicals are now being more liberally applied. In the years since corporations moved to Broadway, the term “megamusical” has thus in some respects become obsolete: at present, any musical can be sold internationally as long as it has a corporate-sized budget.

Over the past 20 years, and especially during the 1990s, theater producers have developed marketing strategies unique to each musical. Tom Viertel notes, for example, that his revue of songs by Lieber and Stoller, *Smoky Joe’s Café*, had a successful run despite poor reviews due in part to a promotional relationship developed with the local “oldies” radio station, which would often give away free tickets or sponsor on-air guest appearances by cast members.¹²⁴ While corporations have more money and a broader reach, most of their strategies

¹²³ Mandelbaum. 1991: 112.

¹²⁴ Personal communication with Tom Viertel. 24 November 1998.

are not much different than those applied by the theater industry in the first place. The scale might be new, but most of the techniques are not.

One might conclude, then, that rather than transforming it, corporations have merely given the commercial theater a much needed financial boost. Broadway productions have always been commercial ventures, after all; media companies have simply made them even more commercial than the Shuberts, Nederlanders, and Jujamcyns, or even the Lloyd Webbers and Mackintoshes, could have managed on their own. With such logic in mind, it is perhaps surprising that the response to the presence of media companies in the realm of commercial theater has been largely negative among journalists and scholars, and ambivalent among many members of the industry itself.

A Critique of "Theatrical Corporatization"

Critics of increased corporate presence have not collectively duped themselves into thinking that Broadway was ever anything but a place to make money. Broadway musicals have always been big business, so the notion that this business is getting even bigger is not exactly the core of the concern. The focus is more nebulous: while opponents are often quick to acknowledge, and even to appreciate, the economic boost that conglomerates have given the industry, most note that this very boost is wreaking havoc on the already delicate balance struck in theater between art and commerce, which seems to be tilting dangerously away from

art. The conundrum is perhaps best summed up with a comment made by Steve Swenson, a theater technician who has worked in New York since the early 1990s:

Everyone's really happy that there's so much work right now. The problem is, there's so much crap being staged that it's sort of hard to care much about the work you get, once you get it.¹²⁵

Many attribute the perceived decline in quality to the increase in production budgets. While shows like *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* help to increase the amount of money that Broadway makes in a year, these costly productions have raised the stakes even higher than early megamusicals did a decade prior. As the price of musicals escalates, many producers find that they simply cannot compete. Even Cameron Mackintosh, whose *Phantom of the Opera* cost about \$8 million in 1988, is now struggling to compete in this new marketplace.¹²⁶

A need to vie with larger companies has begun to change the way old-time theater producers do business. The rising costs and emphasis on synergy have led to a shift from the desire to perfect a property and toward the desire to sell that property in as many ways as possible. Many producers are thus becoming less concerned about the quality of a show than they are in secondary income generated from that show's related merchandise.¹²⁷ Jack Viertel, Tom Viertel's brother and the creative director of the Jujamcyn organization, notes,

The Lion King was the first shot out of the barrel. Once that worked, you knew it was a matter of time before [Cablevision] and Universal and Hallmark and all these people said, "Wait a minute, this is a good thing, I want to be part of it." And once those companies that are used to spending 40 and 50 million dollars to create a product . . . see Broadway . . . as the beginning of a profit

¹²⁵ Personal communication with Steve Swenson, 6 October 2000.

¹²⁶ Pogrebin, 2000: 1.

¹²⁷ Cox and Evans, 1997: 1.

center for a huge product, rather than the play being the play, then that's it—it's going to change the whole landscape. It has begun to, I think.¹²⁸

With this in mind, rumors such as the one about Disney's *Aida* being inspired by the company's need for an excuse to market a black doll are as plausible as they are risible.¹²⁹

In many respects, the arrival of entertainment conglomerates in Times Square has done less to help theater than it has to help the conglomerates themselves. Tom Viertel notes, for example, that corporations have benefitted most from the marketing strategies being applied on Broadway:

Disney is a very marketing-heavy company, but their capacities to market are so specific to them that while they have borrowed from us, it has been virtually impossible for us to borrow from them. I mean, we don't own a theme park in which to give away tickets to our shows, or offer opportunities for people to see the shows at discounted prices. The synergy involved when you own a television network, several cable networks, a half-dozen theme parks and all that stuff is unimaginable from our perspective. So we watch them and we admire them, but basically it has been a one-way street, where they have taken a number of the techniques that we and other independent producers have pioneered, and adapted them. . . . But we can't really do much of what they do.¹³⁰

In the face of increasingly expensive spectacles and live versions of popular films, many independent producers have responded by developing projects viewed as relatively "risk-free." As noted above, many are following the lead of corporate producers by adapting movies for the stage; Tom Viertel is a producer of the Broadway version of Mel Brooks' 1968 film *The Producers*. Others are turning to revivals, now abundant on Broadway.

¹²⁸ Personal communication with Jack Viertel. 20 October 1998.

¹²⁹ Simon, 2000: 88.

¹³⁰ Personal communication with Tom Viertel. 24 November 1998.

Evidence that corporations are beginning to absorb or edge out old-time producers lies in the development of vertical production empires. In 1997, for example, Jujamcyn Theaters announced a partnership with the SFX-owned Pace Theatrical Group; the union allows Jujamcyn to share the power that corporations enjoy, but it brings with it an increasing concern for the bottom line above all else. Jack Viertel notes,

The thing we are always aware of that causes us to pass by a lot of good work is that we have to develop shows that have at least a decent chance of playing to a wide audience. . . . It's a question we are constantly asking—How is this play or musical going to make itself heard above the din . . . ? Sometimes it's not a particularly noble answer that we have.¹³¹

As these empires continue to grow, then, risks will only get harder to take.

While “crowd-pleasers” might be good for business, they are not necessarily indicative of a healthy state for the theater. On the contrary, fetishizing the familiar can work to the disadvantage of new works, which become increasingly marginalized. In this respect, what is currently happening to the commercial theater can be compared with what has been happening to classical music in this country.¹³² As in the music industry, the theater industry is increasingly forced to take economics into consideration, and less able to bring new work to Broadway since, as Cameron notes, “developing new work . . . is scarcely cost effective: It is expensive, time-consuming, and risky.”¹³³

While innovative work is becoming scarce on Broadway, original shows that do open there often prove unable to compete with the familiar or spectacular. Furthermore, just as it

¹³¹ Personal communication with Jack Viertel, 20 October 1998.

¹³² Tommasini, 1998: 24.

¹³³ Cameron, 2000: 10.

is difficult to lure audiences away from spectacle, it is hard to argue with the market for nostalgia. Statistics on the past 15 Broadway seasons indicate that often, the seasons that offer the fewest new productions make the most money.¹³⁴

While commercial theater in general is suffering under the weight of increasing costs, nonmusical productions are hit hardest, at least on Broadway, where they have never been as commercially viable as musicals. Broadway grossed a record-breaking \$603,000,000 in ticket sales during the 1999-2000 season, but during the same period, the industry experienced a far more sobering historical first: in December 1999, for the first time in memory, no original, recently written comedy or drama was running on a Broadway stage.¹³⁵

Although the revitalized Times Square area has seen the renovation of a number of large, old theaters, as well as the construction of new rehearsal spaces for incoming productions, access to performance venues remains a problem in the area, since corporate-backed shows are kept open for longer runs. While there are certainly benefits to keeping productions open for as long as possible, the growing glut of shows that producers refuse to close has begun to cause something of a shortage of theaters, the largest of which are dominated by either long-running holdovers from the 1980s or more recent, corporate-backed musicals. Tom Viertel notes,

Independent producers . . . can't compete with [corporations] for the types of attractions that now go into the 2000-seat theaters. Those are likely to cost \$15 to \$20 million instead of \$8 to \$12 million because *The Lion King* set the bar

¹³⁴ Broadway Season Statistics, seasons 1984-2000. Study conducted by the League of American Theatres and Producers, June 2000 (<http://www.broadway.org/bwaystats.html>).

¹³⁵ Pogrebin, 1999: 1.

that high. The only people who can do that are large companies who have other fish to fry besides simply making a profit out of the endeavor itself. That leaves the rest of us looking at . . . theaters that aren't big enough to accommodate that kind of attraction. . . . To take an example, a theater like the Martin Beck, which is 1433 seats . . . would have been big enough to house what was [once] thought to be a large musical. You could have put *Les Miz* in the Beck. . . . They almost did put *Phantom of the Opera* there. But those shows are small by comparison with a show like *The Lion King* . . . [so] a theater like the Beck has ceased to be appropriate for the . . . largest attractions, [which] now have to go into houses that are 1500 seats and up. There are only a handful of houses like that . . . on Broadway, many of them housing long-running attractions that aren't showing any sign of slowing down. . . . This is forcing [independent producers] to play in smaller houses. . . . Some theaters, which were typically never musical theaters, are being turned into musical theaters for [producers] willing to accept the additional risk of having small capacities. The alternative is not having a theater at all. . . . [But] when you're . . . in a theater with a 1000-seat capacity and you have a running cost that suggests you should be in a theater with a 1400-seat capacity, your approach to promotions has to be slightly different because so much promotion involves trading tickets for exposure in the media. . . . The notion of giving away a significant number of tickets when you only have 1000 tickets to sell a night is fairly terrifying.¹³⁶

Hence, Broadway is currently experiencing a bottleneck effect that benefits corporations and puts strain on independent producers.

In an atmosphere in which the best-selling productions are big-budget spectacles, a question arises as to what type of audience is being created for the theater. While it is perhaps good news that record numbers are flocking to theaters in New York, or to see national and international tours of Broadway musicals, it must be remembered that showing people their favorite films live on stage, no matter how innovative the adaptation, is not necessarily going

¹³⁶ Personal communication with Tom Viertel, 24 November 1998.

to create life-long theatergoers. The approach could just as easily lower the standards of what is expected from theatrical production. Frank Rich notes,

If the new generations of theatergoers coming up now are . . . weaned on the esthetics of *Lion King* and *Riverdance*, will they want the same limited theatrical diet when they become the new audience pool for the Roundabout Theater Company or the Goodman Theater in Chicago or Arena Stage in Washington? A new Theatre Development Fund survey released last month reported the good news that the under-18 theater audience is increasing for the first time in more than a generation. But there is chilling news buried beneath the fine print: Almost all of these new theatergoers were attending *Beauty and the Beast* and the like, with the under-18 component of straight play audiences numbering a miniscule 1.1 percent.¹³⁷

The question as to what future audiences will expect of theater becomes more pressing since corporations are the ones that can most easily afford to develop education programs, offer reduced ticket prices, and court young people with specialized advertising campaigns.

Despite the aforementioned issues, many argue that Broadway's move toward commerce and away from art is not only inevitable, it is also unproblematic. Although he is ambivalent about the current atmosphere of commercial theater, Jack Viertel notes,

Whether art needs to survive on Broadway is a good question. I am not sure it does need to for anybody but people like me who want it to survive. As a business, it may not need to. The problem is . . . in the movie business, you can make a \$200 million movie, but it's still possible to make a \$6 million movie. In Broadway theater, at least, you can *only* make the \$200 million movie. . . . You can't do something as risky, offbeat and cheap as you can in the movies, relative to what an expensive movie costs. You can maybe do it Off Broadway, or in a resident theater, but you can't on Broadway, because the economic constraints are such that it's impossible. . . . The question that everyone has to answer in his or her own way is, does it matter if there is no

¹³⁷ Rich. 1998: 7.

real quality art on Broadway? It matters to me because I work on Broadway and that's what I'm interested in. But it may not matter in the long run.¹³⁸

The Relationship Between Commercial and Non-Profit Theatrical Realms

The issues raised herein would matter less if the commercial and nonprofit theatrical realms were distinct. If this were the case, Broadway could continue evolving into a museum for revivals, spectacles, and recycled films, while the nonprofit realm concentrated on developing new musicals and plays. The corporatization of Broadway, however, has affected the not-for-profit realm, which is being used more and more for commercial purposes. In another trend that has been spurred by the presence of entertainment conglomerates as theater producers, the divide between commercial and nonprofit theater is blurring more rapidly than ever.

As has been noted elsewhere in this study, although they have always mutually influenced one another, the nonprofit and commercial realms of theater in the United States have historically remained at a wary distance. Commercial theater has traditionally prioritized entertainment suitable for mass audiences, while the nonprofit sector has prided itself on placing artistic innovation before economic gain. While the nonprofit theater remains, at present, the primary cultivator of new American drama¹³⁹ and a site for the development of more challenging, less spectacle-laden musical theater, those who work in the nonprofit realm are underpaid when compared with their commercial counterparts: a 1999 Theatre

¹³⁸ Personal communication with Jack Viertel, 20 October 1998.

¹³⁹ Cameron, 2000: 10.

Communication Group fiscal survey of nonprofit theaters shows that 35% of respondents finished the 1999 fiscal year in the red.¹⁴⁰ Nonprofits, like their commercial counterparts, need money to survive; this has begun to translate more into drawing big audiences with surefire hits that have a chance of crossing over into the commercial realm than it does into nurturing new endeavors.

The commercial and nonprofit theater worlds have thus moved away from the adversarial relationship they have had in years past and toward a partnership: the commercial realm looks to the nonprofit one for new works and smaller houses to test Broadway-bound material, while the nonprofit realm seeks a greater share of the financial rewards traditionally found in the commercial realm. As a result, more and more nonprofit groups have begun to host what are essentially workshop versions of productions that are being tailored for the commercial realm. In return for agreeing to house early versions of Broadway-bound productions, nonprofits accept what has been labeled “enhancement money” from producers interested in test-marketing productions before attempting a Broadway opening. Nonprofit companies share production credits, while corporations foot most of the bill. Under this type of agreement, musicals like *The Full Monty* are conceived for Broadway, but are developed in the nonprofit realm.

Partnership has its benefits. Nonprofit houses are now able to produce musicals and bigger plays than they could otherwise afford, and a move to Broadway can put a struggling

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

nonprofit theater on the map. On the other hand, such relationships threaten to stifle creativity; in response to arguments that the growing partnership between the nonprofit and commercial realms is ultimately harmless, Ira Weitzman, former director of musical theater at Lincoln Center, scoffs, "Does the fact that this money is coming from commercial sources influence the end product? Of course it does."¹⁴¹

In such an atmosphere, it is perhaps not surprising that the most successful original rock musicals to be staged recently in New York City have cropped up in spaces that are increasingly far from Broadway, and even, to some degree, from the traditionally nurturing realm of Off Broadway. As the distinctions between Off Broadway, Broadway, and the regional theater blur, Off Off Broadway has become the newest home to such offbeat productions as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which features some of the most aggressive rock music to reach the theatrical stage, and *The Donkey Show*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in a discotheque in the 1970s and performed by actors who lip-synch to pre-recorded disco hits. Both of these offbeat productions found success despite—or perhaps as a result of—runs in performance spaces located literally and figuratively on the fringes of Manhattan: *Hedwig* ran at the long-ignored Jane Street Theater in the farthest reaches of the West Village, while *The Donkey Show* continues to run in an abandoned discotheque near the West Side Highway in Chelsea. Similarly, *The Bombitty of Errors*, a rap version of the Shakespeare play that began as a theater project among a group

¹⁴¹ Singer, 1998: 5.

of graduate students at New York University, became a surprise hit during the summer of 2000 when it ran at various bars and comedy clubs before finding a permanent home in a small, downtown cabaret. Such productions usually boast ticket prices that are markedly lower than their Broadway and Off Broadway counterparts, and thus attract the much-coveted young audience with ease.

Over the past 30 years, rock music has merged with Broadway fare in the commercial theater, while less diluted forms of rock and popular music continue to emerge in innovative new productions that attract more specialized audiences. While the large number of rock musical casualties on Broadway in the 1970s continues to keep producers wary of rock musicals, even in the years since *Rent* became an international phenomenon, plenty of Off—and now Off Off—Broadway productions continue to experiment with rock music. Such a formula extends to practically all theatrical productions in New York City: the more experimental or risky a piece is, the more likely it will find its way to an Off or Off Off Broadway house. Since the Off and Off Off Broadway realms, like regional houses, are increasingly influenced by economic factors on Broadway, however, experimental drama and musical theater are gradually being placed in greater peril.

Like the Times Square area in which it is based, the commercial theater industry has seen a number of monumental changes in a very short period of time. These are indicative of a general process of corporatization whereby fewer and fewer organizations control an ever-widening amount of any given product. In a trend that began in the late 1970s and has only

accelerated in the past half-decade due to the presence of media companies in Times Square, an increasing number of “risk-free” Broadway productions are developed, produced, and marketed to appeal to ever-widening audiences. While the megamusical in the 1980s, and the corporatization of theater through the 1990s, have allowed the Broadway musical to move back into an entertainment mainstream that had become dominated in the past half-century by the film, television, and recording industries (which were all similarly corporatized decades ago), the American theater takes its share of the spotlight at a cost.

Although Broadway is currently enjoying an unprecedented financial windfall, theatrical productions in New York and across the country are evolving from creative forms of artistic expression into products developed by committee and suitable for synergistic appropriation by the entertainment conglomerates that produce and market them. In short, stylistically and economically, theater is becoming more like mass mediated entertainment than ever before. While this process of corporatization is perhaps less problematic on Broadway, which has always been a center for commercialism, the issue becomes more complicated due to the fact that the most commercial realm of American theater is influencing the country’s many nonprofit houses. Corporations might be helping theater, then, but arguably not as much as theater is helping corporations.

Analyzing the relationship between corporate control and independent artistic expression is difficult in any medium. It is important to note that the extent of influence that corporations will finally have on the American theater is not yet known and may not be for

some time. At present, corporatization has certainly limited artistic expression in the American theater, but has yet to cause its death. New musicals and plays are still being created and staged across the country; many theatrical productions still regularly succeed or flop as the result of audience response, critics' reviews, or both, despite the best efforts of marketing experts new to the theater; and perhaps most importantly, independent programs that nurture young artists continue to operate, and even to be newly developed. Thus, amid the now-regular announcements of new partnerships between Broadway's old and new guards, there may still be found news of strenuous efforts being made to keep the American musical theater from stagnating.¹⁴²

Optimists might argue that creative expression will always find its way. Just as music continues to be made and disseminated on the grass-roots level, smaller, innovative theatrical productions continue to dot the landscape. For every staged screenplay or big-budget revival, there is a *Donkey Show* or a *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, both of which earned critical and commercial praise despite their lack of marketing tie-ins.

Unlike making music, however, making theater is almost always expensive. As corporations continue to fill the vacuum left by the dwindling and censorious National Endowment for the Arts, there is less opportunity for young composers and playwrights to be nurtured in environments that value creativity and innovation over money-making and the broadest possible appeal. As long as costs continue to spin out of control, corporations

¹⁴² For example, Harold Prince and his children have recently made news for their collective efforts to fund, promote, and stage new works of musical theater by up-and-coming composers. Pogrebin, 2000a.

continue to offer recycled films in place of innovative musicals, and regional theaters continue to be used as breeding grounds for Broadway-bound ventures, the American theater will only continue to be compromised.

Chapter IV

Rock “Authenticity” and the Reception of the Staged Rock Musical

The significance of magic is that
people believe it.

—Simon Frith

As 1950s rock ‘n’ roll developed into the more sociopolitically aware rock music of the 1960s, an ideology of authenticity became increasingly central to its culture. Such an ideology implies that as artists who bare their souls in both composition and performance, rock performers somehow transcend the influences of the music industry. Further, the music itself is regularly celebrated as a transgressive, rebellious genre, despite its obvious commercial moorings.

While many writers on rock music argue that this putative authenticity exists largely in the collective imagination, most argue further that such imagined authenticity is powerfully influential.¹ Indeed, rock’s associations with authenticity have led many fans, critics, and historians to set the music apart from and above “pop” music. While the line dividing rock and pop is impossibly blurred and regularly contested—especially since the terms “rock,” “pop,” and “popular” are often used interchangeably—pop is generally seen to be more overtly manufactured and commercialized than rock, and thus less representative of the true emotional state of the performer.

While many popular genres have lent themselves successfully to the musical theater, rock has always struggled in that realm, due in part to its relationship with authenticity. Rock’s

¹ See, for example Frith, 1981; Sanjek, 1992; Goodman, 1998; and Gracyk, 1999.

imagined authenticity has made the reception of rock musicals in the media, the industry, and among rock fans somewhat problematic. The means by which rock's imagined authenticity is perpetuated thus deserve examination, as does its relationship to staged rock musical reception.

I: Origins of the Authenticity Myth

Among the cultural claims made for rock music by the end of the 1960s were that it was the genuine reflection of the experience of some idealized, undefined youth community and that there was "no distinction of social experience between performers and audiences."² These ideologies link rock to a long line of vernacular genres that were similarly idealized. During the late-nineteenth century, scholars in the United Kingdom and North America drew sharp distinctions between 'folk' and 'popular' music by placing the artistic and social value of the former over that of the latter. They drew no distinctions between folk performers and their audiences, and thus argued that the music was particularly representative of the rural communities from which it emanated.³

The notion of folk music as a unifying genre or a mouthpiece for the masses was adopted by the American radical left in the 1930s and 1940s.⁴ Such conceptions, of course, did not correspond to reality. During this period, most of the urban working class was more likely listening on the radio to such performers as Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Frank Sinatra than they were to protest songs of the Spanish Civil War or the Harlan County picket

² Frith, 1981: 159-60.

³ *Ibid.*: 160.

⁴ Denisoff, 1972: 101.

lines.⁵ The “People’s Music” movement was thus one in which the lives and experiences of the rural working class were selectively celebrated by urban radicals.

A similar, selective ideology infused the commercial folk music revival that took place in the U.S. during the late 1950s and 1960s. Although initially apolitical, this revival took on political undertones during the 1960s in the wake of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Simon Frith notes that during the height of this revival, “there was, in theory, no separation of performer and listener,” and that “the aesthetic emphasis was less on technique than on truth.”⁶ There were, however, a few important differences between this and earlier folk movements: by the mid-1960s, many performers active in the folk music scene grew newly interested in expressing personal sentiments and shied away from their designated roles as civic representatives for their audiences or their generations. Although he came to prominence as a performer of politically charged folk songs, for example, Bob Dylan later turned his attentions toward rock songs that he composed and set to his own introspective and increasingly obscure lyrics.⁷

Yet associations with authenticity did not wane in the transition from folk to rock; they merely shifted. Terry Bloomfield notes,

the authentic came to be seen not just as the genuine, that is some kind of “real” “folk” art, but also as raw, direct emotion that would somehow break through “the trappings of showbiz.” . . . American folk-rock and the counterculture . . . broadened and embellished the cult of authenticity. In their hands it swelled

⁵ *Ibid.*: 103–4.

⁶ Frith, 1981: 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*

up to embrace emotional honesty and sincerity, autobiographical truth and political correctness.⁸

Paradoxically, then, late-1960s rock musicians' claims to represent a community were reinforced to the extent that they aggressively expressed their individuality.

At least in theory, it was a rock musician's ability to display "real" emotion in composition and in performance that set him or her apart from pop performers. Frith notes that prior to Bob Dylan,

There had always been performers who wrote their own songs but they had not previously been regarded as distinctive popmakers. Paul Anka's "Diana," for example, had never been thought to express his own experience except in terms of clichés so general that they could be used by everyone. . . . Folk singers had always been contrasted to pop singers because they wrote and sang . . . of politics [and] of personal feeling—and it was this convention of reality that singer-songwriters brought to rock. . . . [F]aking an emotion . . . became an aesthetic crime; musicians were judged for their openness, their honesty, their sensitivity. . . . The problem was not that performers sold out the rock community by becoming stars but that they presented themselves as if they weren't.⁹

While rock's connection to authenticity is perhaps most perceptible in the performances of singer-songwriters, Dylan and his emulators influenced rock performance in general.

By the late 1960s, many prominent rock musicians perfected the art of at least seeming to bare their souls while onstage in ever-larger concert venues. Frith writes that performers like Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix

fed the rock audience's need for the emotional charge that confirmed they'd been at a "real" event. The questions they posed were central to rock: how to guarantee the emotional impact of their performances night after night . . . (the answer lay in technology, volume, a gradually evolved repertoire of rock signs

⁸ Bloomfield, 1993: 17.

⁹ Frith, 1984: 66-67.

of emotion); how to relegate public and private life when rock audiences expected no distinction (the answer was to ignore the audience, to deny that there was such a thing as a separate public persona—musicians soon found that they could make lots of money by apparently playing only to please themselves).¹⁰

While it borrowed heavily from folk ideology, then, rock ideology shifted in order to more comfortably embrace the star system that prevails in the world of popular music. As will be discussed in chapter 6, rock's relationship with authenticity became increasingly intricate as it developed and grew in scope.

Rock ideology differed further from folk ideology in its comparative, if not entirely untroubled, acceptance of technology. Through the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the relative lack of technology, combined with the ideological bond between performer and audience, resulted in folk's emphasis on live dissemination via acoustic performance. Even in the mid- to late-twentieth century, technology was seen by many members of folk circles to falsify or cheapen the music and its message. Rock, however, was dependent upon the very technology that was decried in folk circles. The increased use of amplification and electric instruments, first in rock and then in folk-rock, led to the rise of tensions both within folk circles and between folk and rock camps by the mid-1960s.¹¹ The attempt to reconcile rock's imagined relationship to authenticity with its very real relationship to technology has since proven arduous for many rock fans. Many critics, too, have expressed difficulty in reconciling technology with authenticity,¹² hence a tendency in rock journalism to herald new rock

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Goodman, 1998: 8.

¹² Jones, 1992: 3.

subgenres as more authentic and less laden with technological baggage than their predecessors.¹³

The friction between authenticity and technology was eased somewhat when an increasing number of rock musicians learned to produce their own recordings. At roughly the same time that it became the trend among scholars and critics to equate rock lyrics with poetry,¹⁴ technologically sophisticated albums like the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* were being elevated to the status not of mere pop but of "art."¹⁵ Frith notes that through the 1970s, perceptions of the recording studio as a site for artistic creation, and of the rock musician as an *auteur* in complete control of his or her surroundings, helped reconcile the contradictory associations evoked by technology on the one hand and authenticity on the other.¹⁶ Hence, to some extent, technology was circumscribed within rock's ideology of authenticity under the rubric that whether onstage or in the studio, "genuine" rock musicians remained in total control of their art.

II: The Role of Rock Criticism in Perpetuating Rock "Authenticity"

Rock ideology is both influenced and perpetuated by rock criticism, which developed in the United States in the mid- to late-1960s.¹⁷ Kembrew McLeod summarizes the history of rock criticism in the U.S. as one largely dominated by men who tend to valorize rock, which is perceived as "serious," "authentic," and "masculine," and to dismiss pop, which is

¹³ Frith, 1986: 266-67.

¹⁴ Clarke, 1983, 203; Guernsey, 1970: 265-75.

¹⁵ Frith, 1986: 271.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 272.

¹⁷ Sanjek, 1992: 12-13.

perceived as “trivial,” “prefabricated,” and “feminine.”¹⁸ Indeed, a handful of influential critics have challenged such perceptions; the famously obstinate Lester Bangs, for example, argued decades ago that “like Richard Hell says, rock ‘n’ roll is an arena in which you recreate yourself, and all this blathering about authenticity is just a bunch of crap.”¹⁹ Further, in recent years, especially since more women have joined the rock critic corps, many journalists have challenged ideological assumptions, especially those that link alleged “trivial” popular music with femininity and “serious” popular music to masculinity. Nevertheless, rock critic Evelyn McDonnell notes that the rock press remains

very macho. . . . Aggressively male. Or passive-aggressively male! . . . Everything has to be authentic, even though authenticity can also be constructed. The phoniness of rock critics’ insistence on authenticity is that they don’t want somebody who is not—[they] have a history of being hung up on . . . the singer-songwriter, and Dylan being the godhead figure. . . . Everybody has to be writing from this Dylan-esque space.²⁰

Not only do individual critics perpetuate such ideology; music magazines do, too.

Rolling Stone, one of the oldest, most widely circulated, and most influential American rock music magazines, is often criticized as a case in point. According to David Sanjek, *Rolling Stone* founder and publisher Jann Wenner clearly

identified rock’s authenticity with a specific set of figures who formed the publication’s icons of the rock canon: these include Dylan, the Stones, and the Beatles. It is an essentially conservative, even mystical approach to music. . . . The community which [the magazine purports to represent] is always assumed, never assessed or theorized.²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 47.

¹⁹ Bangs, 1988: 227.

²⁰ Personal communication with Evelyn McDonnell, 30 September 1999.

²¹ Sanjek, 1992: 14-15.

Like any specialty publication, then, *Rolling Stone* assumes a particular, idealized point of view, which it imparts to its readers.

The influence of rock critics and periodicals on fans is in many respects limited. In the first place, not everyone who listens to rock reads about it. In the second, publications in which rock criticism appears can be frustratingly discriminatory and even revisionist, often reflecting little more than the evolving taste preferences of their editorial staffs. *Rolling Stone*, in particular, has regularly been criticized for either giving short shrift to or even completely ignoring important popular subgenres like punk, funk, and rap, simply because Wenner disliked them.²²

Despite the shortcomings of rock criticism, it is nevertheless without question that critics can color the opinions of both the public and the industry. And, as Fred Goodman emphasizes in his book *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen, and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce*, rock journalists can exert tremendous influence on—and even become members of—the very music industry on which they report.²³

Further, as McLeod argues,

Bad critical reception does not guarantee commercial failure for an artist (in fact, there is typically an inverse correlation between popularity and critical acceptance), but commercial failure combined with a critical reception that is less than enthusiastic might result in a band being dropped from a label. As well, a strong critical buzz for a new band is often incorporated into the promotion machinery of record companies, and this cultural capital is used to gain the attention of radio and MTV.²⁴

²² *Ibid.*: 16.

²³ Goodman, 1998.

²⁴ McLeod, 2001: 57.

McLeod admits, however, that the influence of most critics on listeners does not compare with that exerted by the music industry.

III: The Role of the Music Industry in Perpetuating Rock “Authenticity”

Rock’s popularity among American youth in the 1960s resonated with the new left, many members of which heralded the music as a vehicle for massive sociopolitical change.²⁵ Yet for all its associations with authenticity and rebellion, rock was also proving a valuable commodity. The music thus found itself embraced at once by the radical left and by multinational record companies. The latter quickly picked up on the language of the former for use in advertisements, such as the ones run by Columbia Records in the music press in the late 1960s and described by Goodman:

“If you don’t listen to your parents, the Man, or the Establishment . . . Why should you listen to us?” asked a Columbia Records ad in the November 9, 1968 issue of *Rolling Stone*. . . . Columbia reached a stomach-turning low in counterculture pandering in the December 21 issue with an ad slugged *“Know Who Your Friends Are.”* The ad showed a half-dozen young people—including a Native American wearing a headdress—passing a joint. *“And look and see and touch and be together,”* ran the copy alongside pictures of eight covers for recently released albums. *“Then listen. We do.”*²⁶

Rock’s ideology of authenticity was thus cultivated simultaneously by the new left and the very “Establishment” they were working against.

This phenomenon caused tensions between the commercial and artistic aspects of rock, which continue to exist. Such tensions arose in part because the commodification of rock was not as obvious as that of previous popular forms. This was especially true once the music

²⁵ Buxton, 1983: 94.

²⁶ Goodman, 1998: 78.

industry became populated with rock fans who might well have believed in rock's sociopolitical potential even as they exploited it for commercial gain. Focusing on the Bay Area in the late 1960s, Frith argues,

The most significant people in the Bay Area turned out to be . . . entrepreneurs [who] . . . emerged from within the new audience itself, and so disguised the exploitation involved in the rock marketplace in the name of "the rock community." The political significance of this was not that rock was coopted, but that the terms of its cooptation were concealed. Pop commercialism was so blatant that pop fans could never forget their consumer status; rock fans, by contrast, could treat their record buying as an act of solidarity.²⁷

One result of the overlap between fans, critics, and industry members is that decades after its inception, rock continues to be marketed, criticized, and consumed as a genre that, at its most successful, defies even its most obvious commercial trappings.

Despite their commodification, interest in appealing to mass audiences, and carefully cultivated images, rock musicians thus continue to be marketed as artists whose onstage personae are no different from their private ones, and who are somehow untouched by crass commercialism in a way that pop artists are not.²⁸ As demonstrated in the next section, separating rock from its associations with authenticity proves difficult, even among rock fans who demonstrate a clear understanding of the artifices of the genre.

²⁷ Frith, 1984: 65-66.

²⁸ For further discussion of the construction of rock performers' images, see Goodman, 1998, and Palmer, 1997.

IV: The Role of the Rock Audience in Perpetuating Rock “Authenticity”

Since the commercial and artistic aspects of rock have coexisted since the genre's inception, both have exerted influence on rock's large and varied fan base. Marketing strategies aimed at romanticizing rock music's genuineness do not explain away the continued correlation by many fans of rock with authenticity, rebellion, and personal freedom, and yet the influence of corporations on the individual cannot be ignored. Many theories attempt to explain the reasons that rock remains associated with such qualities. David Scudder, for example, argues that although the association between rock and the new left collapsed long ago, the movement nevertheless imprinted on rock its “temporary transcendent aesthetic quality,” since an “aesthetic form cannot be divorced from the historical contexts . . . in which it had aesthetic meaning.”²⁹

Rock's commercial and artistic dichotomy is central to theories of Theodore Gracyk, who argues that tensions between these two aspects supply much of the genre's power. Rock's commercial aspects, he notes, cannot smother its basis in Enlightenment assumptions about the self, which are empowering because they proclaim the individual as central to authenticity.³⁰ Despite insistence by contemporaries like Lawrence Grossberg that rock's connection to authenticity is waning,³¹ Gracyk argues that such a connection cannot be severed since authenticity is deeply ingrained in rock aesthetics.³²

²⁹ Scudder. 1984: 168-69.

³⁰ Gracyk. 1996: 220.

³¹ Grossberg. 1992: 209.

³² Gracyk. 1996: 220

The equation of individuality with authenticity is also central to work by Simon Frith, who argues that one's musical tastes aid in self-definition:

The pleasure that pop music produces is a pleasure of identification—with the music we like, with the performers of that music, with the other people who like it. . . . [T]he production of identity is also a production of non-identity. . . . People not only know what they like, they also have very clear ideas about what they don't like and often have very expressive ways of stating their dislikes. . . . Popular music [can be seen as] something possessed. . . . [R]ock fans ["own"] their favorite music in ways that [are] intense and important to them. . . . Obviously it is the commodity form of music which makes this sense of musical possession possible, but it is not just the record that people think they own: we feel that we also possess the song itself, the particular performance, and its performer.³³

Rock ideology can thus be seen not just as the result of associations with the past or the influence of the music industry, but also as the result of more personal associations.

It might be suggested that, rather than simply swallowing media and industry insinuations on the purported authenticity of a given rock musician, rock fans choose, instead, to accept performers who mean something special to them as authentic—or to pretend, even when faced with evidence to the contrary, that they are authentic—simply because such perceptions help legitimize the important roles that they play in a fan's life. Further, it is possible that the association of rock with authenticity takes place on an emotional and not a logical plane, not because fans are merely pawns of the music industry or the media, but because fans use music that is important to them to help define themselves and their social milieu.

³³ Frith, 1987: 140; 143.

V: Rock's Myth of Authenticity and Its Conflicts with Musical Theater

Reception of even the most well-received rock musicals, both in the press and among actual and potential audiences, almost always reveals recurring imbalances: a successful staged production offering a blend of rock and musical theater aesthetics usually wins the favor of either the rock or the musical theater realm, but rarely of both camps at once. Despite the incorporation of props, costumes, scenery, characters, and choreography, for example, concerts staged by Alice Cooper have never been widely embraced in the musical theater world; nor have concerts by Frank Zappa, despite the inclusion of the occasional humorous skit. On the other hand, as noted in chapter 3, while largely received as an excellent musical, *Rent* has failed to be embraced in the music press or among most rock fans as a production that offers any “real” rock in its score.

Further, when performers who are embraced by one camp tip the balance too far in the direction of the other, the results are usually disastrous. As discussed in chapter 2, the vast majority of non-narrative rock explorations that appeared on and Off Broadway through the 1970s failed both critically and commercially. Conversely, all but the most established rock musicians tend to shy away from performing show tunes or otherwise revealing too much of an interest in the musical theater, since, as Orgill notes, “doing a musical-theater piece . . . [is seen to] damage . . . audiences, credibility, and careers.”³⁴

This seems especially true among rock groups. The group Styx, for example, enjoyed commercial success in their early years as a rock band with a healthy interest in theatricality.

³⁴ Orgill, 1999: 23.

But they went a bit too far for many fans and critics in 1983 with a fully staged, costumed, choreographed, and scripted concert version of their album *Kilroy Was Here*, which was panned in the press and booed off more than one stage during the tour. The album and tour led to internal problems among band members—most of whom were more interested in returning to the band's hard-rock roots than they were in staging musical theater productions—and, ultimately, the group's demise.³⁵

While a flair for the theatrical is often deemed acceptable in the rock realm, then, most rock musicians steer clear from appearing in musical theater productions, recording or performing Broadway show tunes, or otherwise showing too great an interest in the genre. There are a number of reasons for this, all of which add veracity to the notion that characteristics extant in the musical theater counteract those imagined qualities that are valued and perpetuated in the rock world. In the first place, unlike rock music, the musical theater does not have a profound relationship with notions of authenticity, per se. One might argue, in fact, that the opposite is the case. As Lawson-Peebles notes, the musical traditionally celebrates the self-conscious blending of high and low cultures, revels in artifice and kitsch, and, unlike rock music, has been associated with the capitalist market system from its inception.³⁶ The most successful musical is also often the most accessible musical; as affecting and philosophical as individual productions might be, the genre is known, for the most part, to be overtly commercial, and more blithely entertaining than it is profound.

³⁵ http://www.electricbasement.com/Interview_styx2000.htm;

<http://www.clevescene.com/issues/2000-11-02/nightwatch2.html>

³⁶ Lawson-Peebles, 1996: 1-5.

Along with the comparative lack of emphasis on authenticity in the musical theater comes a less central role played by the composer. In contrast with the singer-songwriter-musician of the rock realm, the reputations of music theater composers are almost always built exclusively on songwriting ability: like many pop songwriters, theater composers make music for other people to perform. As a result, they are often required to be more open to collaboration than their rock counterparts, since musical scores are regularly and sometimes drastically altered during the staging of a piece. Such compromises are not as typical or acceptable in the rock sphere, where performers who are seen to maintain the most artistic control over their work are traditionally held in highest esteem.

The musical theater and rock realms differ further in their approaches to technology. While rock's myth of authenticity has managed to accept and even to comfortably encompass technological advances, musical theater has traditionally been resistant to them. As noted in chapters 2 and 3, technology is largely viewed, in the theater, as a necessary evil that has worked to attract wider audiences, but has also made theater too much like cinema by placing undue emphasis on spectacle and driving a wedge between performers and audiences.

Finally, two very important differences between rock music and musical theater are found in their particular performative approaches and in the behaviors of their audiences. These aspects will be explored in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6, respectively. It should nevertheless be noted here that while rock concerts and theatrical productions are both carefully rehearsed and staged, there is ultimately more need for accuracy and precision in the latter than in the former. As a result, rock concerts often seem more spontaneous and its

performers more “genuine” when compared with staged rock musicals, which regularly fail to exhibit these important qualities.

In the same light, although more young people are attending the theater in recent years, and rock music is now half a century old, the theater nevertheless remains associated with older people and more restrained behavior, while rock continues to be associated with younger people and more rebellious behavior. Rock critic Evelyn McDonnell suggests further that extant gender stereotypes play a role in influencing the rock world’s often strongly negative view of the musical theater, in that the stereotypical associations of rock with straight, idealized masculinity clash with the stereotypical associations of musical theater with gay men.³⁷

These young/old, legitimate/artificial, and straight/gay associations are often evoked in the press, in marketing departments, and among rock fans and musical theater aficionados. McDonnell asserts that most rock journalists and industry members disregard rock musicals as “corny” and “inauthentic.”³⁸ Indeed, Don Summa, press agent for *Rent*, notes that despite his best efforts and the monumental success of the show, he failed to stir interest among members of the music industry when he tried to shop the show’s songs around to recording artists in hopes of promoting the musical via radio airplay. He was also unable to generate much interest at *Rolling Stone*. Although the magazine ran a fashion spread featuring cast members of *Rent* early in its run, a 10,000-word feature about the musical was bumped to

³⁷ Personal communication with Evelyn McDonnell. 30 September 1999. See also Miller 1998 on Broadway musicals as a stereotypically “gay genre.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Wenner's more general entertainment magazine, *Us*, once editors decided that there was "no room" for it in *Rolling Stone*.³⁹

The notion that musical theater is not as "authentic" or as socially acceptable as rock is regularly echoed among fans of both genres. Interestingly, some members of the musical theater realm view a successful rock musical as lending legitimacy to their genre. Press agent Tom D'Ambrosio, for example, touches on the discomfort he felt as a self-described "musical theater queen" in explaining his appreciation for both *Rent* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*:

Growing up, I thought I was the biggest musical theater queen there is. I come to New York and realize I'm the furthest thing from it—well not the furthest, but there are bigger queens than me. I completely flipped for *Rent*. I loved it. . . . *Hedwig* was [also] a musical that I was not embarrassed about liking. This gets into liking musicals. For me there's always been a little shame involved with it, you know? Buying a show tune CD is like buying pornography. You go ahead and buy a Prince CD too, just so you can be like, "I'm kind of cool—and *that's* for my mother." There's a weird legitimizing feel with *Rent*. With *Rent* I [felt] the same way as I [did] with *Hedwig*. I was like, "You *have* to see it, it's *great!*" and I wasn't embarrassed. . . . If I had a CD of *Hedwig* and I sent it to my brother, who doesn't go to the theater, he'd like it. So there's part of—"Oh, I can finally like rock music like I'm supposed to," for me at least.⁴⁰

On the other hand, comments made to me by countless rock fans in the years that I have been working on this project indicate that almost across the board, rock musicals are perceived as too "spit and polished, with all those big, beaming smiles and wide arm movements"⁴¹ to be considered "legitimate" enough to warrant the interest of a rock fan.

Such perceptions are rarely challenged. Rock musicians seldom involve themselves with musical theater projects, in large part because the risks far outweigh the benefits.

³⁹ Personal communication with Don Summa, 6 October 1998.

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Tom D'Ambrosio, 17 July 1998.

⁴¹ Personal communication with Mark Passow, 23 June 2001.

Performing in a musical is certainly not economically advantageous for prominent rock musicians; as Pete Townshend has noted, “when it comes down to it, the prospect of going onto Broadway and being paid \$50,000 a week to do eight shows is not a prospect that the modern wanky little pop star thinks he wants.”⁴² Rock musicians who do emerge as performers or collaborators in musical theater productions do so for one of two principal reasons: either their careers have slowed, as in the case of Joan Jett and Sebastian Bach, who recently appeared on Broadway in *Jekyll and Hyde* and *The Rocky Horror Show* respectively, and who both reached the heights of success as performers in the 1980s; or they are in the latter stages of long and fruitful careers, and are thus in little danger of harming their images by trying their hands at such projects, as in the case of Pete Townshend, Paul Simon, and Elton John.

The presence of such performers in the musical theater realm reinforces the idea of the musical theater as a site for older people, in which rock musicians appear only after they enter middle age or see their recording careers falter. Producer Tom Viertel notes,

What we are seeing in the theater are former [singer-songwriters] who are flirting with or working on musicals. . . . Elton John has obviously written for the form, Billy Joel periodically talks about writing for the form. . . . I consider . . . those guys past it in terms of what’s a hit on the playlist. This is something they turn to. Part of it is how old they are. They’re now the age at which people start to go to the musical theater. These guys are probably finding themselves at the musical theater more often than they used to and thinking, “well, gee, maybe there’s something for me in here.” Paul Simon wrote *Capeman*, that kind of thing. In terms of . . . *today’s* rock musicians writing for the theater, we aren’t seeing any of that, and I don’t think the theater would know what to make of it if they did.⁴³

⁴² Wild, 1993: 21.

⁴³ Personal communication with Tom Viertel, 24 November 1998

Such perceptions are regularly reinforced in comments like one recently made by Paul Stanley, singer and rhythm guitarist for the group Kiss, who on the occasion of the band's retirement remarked in an interview that "when this is over, I'll be doing Broadway."⁴⁴

Of course, the notion that musical theater is somehow inherently less fashionable a genre than rock music is due in large part to exposure, economics, and history. As genres more suitable to sound recording than musical theater, rock 'n' roll and its offshoots have proven internationally influential since the 1950s, while the musical theater continues to be seen in many circles as decidedly old hat. These lasting perceptions cause particular difficulties for staged rock musicals. While the most successful ones are lauded by theater critics, embraced by theatergoers, and celebrated by members of the theater industry, they are just as often savaged or ignored by the rock press, pigeonholed by the music industry, and mocked sight-unseen by many rock fans.

In terms of reception, rock musicals are thus forced into a corner: they are inevitably aimed at two different camps that do not share the same aesthetic values and do not entirely understand one another. Making matters worse is the fact that trends in rock and popular music tend to elapse much faster than those in the musical theater. In discussing *Rent*, for example, Clifford Lee Johnson III acknowledges,

Now, *that* music is mid-80s rock 'n' roll. *Rent* came out in the mid-90s, early '90s, and that music was already, like, ten years old, to tell you the truth. It's funny, when they said, "This is the rock musical for the kids," well, when I talk to "the kids"—even *I* can tell that that music was ten years old.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Jones, 2000: 17.

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998.

Indeed, as Mark Steyn notes, it often takes so long to develop, workshop, and launch a stage musical that it can be disastrous to rely too heavily on any specific popular music trends, since “by the time you’ve got your grunge musical up on stage, grunge will be out and splurge will be in.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, while there is some overlap, audiences, journalists, and industry personnel affiliated with one camp do not regularly involve themselves with the other. When they do, they often lack the tools and expertise to properly convey what they are seeing. Gracyk notes, “standards for evaluating rock will only have importance for those who have a personal investment in the continuation of that musical culture.”⁴⁷ In this light, theater critics may not be adept at ruling what is or is not a successful use of rock music on the stage, just as their rock counterparts are not ideal evaluators of musicals. Yet rock musicals are almost always assigned to theater critics, in large part because the rock press continually shows little interest in them.

Michael Cerveris, who originated the title role in *The Who’s Tommy* and replaced John Cameron Mitchell in the title role of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, argues that the hesitancy on the part of rock journalists is the result of their insistence on embracing and perpetuating rock’s connection to authenticity:

The rock press are very slow . . . to give the nod to any kind of rock [musical], partly because they never would want to look like they were being establishment, or condoning the marketing of rock . . . into old people’s culture, which is how theater . . . is perceived. . . . I know that in the music

⁴⁶ Steyn, 1997: 225.

⁴⁷ Gracyk, 1999: 216.

business, *Tommy* was perceived as that. People would . . . see it and find that they actually enjoyed it, but they would go with a lot of skepticism. I loved when they came and walked away fans of it. I think they also came and walked away feeling confirmed in their suspicions, or they didn't show up at all, [but] those people did not seek me out to tell me how much they didn't like it. . . . Part of it is that rock 'n' roll pretends to be so much about authenticity. The rock press pretends that rock . . . is about authenticity, and really *being* there, man. . . . The truth of the matter is that it's all business . . . [but] the press has so much invested in pretending it's *not* a show that it's really hard for them to embrace something that *is* a show.⁴⁸

Don Summa avers, noting that as a press agent in charge of a number of nontraditional musical theater pieces, he regularly finds himself in the unenviable position of "trying to get people to cover theater who don't go to the theater, and who don't know theater, and who don't have any sense of theater," which often proves a futile exercise.⁴⁹

Such an exercise, however, is deemed necessary by those who hope to attract audiences beyond those who regularly follow theater reviews. D'Ambrosio, like Summa, recalls working long hours trying to convince members of the rock press to review *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, as well as to come up with new ways of attracting people who do not usually attend musicals but who might nevertheless enjoy *Hedwig*. D'Ambrosio notes that bridging the gap between camps proved extraordinarily difficult:

so many [music critics] . . . do not go to the theater. They live in New York City, and they've never been to the theater! . . . So we are trying to bring those two things together with [*Hedwig*]. We've succeeded in bringing theater people to a rock show. But we haven't succeeded yet in bringing rock people to a theater show. . . . They laugh at the theater. They don't care. And they don't really know what this is.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris. 28 August 1998.

⁴⁹ Personal communication with Don Summa. 6 October 1998.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

James LL. Morrison, D'Ambrosio's boss, adds that his agency's experiences with *Hedwig* helped him to realize that at least in this respect, journalists are representative of the taste cultures they ostensibly epitomize:

We are discovering that there isn't a crossover, just as there isn't a crossover for us. We're theater people. How often do we go to see dance? When is the last time I went to the symphony? To a gallery opening? If someone goes to hear bands and is really up on who plays where and when, *that's* the way [they're] spending [their] entertainment dollar.⁵¹

D'Ambrosio and Morrison eventually found that at least during the early run of their show, they could attract broader audiences by focusing less on trying to get coverage in the rock press and more on the illicit practice of "sniping," or handing out flyers at local clubs, and spray-painting or stickering the show's logo on sidewalks, bathroom walls, the back-seats of taxi cabs, and scaffolding facades in and around New York City.⁵²

The few tidbits that do appear about rock musicals in the rock press are the result of a great deal of hard work, often mixed with sheer luck. Cerveris notes, for example, that the interest *Rolling Stone* took in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was the result not only of persistence by publicists, but of Cerveris's friendship with Pete Townshend. In response to a question about a photograph that appeared in *Rolling Stone* of him and Townshend sitting together backstage, Cerveris explains,

That *Rolling Stone* thing, that "Random Notes" photo? There was nothing random about it. It was the result of a lot of hard work from the show's publicist, and a friend of mine who is also a publicist who has friends at *Rolling Stone* and who worked very hard to get them to come see the show. They were still sort of taking their time and dragging their heels until Pete

⁵¹ Personal communication with James LL. Morrison, 17 July 1998.

⁵² *Ibid.*

[Townshend] was coming, and *then* suddenly it was something that was worth checking out. A couple nights later, Jann Wenner, the founder of *Rolling Stone*, came to see the show.⁵³

At least in this case, attendance by a respected rock musician legitimized the production for the rock press.

In keeping with the predominant notion that rock musicals are inauthentic and unworthy of a true rock fan's attentions, the coverage of rock musicals by rock and theater journalists alike is often notably defensive. Emphasis is almost always placed on convincing readers from both camps that the particular piece being discussed is worth seeing, even though all other representatives of the genre from which it emanates are not. Favorable comparisons of the rock musical in question with its predecessors are ubiquitous, as are such proclamations among theater critics as "Broadway finally got a rock musical right"⁵⁴ and "... at long last the authentic rock musical that has eluded Broadway for two generations . . ."⁵⁵ The pieces about *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* that did appear in the rock press were ultimately no different. In *Billboard*, Jim Bessman proclaims that *Hedwig* is the "rare rock musical that works,"⁵⁶ while David Fricke of *Rolling Stone* insists that "In the whole, long, sorry history of rock musicals, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is the first one that truly *rocks*," especially since, as an Off Broadway show, it "was born a million miles away from the Broadway sugar of *Rent*."⁵⁷

⁵³ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris. 28 August 1998.

⁵⁴ Winer. 2000.

⁵⁵ Rich. 1993: C1.

⁵⁶ Bessman. 1998.

⁵⁷ Fricke. 1998: 55.

Finally, Zev Borow writes in *Spin* that *Hedwig* is “glammy, rock-inspired theater for people who think glammy, rock-inspired theater sucks.”⁵⁸

Unsurprisingly, rock composers and performers who find themselves involved in musical theater productions are often defensive when discussing their projects, in large part because they find themselves caught between two worlds, neither of which fully accepts them. Adam Pascal, an aspiring rock singer whose raw energy and vocal quality earned him the lead in *Rent*, had misgivings in taking the part, and such misgivings are proving warranted: although his work in *Rent* has helped establish him as a successful musical theater performer, he has learned that his appearance in the musical hurt his chances of winning the attentions of A&R record executives. Despite the local success, post-*Rent*, of his rock band, Pascal found himself pigeonholed by the record industry:

[The band was] doing great . . . playing to kids, 400 and 500 kids at a time, who really dug the music. But a lot of rock people, producers and managers, looked at me and said “He’s a theater guy.” We couldn’t get them to come hear us.⁵⁹

Such individuals are thus placed in a double bind, which is only intensified, since the work methods, modes of behavior, and performance approaches that are encouraged and celebrated as marks of authenticity or artistic inspiration in the rock camp are not always appreciated—indeed, are often abruptly dismissed as laughably unprofessional—in the theater camp.

⁵⁸ Borow. 1999:

⁵⁹ Tommasini. 2000.

At the same time, simply being associated with the musical theater can be seen as potentially harmful to a rock musician's reputation as an uncompromising artist. Take, for example, the case of Joan Jett, who originated the role of Columbia in the 2001 Broadway revival of *The Rocky Horror Show*, but refused to take part in the cast album "when it became apparent that she would not have creative control over her performance on the record."⁶⁰ Evoking the conception of the rock musician as remaining ever faithful to his or her artistic vision, Jett's manager, Kenny Laguna, stated, "We had a deal, they chose not to live up to it, and they found out that real rock ['n'] roll doesn't work that way."⁶¹

Michael Cerveris, who pursued careers in both rock and theater before landing the title role in *The Who's Tommy*, relays the following anecdote about the differences between rock and theater worlds:

The night before the big press opening . . . where we were going to show the media a rehearsal, we had [a] party. We put a band together with Pete [Townshend] and me and some guys from the *Tommy* band, and some other guys from the cast. . . . The next morning . . . we were going to have all the national network news crews, and it was the first time the public was going to see anything. It was two or three o'clock and I said, "I should probably get home," and [Townshend] said, "Well, actually, probably . . . I should take you out and we should stay out drinking all night and you should come in looking like hell, and sing about five minutes into the first song and then stop and say, 'No, no, no, fuck it, I hate this, I hate you, I hate it all' and then just walk out. *That* would be very rock 'n' roll. But I guess we can't really do that." There was at least a part of him that thought that this really might be the thing to do.⁶²

Yet as Clifford Lee Johnson III, director of the musical theater program at the Manhattan Theater Club, notes, one of the biggest problems in creating and performing rock musicals

⁶⁰ <http://www.rollingstone.com/news/newsarticle.asp?nid=13586&cf=855>

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Personal communication with Michael Cerveris, 28 August 1998.

successfully is that rebelliousness does not translate to the theatrical stage, just as a lack thereof often does not work in the rock realm.⁶³ It is thus no wonder that most individuals who find themselves crossing from one realm into the other experience a variety of difficulties in the process.

VI. Rock Musicians in the Musical Theater: Three Case Studies

In this section, the work of three rock musicians who ventured into the theatrical realm, and whose musicals opened to very different receptions in New York City in the last half-decade, will be examined.

Paul Simon: *The Capeman*

In the late 1980s, the singer-songwriter Paul Simon grew interested in developing a musical to bring to Broadway, in large part because he found all extant musical theater unsatisfying.⁶⁴ He thus commenced work on *The Capeman*, a musical about the crime, conviction, and redemption of Puerto Rican gang member Salvador Agron, who became tabloid fodder when he murdered two white teenagers on the evening of 30 August 1959 in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City. Less interested in telling a story than in sharing his love for music with Broadway audiences, Simon immersed himself in numerous Latin popular genres. These, combined with a heavy dose of the rock 'n' roll he grew up listening to as a youth in Queens during the 1950s, influenced the musical's score. Eager to avoid the

⁶³ Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998.

⁶⁴ Dubner, 1997: 46.

accusations of “cultural carpetbagger” that accompanied his albums *Graceland* (1986) and *Rhythm of the Saints* (1990), and hoping to create more accurate Caribbean characters, Simon developed a friendship with the Nobel Prize-winning, Saint Lucia-born poet Derek Walcott shortly after conceiving of the project. The two men collaborated on the book and lyrics over a seven-year period.⁶⁵

While the initial buzz about *The Capeman* was strong among members of the theater industry, rumors of Simon’s inability to relinquish control of his work soon began to scare off potential investors and to cause concern among the producers, many of whom either pulled out of the production or downgraded their financial commitments as the budget for *The Capeman* ballooned toward the \$13 million mark.⁶⁶ Unlike Pete Townshend, who collaborated closely with but ultimately ceded control to director Des McAnuff during work on the stage adaptation of *Tommy*, Simon exhibited a great deal of difficulty switching hats from singer-songwriter to musical theater collaborator, and his rigid control of the production ultimately proved destructive.

Simon’s attention to detail was skewed. A notorious perfectionist who “reportedly spent 800 hours, over the course of two years, making the last Simon and Garfunkel album, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*,”⁶⁷ Simon approached *The Capeman* project as if it were a record, not a play. In hopes of generating interest in his project among investors, Simon spent

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 45–47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

close to \$1 million making studio recordings, tapes of which he played for interested parties.

As Dubner notes, this is a decidedly unorthodox practice in theater circles:

Instead of delivering a script and score to a director, Simon's plan was to essentially turn over a finished version of a musical, which a band and cast would try to replicate. This was the first signal that, although Simon was writing a musical that he wanted to play on Broadway, he felt no compunction to play by Broadway rules.⁶⁸

Similarly unorthodox was Simon's attention to musical detail at the expense of all other aspects of his production.

During the process of developing *The Capeman* for the stage, emphasis was placed on the "authenticity" of the music and its performers. In hopes of making his musical as "authentic" as possible, Simon regularly sat in with prominent Latin musicians during the compositional process and hired a number of them to work with him on the musical. The Broadway company of *The Capeman* thus boasted, among others, Oscar Hernández as keyboard player and conductor; Oriente López as assistant conductor and keyboard, flute, and accordion player; Marc Anthony and Ruben Blades as the young and middle-aged Salvador Agrón, respectively; and Ednita Nazario as Agrón's mother. Attaining ideal sound, even during the rehearsal process, was clearly a priority for Simon, yet such perfectionism proved a hindrance. A company member anonymously told Dubner that Simon once kept the cast and band waiting for a half an hour while he moved a tambourine around the room to determine where it sounded best.⁶⁹ While such activities may be viewed in the rock realm as examples

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

of artists taking control of their own creations, they are simply seen as erratic and annoying in theater circles.

Adamant about maintaining full artistic and financial control, Simon alienated or refused to hire a number of esteemed directors: atypically and tellingly, the director was the last member of *The Capeman*'s creative team to be hired. Simon's difficulties in choosing a director—the result of his refusal to relinquish power—caused word to spread through the theater community that Simon was looking not for a director but for a glorified stage manager.⁷⁰ He finally settled, at least temporarily, on the Argentine-born Susana Tubert; she would ultimately serve as only the first of *The Capeman*'s directors. Tubert was replaced by Steppenwolf's Eric Simonson, who was replaced by the show's choreographer, Mark Morris.⁷¹

Due to the constant hiring and firing, as well as the creative team's communication breakdowns, rehearsals for *The Capeman* plodded on for an unusually long time. Natascia Díaz, who originated the role of Yolanda, remembers that while rehearsals went on for six months, little in the way of direction was ever provided:

Mark Morris had no concept of how to talk to actors. . . . If you've never directed before, you don't just come in and say, "Oh, yes, well, I'm a big star." That's how he came in. For the first month it was cute, and it was like, "well, he's a genius, he's allowed to be like this." Second month, it was, "we're getting tired of being insulted, here." . . . The level was not to be believed. Not to mention that he would leave for weeks on end to [work with] . . . the Mark Morris company. And this Broadway show is left hanging, and we're getting directed by his little dance assistant. It was unbelievably frustrating. . . . And [Ruben Blades, Ednita Nazario and Marc Anthony] were in another world, so

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

they didn't really care. . . . I mean, of course they cared, but it was like—the theater people [were] in the ensemble . . . and they were just coming to Broadway as singers. So God bless them for finding their way as they did. . . . And people seemed to just stand by and let it happen, so it died a long death. Six months. You don't need to rehearse six months for a Broadway show that you have been in workshops for. There was a miscommunication.⁷²

Once it was realized that Morris had been unable to properly hone the musical, the seasoned director Jerry Zaks was brought in during the final month of rehearsals in a last-gasp attempt to address some of the production's many problems.

Director Des McAnuff comments on the irony of Zaks's involvement in the show:

Theatre is a collaborative art form, as we know, but rock artists are used to controlling everything for an album, and that's a good thing—you want to keep the record company away. But in the theatre, it just doesn't work that way. You want a designer who is smarter than you about design, and you want a director who has vision. Simon, a man who has made a career of exploring different cultures, seemed to have not much interest and little respect for Broadway, a culture he grew up near to, in New York. The greatest irony is that he ended up with Jerry Zaks trying to fix his show, which seems to be the exact opposite of the kind of artist he wanted to work with.⁷³

Indeed, Zaks's attempt to fix *The Capeman* proved unsuccessful. *The Capeman* opened at the Marquis Theater on 29 January 1998 after a preview period that was extended several times over three weeks.⁷⁴ The show was poorly received by critics, many of whom cited the music as the production's greatest strength, and the convoluted narrative and obvious lack of direction as its largest problems. Canby, for example, concluded that “as a show, *The Capeman* is a great album.”⁷⁵ My own field notes, recorded on the evening of 30 January

⁷² Personal communication with Natascia Diaz, 15 April 1999.

⁷³ Manning, 2001.

⁷⁴ Brantley, 1998: 1.

⁷⁵ Canby, 1998: 4.

1998, reflect a number of structural problems, including poorly developed characters, plot lines that led nowhere, entire scenes that made no sense, and actors—particularly Blades and Anthony—who were clearly unsure as to what they should be doing most of the time.

Nor did *The Capeman* sell particularly well. Dubner notes that months before it opened, its advance in sales was only moderate, at best.⁷⁶ The poor reviews and the show's inability to stir much interest among theatergoers proved fatal for the musical, which closed on 28 March 1998 after 59 previews and 68 regular performances.⁷⁷ While the album Simon recorded of his versions of songs from *The Capeman* sold well among his fans and earned critical accolades, Simon proved incapable of crossing over to the theater world. Although his work in the Broadway realm does not seem to have influenced his relationship to fans of his music, his inability to collaborate and his obsession with musical "authenticity" did little more than earn him a reputation within the theater industry as a rebellious troublemaker.⁷⁸

Paul Scott Goodman: *Bright Lights Big City*

A musician and songwriter who encountered some of the greatest difficulties in trying to bridge the gap between rock and musical theater was Paul Scott Goodman, the composer of the rock musical *Bright Lights Big City*. Goodman's interests were, throughout his life, split evenly between rock and musical theater. Despite his mutual respect for the forms,

⁷⁶ Dubner, 1997: 83.

⁷⁷ Lyman, 1998.

⁷⁸ Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998; personal communication with Natascia Diaz, 15 April 1999.

however, he was bluntly rejected by both rock and musical theater camps when he appeared onstage at the New York Theatre Workshop in early 1999 as a performer in his own musical.

Goodman, a native of Scotland, was born to parents who were actively involved in the Scottish-Jewish amateur theater group in Glasgow. As a small boy, Goodman participated in many of their productions and, as a teenager, began playing guitar and performing in rock bands. After a childhood and adolescence spent with a foot in each camp, Goodman found himself interested in merging the two. He studied English and drama in college in Glasgow and then spent a few years in London writing and performing music. He moved to the United States in the early 1980s and, after a stint in Los Angeles, he enrolled in the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop in New York City. After having written a few smaller-scale, one- or two-person musicals, Goodman was encouraged by his mentor, the musical book writer Peter Stone, to consider basing a musical on Jay McInerney's 1984 novel *Bright Lights, Big City*. Goodman read the book and took Stone's advice: he began writing a rock musical version in August 1996.⁷⁹

In November of that year, Goodman and the musician Annmarie Milazzo sang through an early version of the musical for James Nicola, Artistic Director of the New York Theatre Workshop.⁸⁰ Impressed, Nicola saw Goodman's project through a number of staged readings and a workshop. Nicola tapped Michael Greif, director of *Rent*, to stage the workshop and, later, the finished piece.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Personal communication with Paul Scott Goodman, 14 March 1999.

⁸⁰ Smith, W., 1999: 14.

⁸¹ Nicola, 1999: 7.

In developing *Bright Lights Big City* for the stage, the creative team was faced with a unique challenge: Goodman had never learned to notate the music he composes. This fact touches upon yet another important distinction between rock and the musical theater: the former is, at least ideologically, rooted in oral tradition, while the latter is not. As Paul Simon notes,

Rock critics have consistently derided orchestral or symphonic fusions as pretentious and bourgeois, while exalting the nihilism of punk and alternative bands as the best way to purify and revitalize rock-and-roll. Perhaps the deeply ingrained oral tradition in rock has left an indelible mark on the psyche of its musicians: beware the written form, the manuscript paper with notes, clefs, and musical direction in Italian. It's a credo of rock that raw is true.⁸²

Composers from the popular music world who are not musically literate—Frank Wildhorn, for example—are slowly becoming more present in the musical theater; they nevertheless remain the exception to the rule.

Goodman's approach to the score of *Bright Lights Big City* was, thus, highly distinctive. He notes,

I think one of the gifts God has given me is that I can just remember everything I write. So I literally wrote the first draft of the score without taping anything. Maybe I taped a wee bit here and there, but . . . then I taped it once I had gotten the whole thing.⁸³

To compensate for his inability to put notes to paper, Goodman retained the help of Milazzo, who was cast in the production and also served as the musical's vocal arranger. He also enlisted the help of Richard Barone, a New York-based popular composer, producer, and performer, who joined the project as the orchestrator, arranger, and musical director.

⁸² Simon, 1998: 28.

⁸³ Personal communication with Paul Scott Goodman, 14 March 1999.

Yet Barone's role in the *Bright Lights Big City* creative team quickly proved even more idiosyncratic to the musical theater realm than Goodman's. A producer accustomed to recording his own songs or those of other rock and popular musicians, Barone was not much more adept at notating music than was Goodman:

The way I worked on [the musical] was the way I would work on my own album. I had Paul come over . . . with his guitar. I set him up to record the whole show with just him singing all the parts. I set up my living room as a recording studio, which I often do for new material . . . as a producer or whatever my role is. In this case, I took the role of producer. . . . So he came over, I set him up, he let loose and did the entire show, act one and act two . . . [then] I used the tape to build on. I added all the parts . . . the string parts, guitar parts, bass, percussion and keyboards. . . . That's what I built from. . . . I liked having the heart and soul of his writing and building from that. His performance was something that was important to me. It really worked for me because it had the spirit of the show throughout, the spirit of his compositions. In other words, he didn't really have to write it down. The tape wrote it down for him and I just built on that, the way any orchestrator would build on it on paper. I did it on tape.⁸⁴

While such practices are the norm in the popular music realm, the lack of written music proved problematic when the time came to teach the score of the musical to the cast and the pit band. Thus, Joe McGinty, the musical director of the popular concert series Loser's Lounge, was hired as the conductor; in the first weeks of rehearsal for the musical, in January 1999, he and Barone worked furiously to transcribe the entire score of the musical from tape to paper.⁸⁵

The number of people working on the music for *Bright Lights Big City* was no more challenging than the unorthodox approach that Barone took as musical director. Interested in attaining the best sound, Barone had a habit of tinkering with the tempi and instrumentation of

⁸⁴ Personal communication with Richard Barone. 25 March 1999.

⁸⁵ Personal communication with Martha Donaldson. 15 January 1999.

songs, even after Greif had “set” a particular piece for a particular scene. Martha Donaldson, the stage manager, remembers,

We would do a piece of music and we would set it. We would say, “it’s going to be four counts.” And then the very next day we would do it again and it would be different. Richard [Barone] would say, “I just thought maybe you might like it better if—” And it was like, “no, we decided *yesterday* what it is.” It was funny because I know that he thought that if he did this that we would like it better and maybe we wouldn’t quite notice. And it was like, “yeah we notice, you can’t *not* notice, it was four counts yesterday, it’s eight counts today! We notice!” . . . [Music was] not written down, and not only [was it] not written down, but we had Joe McGinty, who plays piano and reads music, we had Richard . . . who plays a number of different instruments but who does not read or write music, we had Annemarie [Milazzo] who is teaching us [vocal arrangements and] who knows more than any of those guys but also does not read or write music. It was very, very frustrating, and Richard . . . [did not understand] that when we set [a song], it’s *set*. . . . You don’t change it the next day, you don’t do it differently the next time. The tempo is not different every single time we do it, it’s the *same*.⁸⁶

Just as Paul Simon annoyed the cast and crew of *The Capeman* by spending too much time trying to figure out the proper placement of a tambourine, Barone’s interest in attaining the best possible sound for the songs is expected in the studio, but only proved confusing and annoying in a rehearsal for a musical theater production.

A further problem lay in working with Paul Scott Goodman, who was not only busily putting the finishing touches on his musical during the rehearsal period but was also appearing as a character in the show. His presence onstage in his own piece was the result of decisions made on the part of the creative team in hopes of tackling one of the largest problems encountered while adapting *Bright Lights Big City* for the stage: the novel’s distinctive voice.

Set in New York City in the early 1980s, McInerney’s *Bright Lights Big City* is narrated by

⁸⁶ Personal communication with Martha Donaldson, 25 March 1999.

a privileged, unnamed young writer, whose mother has recently died and whose wife, a successful model, has even more recently left him for another man. Depressed and alone, the narrator enters a self-destructive spiral of drinking, cocaine snorting, casual promiscuity, and all-night club-hopping, which eventually costs him his job as a fact-checker at the renowned *Gotham* magazine (a thinly veiled *New Yorker*). The narrative of the story, which follows the young writer from the depths of Gatsbian despair back to emotional health and the promise of a happy and successful life, is not particularly unique. Yet the novel is noteworthy because it is one of the very few written entirely in the second-person singular: the protagonist addresses himself throughout as “you.”

During the early stages of the project, it was decided that Goodman’s initial sing-through of his musical was memorable and moving enough that he should serve as a sort of alter-ego to the stage incarnation of the novel’s central character, therefore addressing the problem of translating one of the novel’s most memorable aspects for the stage. Goodman was thus cast in his own musical as “a character called ‘Writer,’ who delivers most of the novel’s descriptive passages and conveys unwelcome insights to the protagonist.”^{x7} Goodman’s role as an actor, however, led to even greater difficulties.

In the first place, Goodman speaks with a thick Scottish accent. In early workshops, his presence onstage as the alter-ego for a New York-based American man proved confusing to spectators.^{x8} The creative team set about trying to explain Goodman’s presence onstage by adding a short speech to be delivered by him at the very beginning of the show. During its run

^{x7} Smith, W., 1999: 14.

^{x8} Personal communication with Paul Scott Goodman, 14 March 1999.

at the New York Theatre Workshop in 1999, the musical began as Goodman walked onto the stage with his guitar, introduced himself to the audience as the writer of the musical, and explained that McInerney's character reminded him a lot of himself as a young man living in New York City. He made a similar speech at the end of the show, thanking everyone for attending before sending them on their way.

While the speeches helped explain Goodman's presence onstage, they contributed to a rather confused vision for the show. Leigh Silverman, the assistant director, notes,

a fundamental problem in this production is that there is no clear concept of what is supposed to be happening in terms of how it is supposed to be presented. Paul comes out and does a lot of direct address at the top and then he stops doing direct address, then he goes back to doing direct address. And sometimes the actors are doing direct address, and sometimes they are not. . . . I don't feel that there was ever a clear, decisive moment in our rehearsal process when someone—whether a designer or a director or whoever—says, “ok—there was no unifying [vision].”⁸⁹

An even greater problem, however, lay in Goodman's inability to shed the qualities that befit rock musicians, but that are not considered appropriate in the theater. In January 1999, I observed a number of rehearsals and early performances of *Bright Lights Big City* and repeatedly remarked in field notes that the problems Goodman encountered as a musical theater performer would likely be welcomed in a rock concert setting. Again and again, I noted that I found him to be a fascinating performer from a rock perspective, but an utter disaster as an actor.

Onstage for most of the musical, working alternatively as the lead character's alter-ego and an acoustic guitar-strumming accompanist who bridged the cast and the band (set on a

⁸⁹ Personal communication with Leigh Silverman, 11 March 1999.

platform built high above center stage), Goodman regularly exhibited an inability to follow stage directions. He had a penchant for both verbal and musical improvisation, and would often get carried away while accompanying songs during rehearsal. My field notes describing the rehearsal that took place on 20 January 1999 acknowledge Goodman's obvious lack of interest in repetition:

When playing along with the band as an accompanist for the actors, Paul Scott Goodman never sticks to the same patterns. Case in point: At the start of the first run of the song "Coma Baby," he stuck to strummed G chords; the second time around he muted the strings and provided rhythmic accompaniment; and during yet another run-through he started picking, obviously having fun and exploring the options as he went along.

Yet such improvisation became problematic during tech rehearsals, when the company moved from the rehearsal rooms to the stage in the weeks before previews began.

Field notes recorded on 26 January 1999 describe a few instances when Goodman's improvisatory nature worked to throw off the rest of the company:

Twice . . . [Goodman] starts too early and then misses the downbeat, which . . . [causes] the cast to sound confused and weak. Barone counts off out loud to help—maybe that should remain in the show?

Further observations on Goodman's guitar playing were recorded in personal field notes on 28 January 1999, the day of the first rehearsal with the full band:

Improvisation has no place at all on the musical theater stage. Even the best performers can hit a sour note. Goodman improvises every time a song is run. Usually, it sounds fine. But when, every hundredth time, he hits a sour note, or gets carried away with a picking pattern that doesn't fit, or strums too enthusiastically, or doesn't fret a chord in time, it stands out so much louder than his guitar playing does when he's on the money. I'm sure most rock groups don't improvise that much when performing live. Still, even the most rehearsed rock group has more leeway than the Broadway musician does. Rock fans in

a live setting where it is too loud to hear every detail won't care if someone hits a bum note. In fact, one could argue that a sour note where there was not supposed to be one is the stuff of legend in rock—like the mistakes Dylan purposely leaves in his recordings. But music piped from the pit to a Broadway audience sounds polished and perfect and never more interesting than the onstage action. Broadway music is like editing. It's important, but you're never supposed to notice that it's there.

Barone notes that Goodman's fondness for musical improvisation was distracting enough that the band devised a number of "safeties," or specific cues, to protect themselves from being confused by Goodman's digressions at the beginnings of musical numbers.⁹⁰

Goodman's habit for improvising while accompanying singers was matched by an inability to follow directions. Acting, he admitted, was hard for him:

Hit your mark every night, do the same thing every night. As a performer that's tough for me. I like to go with the moment onstage. If I feel a certain way and want to say something, I want to be able to say it. . . . [Acting is] a discipline, but it's not for me. Imagine what it was like being Yul Brynner and doing *King and I* five million times? I don't even need to be doing it for three months and I get bored with it already.⁹¹

Yet doing the same things in the same way each night is important in the theater world, where members of a company rely on one another throughout for cues.

Stage manager Martha Donaldson remembers that part of the production's problems lay in the fact that Goodman was always treated as an outsider:

The issue of who he is in the play was never developed. I don't feel as though anybody ever said, "this is the deal with this character. The reason he is here is because of this. This is how [he moves] the story forward. This is why he has to be present at all times." None of those things were ever established, near as I can tell. Unless Michael [Greif] had secret meetings with Paul. . . . He was just there, and it was a given that he had to be there. . . . There [was]

⁹⁰ Personal communication with Richard Barone, 25 March 1999.

⁹¹ Personal communication with Paul Scott Goodman, 14 March 1999.

something different about him, and that [was] the problem: he wasn't treated like an actor. He was treated like he was the writer and he was also in it. . . . He wasn't taught anything that he needed to know that would have helped his performance, [and] it wasn't established that he was one of a 12-person company.⁹²

Indeed, Goodman habitually forgot his lines, cues, and blocking, all of which proved frustrating for the rest of the company. Assistant director Leigh Silverman avers:

It was always a struggle for Paul to be consistent. It was a struggle for everyone. The lighting designer would design lights around where Paul was and the next night Paul would not even come out onstage. . . . I am madly in love with Paul, I think he is a lovely man and I loved having him there. But he's out of control. He's a loose cannon. There is a discipline that goes along with the theater that has to do with consistency and a focused energy on keeping your performance fresh every night, but keeping it exactly the same. Being able to walk the line between doing little things that keep it fresh for you, versus doing it the same so that you are getting the same quality and the same movements every night. . . . Paul doesn't understand that. It's like a different language. He's a rock-and-roller. So . . . he does something different every night. For everything.⁹³

One cast member who requested anonymity remembers that Goodman's inability to meld with the rest of the cast was not his fault, but that of the creative staff who attempted to force him into the mold of a professional actor:

When you put [Paul] in a situation where there's a lot of rules, I don't think that works for him. So [he] was neither here nor there. Either use him like he is, or don't use him at all. Because he's not an actor, he's a performance artist. And that energy you could really harness, or you should just leave it out. [He] was very much in the middle. You can't hide him. They tried to take away that he was very eccentric . . . and a little bit crept out, so then people had the reaction of, "What's that? Who's that? He's some guy with a Scottish accent standing on the stage."⁹⁴

⁹² Personal communication with Martha Donaldson, 25 March 1999.

⁹³ Personal communication with Leigh Silverman, 11 March 1999.

⁹⁴ Personal communication with Anonymous, 31 March 1999.

Indeed, while a songwriter who performs his or her own songs onstage is allowed the luxury of a distinctive performing style, Goodman's flamboyant presence did not translate to the stage of *Bright Lights Big City*. With his shaggy mop of hair, his thick accent, his reedy and occasionally unintelligible singing style, and his penchant for black or blue fingernail polish, Goodman often seemed to be occupying a different stage from the rest of the obviously trained and carefully groomed cast.

Both during the rehearsal period and the run of the musical, Goodman struck me as one of the most unselfconscious and uncompromising rock performers I have seen on a theater stage. He was thus, throughout my fieldwork, a subject of particular interest. Unfortunately, neither the theater critics who reviewed *Bright Lights Big City* nor the majority of spectators who saw the production warmed to Goodman in the same way. When *Bright Lights Big City* opened on 24 February 1999, it was typically ignored by rock critics and was greeted with mixed-to-poor reviews by theater critics. Most compared the musical unfavorably with the New York Theatre Workshop's previous rock musical, *Rent*, and almost all cited Goodman's presence onstage as one of the musical's biggest shortcomings. Peter Marks, in his review for the *New York Times*, argued that Goodman, as a "scruffy, guitar-strumming troubadour," was so miscast as to be "pointless."⁹⁵ In a particularly cruel pan, Sam Whitehead of *Time Out New York* wrote,

Thank God that every yahoo who feels a connection to other people's words doesn't also feel the need to parlay the bond into a show. If Goodman has one thing going for him throughout his theatrical debacle, it's that he definitely looks as if he's done all the boozing and blow necessary to somehow figure

⁹⁵ Marks, 1999: 7.

as a hard-living player in the decade of excess that *Bright Lights* came to symbolize. With a craggy, washed-up smile, he awkwardly strolls the stage acting like a detached emcee and guiding the audience through the infamous week of drug-fueled despair that brought McNerney's autobiographical hero . . . to his knees. And given eye-rolling lyrics that rely on strained, sophomoric rhyme schemes . . . it's not long before you too are brought to your knees. If only it were in an intoxicated haze.⁹⁶

While critical and commercial reception do not always reflect one another, the audiences who attended performances of *Bright Lights Big City* had similar reactions.

As noted, the role of the singer-songwriter in the rock realm is vastly different from that of the songwriter in the musical theater. Whereas in the rock realm, authenticity is bound up with the notion of a songwriter performing his or her own music, the singer-songwriter is comparatively nonexistent in the musical theater, where to perform one's own music onstage—especially poorly—is perceived by some spectators as the epitome of egotism. A commentary about *Bright Lights Big City* that was posted online by an anonymous contributor to the fan-site “StephenSondheim.com” neatly summed up such opinions with the following:

Bright Lights Big City was written by a fellow named Paul Scott Goodman. . . . He is also in the show, playing someone named Paul Scott Goodman. This is a curious device, to say the least. I don't think this “author serving as narrator” is a good idea for the musical theater. Why, can you imagine if Stephen Sondheim came out at the beginning of *Passion* and said, “Hi, I'm Steve Sondheim and I wrote this show” and then proceeded to walk up to the naked Clara and Giorgio and start singing about what we're going to see?⁹⁷

Indeed, many audience members I approached during preview performances of the musical noted that they were confused by the goings-on onstage.

⁹⁶ Whitehead. 1999: 148.

⁹⁷ <http://www.sondheim.com/comedy/columna/past/77.html>

A few audience members, whom I questioned at different performances, commented that because they had never read the book, the musical made little sense to them, and that Goodman's presence was especially confusing. During the performance on the evening of 4 February 1999, I sat behind a handful of audience members who regularly stifled giggles at the sight of Goodman on the stage. Walkouts after intermission were not overwhelming, but were also not infrequent. After the performance on the evening of 15 February, as I walked across town, I listened surreptitiously to the reactions of a couple who had seen the same performance and who were walking a few paces ahead of me. They had greatly disliked the production and were specifically critical of Goodman, whose presence onstage struck them as unforgivably arrogant. "Get *over* yourself!" one of them shouted. "They *have* to take him out of there!" agreed the other.

Without question, negative critical and commercial reception hurts the morale of a performing company, and this was certainly the case with *Bright Lights Big City*.⁹⁸ The poor reviews and ticket sales took a particular toll on Goodman. After the musical opened, his bitter disappointment at the negative reception manifested itself in even more erratic onstage behavior than he had exhibited before *Bright Lights Big City* opened.

On the evening of 14 March, I attended a performance of the show. Having arrived a bit early, I stopped to chat with stage manager Martha Donaldson, who told me that Michael Greif, the director, had returned from Los Angeles to check up on the show. Donaldson told

⁹⁸ Personal communication with Leigh Silverman. 11 March 1999.

me that she was relieved by his presence, since Goodman had become increasingly difficult to work with.⁹⁹ Later, Donaldson elaborated:

after the reviews came out . . . [Goodman] became morose and despondent . . . and refused to wear his costume, and refused to follow his blocking, and refused to follow the script, and was like, "I'm the writer, I can do whatever I want." . . . Most of the trouble with him happened . . . when he did the prologue and the closing statement. . . . He always thought that he should talk to and cajole the audience. . . . Michael spent a great deal of time saying, "No, you need to walk out, say who you are . . . and start the show. You don't get the audience to talk back, you don't banter with them." If it was his own show, maybe. But it's a giant musical that's waiting for him to start. There was no way to know what he was going to say. . . . It's a testament to the professionalism of the cast that they didn't just . . . say, "Look . . . we are not putting up with this shit any more." With him being at the curtain call and spouting off whatever is on his mind before he *finally* says goodnight. So many nights, the cast had to stand there . . . as he went on and on and thanked the audience for being there and that he doesn't care what the New York press says. That kind of stuff. And the audience meanwhile is like, "We don't *know* what the New York press says, so why don't you shut up?" Killing the end of the show.¹⁰⁰

Assistant director Leigh Silverman agrees that Goodman's habit of dragging out his introductory and concluding remarks destroyed the energy of the production:

When [Paul] gets out on stage at the beginning and says, "Hi, I'm Paul Scott Goodman and I wrote this musical" . . . and people start to clap, he doesn't understand that when he bows five times that he kills the moment. That a simple head-nod and a continuation would be plenty. That with five head nods people are like, "I'm outta here. Who *is* this motherfucker?"¹⁰¹

Again, whereas onstage banter and interaction with the audience—especially interaction that allows an audience to gain insight into the emotional state of the songwriter—would be acceptable, if not preferable, in the rock realm, Goodman's behavior in the musical was

⁹⁹ Personal communication with Martha Donaldson, 14 March 1999.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1999.

¹⁰¹ Personal communication with Leigh Silverman, 11 March 1999.

deemed inappropriate. Yet although he was roundly rejected, one might argue that the only thing wrong with Goodman's performance was the setting.

Stephen Trask: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

One of the most critically and commercially successful projects to combine elements from rock and the musical theater is *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* by John Cameron Mitchell, with music and lyrics by Stephen Trask. This piece premiered at the Jane Street Theatre on 14 February 1998 and enjoyed a run of over two years. It has since been mounted in a number of cities across the U.S., as well as in Germany, England, Italy, Canada, and Iceland. A film version, adapted and directed by Mitchell, won awards at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival and opened in the late summer of 2001 in theaters nationwide.¹⁰² More a monologue with songs than a full-fledged musical, *Hedwig* borrows from Plato's *Symposium* in recounting the tale of its title character.

The story of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is as follows: abandoned at a young age by his sexually abusive father and raised by his mother in East Germany during the 1970s and 1980s, Hedwig—born Hansel Schmidt—lives in an apartment so small that his mother makes him play and listen to the American pop records he adores in the oven. As a young man, he meets and wins the affections of an American GI who agrees to marry him and take him to the United States if he will first agree to a sex change operation. Hansel agrees, but the doctor

¹⁰² All information provided on the official website of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* or on the official website of Michael Cerveris, who played Hedwig in the New York, Los Angeles, and London productions: <http://www.get-hed.com> and <http://www.amazing-journey.com/theatre.htm>.

botches the operation. Hansel awakens to find that he has been left with a thickly scarred and unsightly mound of flesh where his penis had been, hence the “Angry Inch” of the show’s title.

Hansel, renamed Hedwig and self-identified as a female after the surgery, marries the GI and accompanies him to the U.S., only to be abandoned in a Kansas trailer park where she forlornly watches the fall of the Berlin Wall on television. Making a living by prostituting herself and occasionally performing songs in restaurants around the park, Hedwig meets Tommy Speck, a teenage Army brat, Jesus freak, and aspiring rock star. She grooms Tommy for stardom and gives him the stage name Tommy Gnosis, after the Greek word for knowledge. The two become romantically involved, but because of his own confused sexuality, Tommy refuses to kiss Hedwig on the mouth and only makes sexual overtures by approaching her from behind. When Tommy finally reaches between Hedwig’s legs, he is horrified by what he finds, and abruptly leaves her.

Tommy takes with him all the songs that he and Hedwig collaborated upon and soon becomes a hugely successful rock star. Hedwig, heartbroken, continues to struggle in obscurity. In a desperate attempt to maintain some control over her life and her world, Hedwig marries, and thus takes control of both the immigration papers and the life of a talented Serbian-Jewish drag queen named Yitzak. She forms a band of Slavic immigrants, which she names the Angry Inch, and keeps her band and husband in line by threatening to have them deported whenever they defy her. Hedwig further inflicts her anger and despair on Yitzak by refusing to allow him to perform in drag, despite the fact that he regularly attempts to steal Hedwig’s wigs when she is not watching.

Obsessed with Tommy and wanting only to hear him acknowledge that she in some small way influenced his life, Hedwig travels with her entourage to perform in dive bars in the vicinity of Tommy Gnosis's larger, more reputable performance venues. Throughout the show, when not barking at her band, fighting with Yitzak, or imparting her life story to the audience, Hedwig repeatedly kicks open a stage door upstage left and listens to what she tells her audience is a sold-out concert that Tommy is giving across the waters at the Meadowlands. Yet her attempts to hear any acknowledgment of her presence in his life are rewarded only with earfuls of Tommy praising himself. Eventually, Yitzak defies Hedwig by spitting in her face, which catalyzes an emotional breakdown. The ambiguous ending of the show suggests at once that Hedwig and Tommy were two parts of the same person, and that Hedwig has found the strength to forgive Tommy, release Yitzhak from virtual slavery, and stand alone as a self-respecting, emotionally sound individual.

In many respects, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* offers the most successful blend of rock and musical theater elements to date, in large part because the creators wisely made no attempt to fully integrate the two divergent genres. Rather, rock and musical theater elements are permitted to exist side by side. Throughout the show, Hedwig, surrounded by Yitzak and the Angry Inch, tells her tale in monologue form, with only occasional lines spoken by any of the other characters on the stage. Most of the show's eleven musical numbers are far more aggressively amplified and rendered than most songs on the theatrical stage. They are performed, as good live rock songs often are, with no regard to the clarity or precision typically required of the musical theater. Freed from narrative trappings, in that they are almost

never used to further the plot of the show, the songs in *Hedwig* are used almost exclusively to punctuate the lead character's changing moods.

Even further, the overall aesthetic of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is heavily influenced by the glam rock movement, which proved advantageous to the show's reception. Glam, which arose in the early 1970s was, in part, a response to the highly machismo posturing found among the performers of hard rock. Adherents such as the New York Dolls, T. Rex, Mott the Hoople, Roxy Music, and David Bowie recorded brief, hook-based songs that, in live settings, were executed in a highly theatrical manner by performers in either androgynous or overtly feminine costumes. The aspect of glam rock that most benefited *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was its overt disregard of authenticity. As Smith notes, Trask and Mitchell

knew that the only kind of rock that would lend itself to successful simulation in the theater was that which makes no claim to authenticity at all, instead celebrating, even flaunting, its artifice, its campiness—its very *theatricality*. No form of rock has ever reveled quite so self-consciously in its own stagy, rhinestone-encrusted fabulousness as the glam-rock concocted by David Bowie, T. Rex, and Roxy Music in the early seventies (it didn't hurt that Trask was an actual fixture on the New York rock scene, having fronted a band, Cheater . . . for years before he wrote the music for *Hedwig*). Glam . . . lends itself perfectly to Trask and Mitchell's subject. . . . *Hedwig*—like the entire pop subgenre from which it borrows its ambitious sound—is about androgyny, life in a borderline state of being, and the inevitably disappointing pursuit of glamour.¹⁰³

Ironically, despite the fact that glam has traditionally reveled in its inauthenticity, its influence on *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* helped the show to appeal further to a number of rock musicians and fans who usually dismiss such pieces as inauthentic. The show won the respect of David Bowie, for example, who enjoyed it so much that he became a producer of the Los

¹⁰³ Smith, E. 1999.

Angeles production.¹⁰⁴ As one informant for this project noted, “*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is the only musical I’ve ever seen that made me want to stand up, raise my fist, and yell.”¹⁰⁵

Trask and Mitchell avoided other problems that rock musicals often face in developing their show as if it were a rock concert. Cerveris argues that “the fundamentally weird thing about musicals is that people sing in the middle of everyday life and you have to kind of step out of reality”; by structuring their piece as a “rock cabaret” instead of as a fully fledged musical, Mitchell and Trask

totally sidestepped the problem by saying, “You’re coming to a gig to see a singer and her band,” so you don’t have to pretend they’re not singing to you. And then the narrative comes as onstage patter between songs, as if you’re watching a concert and the singer says, “This is a song I wrote about my girlfriend who left me,” only for Hedwig, it’s a much more involved story than that. So that structure sets up the freedom to have it feel like an authentic rock event.”¹⁰⁶

The show’s effective use of rock and musical theater elements is in many respects due to the unique nature of collaboration between the creators of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

John Cameron Mitchell, a stage actor who made his name in such musicals as *Big River* and *The Secret Garden*, and Stephen Trask, a rock musician and composer who led the house band at the gay downtown club Squeezebox, struck up a friendship when they met on a flight to Los Angeles. After discovering that they had mutual likes (rock and the theater) and dislikes (all extant rock musicals), the two decided to collaborate on “a play that translated the visceral charge of live rock into theater that wasn’t watered down or sanitized.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Kendt. 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Personal communication with Jacob M. Rye. 23 June 2001.

¹⁰⁶ Kendt. 1999.

¹⁰⁷ Eisenbach. 1998.

Mitchell developed the character of Hedwig while Trask wrote music and lyrics. Rather than workshop their production in a traditional manner, they honed their project at Squeezebox, where Mitchell would appear as Hedwig before a tough audience of drag queen regulars known for being icy to newcomers.¹⁰⁸ As the bit developed into a full-length piece, Trask's band, Cheater, became Hedwig's backing band, the Angry Inch.

Trask and Mitchell tinkered with *Hedwig* for four years. The show, directed by Peter Askin, enjoyed a one-month run at the Westbeth Theatre in Greenwich Village in 1997, after which its creators began to shop around for a more permanent venue.¹⁰⁹ Unable to find a site that offered a proper balance of theater and club aesthetics, the two finally stumbled upon the Jane Street Theater at the Hotel Riverview. A theater and bar area fashioned from a former ballroom, the room was deemed both dilapidated and remote enough to serve *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*; an added draw was that the site, originally a seaman's hotel and currently a resting place for European backpackers, was used in 1912 to shelter the surviving members of the Titanic.¹¹⁰

Although *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was initially a hard sell for its press agents, their efforts eventually paid off. *Hedwig* opened to positive reviews, and these, along with a few appearances on television talk shows, attracted theatergoers to the show. Pete Townshend's attendance was quickly followed by that of such rock denizens as David Bowie, Lou Reed, Bob Mould, and Joey Ramone,¹¹¹ which helped add to the show's legitimacy in the rock press

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ McDonnell. 1998: 51.

¹¹⁰ Marks. 1998.

¹¹¹ Personal communication with Stephen Trask. 29 July 1998.

and among rock fans.¹¹² Finally, although placing advertisements in the print media is expensive, the press agents D'Ambrosio and Morrison placed the few that they could afford strategically: ads listing the many famous rock musicians, film and television actors, and local personalities who attended early productions of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* appeared alternately in the theater and music sections of such periodicals as *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and *Time Out*.¹¹³ Yet while *Hedwig* arguably enjoyed more commercial and critical success in both rock and theater camps than any other staged rock musical, the show was not without internal complications, many having to do with Trask and his role in the production.

Early in the run of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Tom D'Ambrosio noted, with some surprise, that "for a rock musical, all anybody cares about is John Cameron Mitchell from a press point of view."¹¹⁴ Ironically, although he was heralded by journalists as an "authentic" rock musician who composed an impressive score for the production, Trask was indeed ultimately given short shrift in the media's reception of the show. Understandably, the flamboyance and the quick-witted humor of Mitchell as Hedwig proved somewhat more appealing, from a media perspective, than did Trask, who played a decidedly less flamboyant role onstage as the bandleader of the Angry Inch. Yet, surprisingly, even the rock press, which duly cited Trask's involvement in New York's rock scene as evidence of the show's relative legitimacy, tended to give Trask less attention than Mitchell. This is made clear in a *Rolling*

¹¹² Personal communication with Evelyn McDonnell, 30 September 1999; personal communication with rock fans throughout the course of this project.

¹¹³ Personal communication with Tom D'Ambrosio, 17 July 1998.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Stone article about the show that features a full-page photograph of Mitchell as Hedwig on the first page, and a one-eighth-page sized photograph of Trask on the second.¹¹⁵ Such media emphasis is typical of the musical theater, in which actors often receive more media attention and credit for a successful production than those in “behind the scenes” roles. Yet the opposite is usually the case in the rock world, where performers are traditionally lauded both for their musicianship and the originality of their songwriting.

Two different informants affiliated with the production, both of whom requested anonymity, noted that the comparative lack of media attention was initially very painful for Trask, who openly acknowledged as much in the press. In an interview for *The Village Voice*, Trask joked, “It’s weird after years of trying to be a rock star myself to be in the Dave Stewart half of this very Eurythmics relationship.”¹¹⁶ His difficulties accepting such a role are made a bit clearer in an interview for the online network Gay.com. In discussing the inspiration for the show’s finale, Trask notes,

The most compelling theme of Hedwig’s life was her lifelong desire, struggle, and ultimate failure to become a rock star. Since that was also my story, I was able to write “Midnight Radio” from a very personal view point. And I cried every time we played it for the first month of the show.¹¹⁷

Trask’s secondary role in the reception of his show was matched by the secondary role he played onstage: as a bandleader, Trask was used to being in charge, but as a member of the cast of *Hedwig*, he found himself reduced to the role of accompanist.

¹¹⁵ Fricke, 1998: 54-55.

¹¹⁶ McDonnell, 1998: 51.

¹¹⁷ http://content.gay.com/channels/arts/musiccorner/stephentask_000217.html

Trask's difficulty accepting a less central role was in evidence on a number of occasions, in particular during a shoot for MTV News at the Jane Street Theatre on the afternoon of 10 February 1999, and at an album release concert sponsored by Atlantic records at the Bowery Ballroom on the evening of 17 February 1999. Personal field notes recorded after the latter event describe Trask's obvious discomfort in his secondary role:

Trask called a lot of undue attention to himself: He fidgeted, he was easily distracted, he fumbled with the mike, he kept making all sorts of unnecessary technical commentary. "You can cut the guitar mike, now!" he snapped at one point, after frantically motioning to the booth about six times that it needed to be turned up a notch. This behavior is consistent with that during the MTV shoot last week, when he kept complaining that his mike was too soft, and the engineers kept informing him that the soft mix was necessary to keep the sound from distorting on video, and Trask would listen to them say this and then complain minutes later that his mike was too soft. He seems bored and unfocused and more interested in calling attention to himself than in getting through a song. I feel sorry for him: it's Hedwig that everyone gives a shit about. Trask's songs have become famous without him. His words are no longer his. No one would stick around to watch Trask perform his own music. It's the character everyone wants. Last night, it was Mitchell as Hedwig that everyone was asking to sign their free promotional CDs. I didn't see Trask get a single request. No one really paid him any mind at all. It's got to hurt.¹¹⁸

Making matters worse for Trask was the fact that despite the blessings bestowed upon his songs, and their acceptance in the rock press and among many rock fans, the cast recording of the show failed to cross over into the rock music market.

Shortly after *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* opened, Trask and Mitchell began negotiations with record companies interested in recording the cast album and eventually signed with Atlantic Records. Aware that most cast albums are "recorded live in one day," which struck him as "a ridiculous way of recording," Trask began to think about ways to

¹¹⁸ Personal field notes recorded 18 February 1999.

distinguish the album from other cast recordings.¹¹⁹ Hoping to fashion the songs into a concept album that would stand apart from the show,¹²⁰ Trask approached the indie rock producer Brad Wood, who agreed to work with Trask on the project.¹²¹ The result was a cast recording that was put together in a studio, more in the manner of a typical rock album than a traditional cast recording.

Once the album had been recorded, personnel at Atlantic Records attempted to market it to a broader audience, in hopes that it would move beyond its theater moorings:

“We’re totally downplaying the theater aspect for radio,” says Vicky Germaise, senior VP of marketing at Atlantic. “That would just give them another excuse not to play it.” To further distinguish the album from the show, [the recording of] *Hedwig* features a new song, “Random Number Generation”—a Hole-ish rave-up sung by actress Miriam Shor, who plays . . . Yitzak. And inspired by *Please Kill Me*, Legs McNeil’s oral history of the ’70s downtown punk explosion, Trask snagged veteran scenester Danny Fields to write an essay for the liner notes.¹²²

The efforts that went into marketing the album initially seemed to pay off: like the show itself, the cast recording of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* earned rare accolades in the rock press. In keeping with the habit rock writers have of justifying what little attention they give to staged rock musicals, Barry Walters of *Rolling Stone* gave the album three-and-a-half out of five stars and noted that while “rock rarely makes it to the theatrical stage with balls intact,” the *Hedwig* album “makes for the brainiest, catchiest concept album since Liz Phair’s *Exile in Guyville*.”¹²³ Further, the local, late-night rock radio disk jockey Vin Scelsa embraced both

¹¹⁹ Dansby, 1999.

¹²⁰ Personal communication with Stephen Trask, 29 July 1998.

¹²¹ Dansby, 1999.

¹²² Galtney, 1999: 13.

¹²³ Walters, 1999: 58.

the show and the album; more than once, he invited the company to perform on the show, mentioned the production frequently during his broadcasts, and played cuts from the album when it was released.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, the album failed to catch on with a broader audience. Cerveris argues that the fault lies with the divisions imposed on music by an industry obsessed with target audiences and niche marketing:

I've been asked why the music business hasn't embraced *Hedwig* more. The record has sold like most cast albums, but it hasn't been a big crossover hit; you don't hear it on the radio. I think that comes down to the music business' resistance of anything performance oriented, or its distrust of it. So if anything comes from the theatre, it's automatically fake, artificial. . . . I was talking to Pete Townshend about this and saying, "Do I need to focus more on music to be taken seriously?" He said, "In some ways, it's true: as long as you're connected with the musical theater world, the music business is going to be resistant to you. If you can find a way to use the exposure without being identified with it, that could be useful—and good luck to you."¹²⁵

Indeed, the simple fact that the music was originally used on the theater stage seemed to have kept the music from crossing over to a rock audience: all attempts that were made to divorce the songs from the show seemed particularly futile, especially once the album was made commercially available. The cast recording of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* never made it to the "rock" section of most major record stores. Rather, it was grouped with the other Broadway and Off Broadway shows in the "soundtrack" section.

Despite the critical and commercial success of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Stephen Trask found his dreams oddly compromised when his songs became most closely associated

¹²⁴Personal communication with Stephen Trask, 29 July 1998; Broadcast of Vin Scelsa's *Idiot's Delight*, 7 February 1999, 10:00 p.m.

¹²⁵Kendt, 1999.

with a fictional character. Although embraced by the theater world, and, perhaps more impressively, awarded an amount of respect by rock critics that is unprecedented among rock musicals, Trask's songs were ultimately unable to transcend their status as parts of the score to a successful Off Broadway production. There is no aesthetic reason that the show's music, with its catchy hooks, obscure and moody lyrics, and aggressive delivery, should not have won the interest of rock audiences. Yet by very nature of its association with the musical theater, *Hedwig* became a "specialty" item that was tolerated and even respected, but ultimately never fully embraced in the rock world.

The relative successes or failures of the three case studies discussed above were due in some respects to the personalities of their creators: while Simon's and Goodman's rock-influenced idiosyncrasies won out over their collective ability to adjust to the musical theater realm, Trask was, for the most part, able to keep his difficulties in adapting from affecting his performance or his production. Nevertheless, the very difficulties that these men had in crossing from the rock to the theater realm reflect the inherent tensions between rock and musical theater aesthetics, including those that arise when rock's connection to authenticity fails to resonate in the less authenticity-obsessed theatrical realm: Simon's obsession with bringing "authentic" music to the Broadway stage; Goodman's inability to surrender his passion for the spontaneous, the improvisational, and the rebellious; and Trask's defensiveness at being unable to maintain complete control of his own musical creation. These attributes are at once typical of and admired in the rock realm, but they failed to translate—and in the first two cases, caused serious problems—to the musical theater realm.

Because of the many difficulties experienced by composer-performers who straddle the fence between rock and musical theater, it is no wonder that so few rock musicians attempt it. It also unsurprising that popular styles lacking the same relationship to authenticity are more readily accepted by or absorbed into the musical theater realm. While jazz, rhythm and blues, disco, and country music have certainly met with some resistance when featured in musicals—and are often viewed with suspicion by purists who see all popular genres as somehow sully the value of high-quality musical theater—no style has met with as much resistance as has rock music.

As this chapter demonstrates, much of the resistance to the staged rock musical can be seen to come from both the rock and the theater realms. On the one hand, despite rock's strong connection to commercialism, rock music remains bound with notions of a collectively imagined authenticity in the minds of its fans and its chroniclers, which is perpetuated by the industry that promotes it. These associations with authenticity have helped to create and maintain, in the rock realm, an image of the singer-songwriter-as-artist that is not appreciated, or even tolerated, in the far less authenticity-preoccupied realm of the musical theater.

Of course, the difficulty encountered in bridging the gap between rock music and musical theater is not fully explained via theories regarding the associations, with the former, of imagined authenticity. In the years since the advent of rock music, the genre has developed its own set of performance aesthetics, which are markedly different from those found in the musical theater realm. In the following chapter, the approaches to performance in both realms will be analyzed and discussed.

Chapter V

The Singer, Not the Song: Differing Approaches to and Executions of Rock and Musical Theater Performance

Rent isn't rock music. It just isn't.
It's theatre music played with guitars
and drums.

—Stephen Trask, composer,
Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Get an opera singer to sing "I Am
the Walrus." and something weird
happens.

—Marjorie LiPari,
Tribe member,
Original Broadway
cast of *Hair*

Rock musicals may be interpreted as attempts to bring a sense of youthful energy and spontaneity to an American performing arts genre that is often perceived as pitifully stale and behind the times. Such attempts do occasionally yield exciting, innovative, and successful theatrical productions. More often than not, however, rock's associations with energy, spontaneity, and rebellion are simultaneously reinforced and attacked on the musical stage, and this contradiction leads to unsuccessful hybrids that fail to attract audiences.

As demonstrated in chapter 4, rock music's relationship with an idealized, imagined authenticity has influenced the reception of staged rock musicals among both musical theater aficionados and rock fans. Yet contributing far more to the complexities of staging a successful rock musical are the many often contradictory approaches to and realizations of actual performance. Clifford Lee Johnson III argues,

Rock music is ecstatic, it's visceral. And the theater has great emotional, visceral moments, but there is a lot of cool mind work, a lot of give and take from five or six or seven different minds, and that tends to flatten things out: Why does he say this, why does she say that? And those things just flatten out ecstatic moments, so it's hard to reach them. That's one reason it's hard to bring rock straight into the theater.¹

Indeed, the differing approaches to and executions of performance can cause even the best rock musical productions to fail to attain the energy with which it is hoped that rock will infuse a theater performance in the first place. The ways in which differences in performance structure, musical form, instrumentation and orchestration, and performance space can work, in the musical theater, to negate the energy of rock music, thus warrant further investigation.

¹ Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998.

The Structure of Performance: Narrative, Revisited

A great many staged rock musicals manage to reinforce rock's associations with rebellion by using the music to accompany characters, situations, or modes of behavior—for example, free-love seeking, marijuana-smoking hippies; HIV-positive East Village squatters; deaf, blind, and mute false Messiahs; and drunken, down-on-their-luck transsexuals—that are highly atypical of the American musical theater. This said, the American musical tends to be remarkably conservative and resistant to change,² structurally speaking, and thus the institution's very conventionality can work to counteract attempts at cultivating any sense of rebelliousness. As discussed in chapter 2, and worth revisiting here, reliance on the narrative structures of traditional musical theater can result in a dampening of the energy with which rock is expected to infuse a theatrical performance in the first place.

At the same time, diverging from traditional narrative structures proves extraordinarily difficult in the musical theater realm. This is especially true since, as Stempel notes, the reliance on carefully developed, cohesive narratives hearkens back to the postwar collaborative work of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, and thus to what is largely celebrated as the golden age of the American musical:

Rodgers and Hammerstein championed what they referred to as musical plays, which often had the effect of standing musical comedy, as it has been previously understood, on its head. What was spoken in their shows wasn't there simply as filler between the songs and dances . . . [but] was rather meant to be taken as if it were, in fact, a legitimate stage play. Such legitimacy had consequences: the spoken play was also meant to work its way into the fabric of the songs and dances, to become in effect what they were about, and thus to eliminate or at least disguise the variety-show aspect of the musical numbers

² Personal communication with Jack Viertel, 20 October 1998; Manning, 2001.

altogether. For the most part, then, songs and dances in musical plays sacrificed the autonomy and the ironic relationships to their scripted “books” that they enjoyed in musical comedies. Instead, they were integrated into the “books” of musical plays. . . . A book’s narrative content now not only aspired to a certain integrity of its own, it also determined the shape that the musical numbers in a show would take.³

Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, then, the American musical has been most celebrated for its songs, but arguably has been more reliant on the overall narrative that carries these songs to the audience. As Bernard Holland notes, “music on Broadway is not the cargo; it is a conveyance for other cargo.”⁴

Such reliance on narrative, however, poses one of the more serious obstacles encountered in combining rock and musical theater fare. Since rock musicals that emphasize score over story-line have almost always proven critically and commercially disastrous, rock music is more often than not simply integrated into a plotted show. The presence of linear narrative, however, helps explain in part why many rock musicals initially succeed in reaching energy levels comparable to those reached at rock concerts, only to fail in sustaining them as the performance continues.

The critically and commercially successful rock musicals *Rent* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* serve as good examples. Both productions approximate live rock performance most directly and successfully in their first few moments. Both musicals feature non-traditional introductions: Forgoing any formal overture, or even the slow dimming of house-lights that customarily signifies the onset of a production, *Rent* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* both

³ Stempel. 1992: 136-37.

⁴ Holland. 1998: 30.

begin shortly after members of their respective casts amble informally onto the stage, only to launch suddenly and with little warning into highly amplified, energetic musical numbers.

As it was performed Off Broadway, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* took the rock concert as its model even further than did *Rent*, in beginning much later than the average musical. While the house lights at most Broadway and Off Broadway productions dim, on average, about seven minutes after the hour, *Hedwig* consistently delayed curtain for twenty minutes or longer. Michael Cerveris admits that the delayed starting time was actually due to the fact that the backstage accommodations, less than ideal at the Jane Street Theater, included a large dressing room that was several floors away from the stage area.⁵ The delay in starting time nevertheless befit the context of the production, since most rock concerts begin quite suddenly an hour or more after their advertised starting times. The tension of expectation therefore built among audience members attending performances of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* much in the way it does before the start of many rock concerts.

In the cases of both *Rent* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, audience response initially proved far more visceral than at most musical theater houses. At repeated viewings of both shows, the opening musical numbers regularly elicited not only the enthusiastic applause that is typically heard after a well-executed musical theater number, but also the shouts, screams, and hoots of approval more befitting a rock concert than a theatrical piece. The musical numbers of both productions gradually became more subdued, however, once their respective story lines were introduced, and audience members realized that they would need to quiet

⁵ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris. 25 August 1998.

themselves to keep from missing information vital to the narrative. This is more the case with *Rent* than with *Hedwig*, since the former musical features a more integrated and detailed plot, while the latter steps closer to emulating a true rock concert in allowing narrative to unfold as banter delivered between musical numbers. Because it did feature narrative, however, the energy of *Hedwig* nevertheless also slowed considerably as the production continued. Hence, while staged rock musical productions may temporarily emulate the energy of a rock concert, even the most successful ones ultimately struggle to maintain it due to the presence of narrative.

A further problem many staged rock musicals encounter in sustaining energy, and thereby attracting popular music fans to musical theater productions, lies in the fact that most feature a markedly diverse blending of popular music styles. As Galt MacDermot, composer of *Hair*, has noted, a successful theater composer has to be able to diversify his or her output, since too much of the same sound will fail to hold the interest of musical theater audiences.⁶ Composers of rock musicals tend to safeguard against boring their audiences by drawing from a wide variety of popular genres in composing songs for any given production. Following the lead of MacDermot, whose score for *Hair* was influenced by the popular styles of the period, contemporary rock musicals like *Rent* and *Footloose* offer scores that reflect a vast array of popular influences including pop ballads, rap, heavy metal, and salsa.

Such a blend of popular styles posed less of a problem when MacDermot was composing *Hair* than it does at present. In the late 1960s, rock music was still young, featured

⁶ Personal communication with Galt MacDermot, 22 October 1998.

comparatively few stylistic subgenres, and had not yet become as commodified as it would through the 1970s. In the years since *Hair*'s hugely successful Broadway run, however, the popular music market has become increasingly fragmented, and its fan base has followed suit. As a result, while there remains some degree of crossover among popular music subgenres, many heavy metal devotees, for example, do not listen with the same intensity to pop ballads or disco, just as many rhythm and blues fans show little interest in punk or country music. As Gracyk argues, "it is a mistake to suppose that all [popular music] is valued in the same way . . . or is used in the same ways by its diverse audiences."⁷ In this light, culling from a wide variety of popular styles can actually work to deter popular music fans, rather than to attract them to staged rock musicals.

Indeed, staged rock musicals that prove most successful in emulating and sustaining the energy characteristic of live rock music performance are those that manage to remain rooted in one stylistic tradition while simultaneously making narrative secondary to the music itself, all without boring or confusing the audience. While failed productions like *Dude, or, The Highway Life* function as historical reminders that such an undertaking is extraordinarily challenging, those like the 1960s-Happening-influenced production *The Donkey Show*, which opened in early September 1999, prove that it is not impossible.

The Donkey Show was created and directed by Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner, co-creators of the experimental Project 400 Theater Group. Following Antonin Artaud's belief that theater should be ritual and transformative rather than simply entertaining, Paulus and

⁷ Gracyk, 1999: 212.

Weiner's *The Donkey Show* is an hour-long adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, set in a discotheque in the 1970s. Performed in an actual dance club located in the very westernmost reaches of Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, *The Donkey Show* integrates audience members into the action, thereby entrusting them to sustain the mood created by the performers.

This mood is cultivated long before the staged action of *The Donkey Show* begins. Ticket holders for *The Donkey Show* are advised to arrive a half-hour early; when they do, they are asked to wait in a long line in front of the club, the entrance to which is guarded by velvet ropes and an actor playing a bouncer. In keeping with the exclusivity rituals that have been enacted nightly at dance clubs since the heyday of the famous nightclub Studio 54, the actor playing the bouncer occasionally allows some of the ticket holders to enter the club, and insists that others must continue to wait in the line. Meanwhile, other members of the cast, who have been standing in the line, in character, waiting to enter the club along with the audience, begin to walk up and down the queue, interacting with individual ticket holders and occasionally begging the bouncer to let them in (he refuses).

The entire audience is granted entry into the club about 15 minutes before the start of the staged performance. Once inside the club, which is replete with smoke machines, flashing lights, and mirror balls, the audience is immediately confronted by the sound of familiar disco hits of yore, which are amplified over the club loudspeakers. Dancing vigorously to these recorded songs are members of the cast, all of whom are costumed and in character. The actors occasionally take breaks from dancing to mix with audience members and thereby work

at lowering the crowd's inhibitions. By the time the staged production begins, the audience and the cast have mingled enough that despite the period costumes, it becomes difficult to tell who is a cast member and who is a spectator.

Like *Rent* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the staged portion of *The Donkey Show* begins without much in the way of theatrical convention. The actor playing the disc jockey, who has been introducing records and periodically addressing audience members as they file into the club, suddenly announces a very special appearance by Oberon, the club owner. The character appears by the disc jockey's booth and waves, only to have his attention drawn away by Titania, the fairy queen, who stands across the room in the guise of a raven-haired disco dancer wearing a masquerade mask, thigh-high boots, hot pants, and butterfly pasties. As she is carried toward Oberon by her attending fairies (here, a group of well-built young men wearing more glitter makeup than clothing), the disc jockey spins Alicia Bridges' 1978 hit "I Love the Nightlife (Disco 'Round)." Titania looks at Oberon and begins to sing along with the track.

The Donkey Show progresses much in this manner. Few words are spoken in the piece, save for very brief snippets of dialogue used to set up the relationships between the characters. The story is instead recounted almost entirely through actions accompanied by disco-era sound recordings, each representing the changing moods of the characters as they argue, chase one another, fall in and out of love, and—in keeping with this particular period, subculture, and setting—become progressively befuddled as a result of the cocaine (fairy dust) provided in endless supply by a roller skating, disco-dancing Puck.

What makes this production so successful is the way it allows its audience *and* its performers to revel collectively in music that is by now highly familiar to much of the western world, simply by allowing it to take center stage. As I recorded in field notes describing the performance on the evening of 3 September 1999,

The Donkey Show is part Happening, part *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, part Club 54, and part dancing around in your bathroom to a song on the radio while singing into your hairbrush. The excellent staging, amusing situations, and impressive character development are all enhanced by the fact that despite all of this, the music always remains most vital to the piece. The people who developed the show had the very good sense to do away almost entirely with the narrative, and just focus on the music: We all know the songs really well, so to have actors singing in place of the original singers would be laughable. Having them sing *along*, however, makes perfect sense—that's what you would do in a disco. So here, nothing gets in the way of the music—there's no horrible vamping, there are no big trained voices mangling some song that Stephanie Mills or the Bee Gees or Lipps, Inc. did a fine job with in the first place, and there are no interruptions to deliver monologues or run much dialogue, which would kill the mood. The audience is thus allowed to remain absorbed in the music, as well as to behave much more freely than they would at your average theatrical production. Through the show, audience members dance, talk, whistle, applaud, and even sing along. Loudly. It's hard not to. In this rare case, such commotion only enhances the show.

While *The Donkey Show* proves that narrative can indeed be successfully submerged to a musical score, the feat nevertheless proves highly challenging. It is no wonder, then, that rock and popular songs tend to make their way to Broadway and Off Broadway most often in the guise of such narrative-free productions as the long-running Lieber and Stoller revue *Smoky Joe's Café*.

I. Musical Form

Further difficulties encountered in sustaining the energy of rock when it is used in the musical theater occur when the forms most typical of rock music—most of which employ strophic or other repetitive structures⁸—are altered to fit musical theater settings. The composer Stephen Schwartz explains the logic behind such practices:

The most effective part of pop/rock music on stage is the energy and the infectiousness of the rhythm. The thing that doesn't translate well is a song structure that relies on repetition and repeated "hook" choruses, because stage songs have to be constantly moving forward dramatically. The generic quality of many pop lyrics also doesn't work well on stage, where specificity of character is vital. As an oversimplification, I think what works well are theatre lyrics set to pop/rock music.⁹

Rock on the musical stage is thus often reduced to instrumentation, amplification, and a more propulsive, repetitive beat than that usually encountered in the average theater ballad.

Stephen Trask, however, argues that such approaches to adapting rock for the musical stage are highly problematic, reflect a maddening ignorance of rock on the part of the composer, and contribute significantly to his hatred of most rock musicals:

First of all, none of it [ends up sounding] like rock music. It tends to be a very disrespectful use of some of the sonic tropes of rock music without any understanding of the logic and aesthetics that go into making a rock song or even a contemporary pop song. Rock songs have structures of verses and choruses and bridges and riffs, and they tend to be built—I'm not saying that there is only one structure that works, because I don't believe it. . . . There's a lot of different rock structures. But they're out there, and when you are writing a rock song you have to act instinctually within those structures and those rules. . . . One should familiarize oneself with what the art form is. What

⁸ Davies, 1999: 195.

⁹ Personal communication with Stephen Schwartz, 26 January 1999.

I usually find is that [most rock-influenced theater songs] sound like they are written by people that think of it as an inferior form.¹⁰

Trask's argument is reinforced by the following anecdote, recounted by an informant who attended a performance of *Rent* with his parents:

They asked me to tell them when grunge was playing, because they'd read that [*Rent*] was an amalgam of different genres—you know, from rock to folk to grunge. So they wanted me to tap them on the shoulder when an example of grunge was playing. There was never any tap.¹¹

Indeed, while song form is regularly altered to better fit the plot of a musical, toying with the structure of a rock song often yields musical compositions that, in the eyes of many rock aficionados, fail to attain the status of “real” rock. As Clifford Lee Johnson III argues, “Elements of rock and roll is still not true rock and roll—it’s just closer than anything else.”¹²

Easily the biggest offense in compromising the form of rock songs for musical theater purposes lies in the practice of adding a section in the middle of a song in which the instruments vamp for a few bars while characters recite plot-furthering dialogue before the next verse or chorus begins. This is a technique that is used with amazing regularity, especially when it comes to popular songs that previously had a life of their own and were thus not written to function within a theatrical plot. The creators of *Summer '69: The Musical*, for example, relied rather heavily on this technique, in integrating classic rock songs into the plot.

Bill Van Horn, Ellen Michelmore, and Leer Paul Leary's *Summer '69: The Musical*, which commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the original Woodstock Festival, ran Off

¹⁰ Personal communication with Stephen Trask, 29 July 1998.

¹¹ Personal communication with George Wallace, 23 June 2001.

¹² Personal communication with Clifford Lee Johnson III, 6 October 1998.

Broadway through the summer of 1999. *Summer '69: The Musical* features a loose plot revolving around a group of Long Island teenagers who decide to go to Woodstock, journey to Woodstock (both physically and spiritually), and arrive at Woodstock (ditto previous parenthetical remark). The musical's score, built entirely of classic rock songs, was played by a five-piece rock band set upstage center. About half the songs were sung-through; the other half featured inserted dialogue that worked to further the plot.

As described in field notes recorded after the performance on the evening of 28 July 1999, the songs in which spoken dialogue had been inserted consistently elicited weaker reactions from the audience than those performed without interruption:

You cannot divide a rock song with dialogue to any good effect, especially if that song is a very recognizable one. Here is a house full of people who know all the songs (a vast majority of audience members were clearly representative of the '60s generation). The musical numbers worked in one of two ways: Either they figured into the plot and thus were sung and acted out by members of the cast, or they were sung by the band's lead vocalist, E. Alyssa Claar. Claar was not really part of the cast, per se—rather, she bridged the gap between musicians and actors. Sometimes she sang to accompany the actors, and other times, the actors sprawled across the stage and gave her full attention while she sang, as if she were performing a set at the festival. Without fail, the songs that she sung straight through elicited the most visceral responses from the audience: Boom! The song has started! Boom! The song is done! Boom! Let's erupt in hoots and hollers and whistles and applause! Back to the show! But once you force narrative where it doesn't belong, you sap the energy right out of the house. Joni Mitchell's song "Woodstock," the first song performed (go figure), was interrupted between almost every single chorus and verse so that the many actors could deliver a character-defining monologue. Same went for "Summer in the City," which featured lengthy dialogue between choruses and verses. Such numbers, while obviously recognized by most of the house (lots of headbobbing and clapping along, lots of mouthing along to the lyrics), seemed to leave the audience in doubt as to what to do at the end of the numbers: Do we applaud now? Is it over, or is this more exposition? Often,

there was little to no applause at the end of the “broken up” songs, whereas there was always enthusiastic applause at the end of the straight numbers.

While used in the musical theater to attract audiences, then, familiar popular songs can in fact work to a musical’s disadvantage, in some respects: Why, in this day and age, would anyone attend a musical production to see familiar music compromised for the sake of the plot, if one could simply listen to a sound recording?

Such a question loomed over the musical versions of the films *Footloose* and *Saturday Night Fever*. The creators of these musicals were faced with the task of integrating the songs from the original films’ remarkably popular soundtracks directly into the plots so that the characters could sing them. Because, as in *Summer ’69: The Musical*, these songs originally stood alone, such a task usually involved pausing, mid-musical number, for plot-furthering dialogue to be inserted.

For example, Kenny Loggins’ title song from the film *Footloose*, which originally topped the charts in 1984,¹³ became the opening number of the musical version. The entire cast performed it, pausing after one of the choruses for the lead character, Ren, to explain to his fellow cast-mates (and hence, to the audience) the following expositional material: Although he loved living in Chicago, his father had walked out on him and his mother, and thus they would soon be moving to a small town, far, far away, to live with his uncle’s family. In similar fashion, the 1977 number-one hit song for the Bee Gees, “Stayin’ Alive,”¹⁴ becomes the musical version’s opening number, as in *Footloose*, the musicians vamp between chorus and

¹³ Whitburn. 1996: 369.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 55.

verse in order to allow specific characters to deliver lines lifted directly from the first scene of the original screenplay.

Doug Katsaros, the musical director and conductor of the Broadway musical version of *Footloose*, notes that such a technique is employed as often as it is because “in theater, people will readily accept tempo changes and dialogue littering up a song,”¹⁵ as long as these changes and snippets of dialogue move the action along. What is overlooked, however, is the fact that while theater audiences might readily accept such devices, popular music fans—especially those familiar with the original songs—often will not. Many audience members interviewed at random during the intermission and after the final curtain of the evening performance of *Saturday Night Fever* on 20 October 1999 noted that it was precisely because they were familiar with the original soundtrack that they found the technique in question distracting. Similarly, the audience at the matinee performance of *Footloose* on 28 October 1998 seemed to react with complete bewilderment to familiar songs in which a lot of dialogue had been inserted. As noted in original field notes,

The constant stopping and starting between verses to vamp and insert dialogue sucked the life out of many of the numbers. Some, in fact, got absolutely no applause, and many others got only unsure smatterings. I was convinced that half the audience would be gone by intermission, but from the looks of it, no seats were empty for the second act. Perhaps rather than hating the show, most of the audience simply didn't know when to applaud because they couldn't tell when the songs were over.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Doug Katsaros, 8 November 1998.

A further problem that plagued both shows was that although they, like *The Donkey Show*, relied on internationally familiar popular songs, these songs were sung not by the original recording artists, but instead by members of the cast.

Some members of the audience who were questioned at random during the intermissions and after the final curtains of both shows professed to having no problem with “musicalized” versions of popular Bee Gees songs like “Tragedy”—transformed into a slow ballad and belted emotionally in *Saturday Night Fever* by Bobby, the character who eventually throws himself off the Verrazano Narrows Bridge after accidentally impregnating a girl he does not love and is expected to marry—or the Sammy Hagar hit from the 1980s, “The Girl Gets Around”—transformed from a hard-rock song to a big, vibrato-heavy cast number set in a diner for the stage version of *Footloose*. Yet many found the transformations problematic. One theatergoer interviewed after *Saturday Night Fever* noted,

I did not like the arrangements of any of the ballads. Especially “Tragedy”. That was *really* not acceptable. That song in particular was—they were trying to make a disco song into a ballad, and I didn’t think it worked.¹⁶

Another theatergoer interviewed during intermission at *Saturday Night Fever* put it a bit more bluntly: “I’m having a problem with the music. It just doesn’t sound the same!”

Despite the promise of familiar music that *Footloose* and *Saturday Night Fever* offered, neither proved particularly successful. Interestingly, although initially hoping to appeal to the generation who remembered the initial release of the film as the primary demographic group, producers of *Footloose* soon targeted families with pre-adolescent

¹⁶ Personal communication with Shuli Passow, 20 October 1999.

children, to whom the musical appealed most and to whom the original soundtrack was largely unfamiliar. Despite such attempts, however, both musicals closed at a loss: *Saturday Night Fever* ran for 27 previews and 501 regular performances, while *Footloose* ran for 18 previews and 709 regular performances.¹⁷

II. Instrumentation and Orchestration

Throughout the history of the musical theater, instruments have traditionally been used specifically for the purposes of accompaniment. Such accompaniment ideally functions to bring out the best aspects of both script and score, and thus it is seen as a crucial ingredient to a successful musical. Nevertheless, the role is strictly secondary: A successful orchestrator is one whose arrangement of a score never draws attention from the action on stage, or drowns the lyrics of a musical number.

Rock music frequently fails to translate successfully when used in the musical theater in part because both the roles of and the relationships between rock instrumentalists and singers differ markedly from those that exist between theater musicians and actors. Such differences are regularly overlooked in light of the many surface similarities: Like theater music, rock is often vocal music with accompaniment. A rock band usually features a lead singer, who often engages in banter with the audience, and often becomes the mouthpiece for the band, both on and off the stage. As the spokesperson, the lead singer thus tends to become

¹⁷ Information provided by the Internet Broadway Database (<http://www.ibdb.com>). While the lengths of these runs might once have resulted in hit status, the current market often requires musicals to run for many years before they recoup their investments.

more of a household name than the other band members. Such a regularly recurring phenomenon can cause rock to be viewed as a genre that, like theater, places primary importance on the human voice and awards secondary status to all other instruments.

Yet to define rock as such is to deny the importance of the instruments that have helped characterize the genre. Although instrumentation can vary slightly from group to group and sound recording to sound recording, standard rock instrumentation generally comprises the electric guitar, the electric bass, and drums. These instruments are important to rock music largely because of their distinctive techniques, “for instance, that of creating special timbral qualities on the electric guitar through the exploitation of volume and feedback.”¹⁸

As indicated by heavy metal rock guitarist Ted Nugent’s oft-quoted statement, “If it’s too loud, you’re too old,” the importance of maximum volume to rock music must not be overlooked. As Gracyk notes, rock’s relationship with volume is not one born simply out of an interest in raucous aggression:

High volume is employed to produce sound of a certain character, unique to electronically amplified music. There is a reciprocal relationship between volume and sound quality; increasing the amplitude of a sound wave alters its characteristic pattern and thus its timbre. This may not have been anyone’s original intent. Microphones were initially adopted to make music louder, but musicians now exploit the microphone, amplification, and resultant technologies for musical effects beside volume.¹⁹

When it comes to rock, then, timbre and volume are seen as mutually interdependent, defining aspects of the genre.

¹⁸ Davies. 1999: 203.

¹⁹ Gracyk. 1996: 109.

Indeed, many who consume, document, or perform rock will argue that the human voice is but one aspect of a rock song, while overall timbre is of primary importance. Describing live rock performance in the genre's early years, Conard notes,

It is a simple fact that for most groups performing rock music the words, music, lights, dance, gyrations, movements, odor of pot, all exist to mutually support one another, not to act against or to create tension between one another. The fact that rock is tending more to non-verbal communication, without eliminating the lyrics, supports this statement even more.²⁰

Writing many years later, Gracyk arrives at the same conclusion, in noting that although much writing about rock music tends to focus exclusively on the lyrics, this is so largely because discussing texts is far easier than discussing music.²¹

Gracyk argues further that when rock performers discuss their own genre, they tend to focus more on aural than on textual values. His citation of the following excerpt from an interview with David Byrne is a case in point:

When I grew up and first started hearing rock music . . . it was the *sound* that really struck me. The words were, for the most part, pretty stupid. But it was the sound, the texture of the guitar and drums, the way one song sounded so completely different than another. The texture a group of musicians arrives at, in support of melody or lyrics, can be at least as important as the melody or lyrics or whatever.²²

Indeed, some rock groups go so far as to downplay the intelligibility of the lyrics on purpose, as in the case of the group R.E.M., which became known for the highly distinctive—and highly unintelligible—performance style of its lead singer, Michael Stipe. Stipe argues that such unintelligibility is part of the band's overall aesthetic:

²⁰ Conard. 1971: 107.

²¹ Gracyk. 1996: 63.

²² Flanagan. 1987: 343.

If there is a philosophy to the band . . . it's that every individual person who hears or has anything to do with the band has their own idea of what it's about and what's going on. What they get out of it is what they put into it. . . . [W]ith the EP [*Murmur*, 1983], people would send in their idea of what the lyrics were, and often I would like what they sent better than what they originally were.²³

Such comments indicate that it is the *sound* of the singer, and not the words he or she utters that is valued in the rock realm. In other words, as Gracyk bluntly states, "In rock music most lyrics don't matter very much."²⁴

Rock's relationship with timbre and volume is often compromised when the genre is used in the theater, where instruments playing at loud volumes and vocalists singing unclearly are seen as detriments to the coherence of a production. Richard Barone, the musical director of *Bright Lights Big City*, notes that after weeks of rehearsals for the show, the band needed to make some panicked adjustments during tech rehearsals, once the company realized that the volumes traditionally associated with rock music simply would not translate to the musical theater stage:

When we got together with the actors . . . we found that the acoustic piano that we had first thought was going to work fine in the show was not being read by the sound designer very well. They could not pick up the signal from the acoustic piano. The reason being that even though it seemed like there was a lot of room . . . the band was quite cramped. The amplifier for the electric and the acoustic bass was under the piano. So when they brought up the acoustic piano, they would also bring the bass up. That threw off the balance. . . . So we had to quickly change to a synthesizer, which we used for the whole run. That was a major shift, because I wanted to use a baby grand. . . . It didn't sound like a baby grand when we got it up there. You couldn't hear it. So we had to make a big switch. . . . We found in the office scenes . . . that the drums had to come way down. The drummer had to play very quietly. Which takes out the

²³ Considine, 1998: 26.

²⁴ Gracyk, 1996: 65.

rock idiom in some ways. . . . I just brought him way down and made him quieter. Several record producers came to see the show. Some major ones. And they all mentioned, "How do you get the drums so quiet?" And I said, "We just had to play them quieter in certain scenes." In other words, the band has to have dynamics that are not usually associated with rock music. . . . In rock you are fairly loud most of the time. With theater, you can't do that. . . . [T]he show will have no shape or you lose dialogue. . . . So the dynamics of rock have to be adjusted to theater.

Such necessary adjustments can result in conflicts of interest among the creators and performers of rock musicals.

In an interview in which he discusses taking over the title role of the original production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* from John Cameron Mitchell, Michael Cerveris touched on some difficulties that he and his fellow company members encountered in attempting to bring rock to the theater stage:

I . . . worry less about total intelligibility with Hedwig: I'm willing to go on feeling and intensity much more. [But] some audiences have a problem with that; they want to get every word. There's a funny story about that. John [Cameron Mitchell]'s background is much more musical theater, and Stephen [Trask] was encouraging him stylistically to throw it away more, give it more of a rock performance, not over-articulate things. But then he sat out and listened one night, and couldn't hear some of the words he was most proud of.²⁵

The conundrum described above is certainly not atypical; Cerveris remembers that during rehearsals for *Tommy*, Pete Townshend and director Des McAnuff also fretted over ways to preserve the volume levels and timbres vital to rock music while simultaneously ensuring that lyrics of the through-composed piece would not be lost on the audience.²⁶ As noted in chapter 2, the result led to a rather mixed reception. Barney Miller, a New York-based actor, rock

²⁵ Kendt. 1999: 2.

²⁶ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris. 25 August 1998.

percussionist, and singer, notes, “There were a lot of great things about *Tommy*. But still, it felt absolutely sucked of all its raw energy.”²⁷

III. Execution of Performance: Music

Because rock’s volume levels and the timbres attained by the resulting distortion are regularly compromised for the sake of clarity in the musical theater, so, too, are the roles played by the instruments most associated with rock. The electric guitar, for example, has been so closely associated with rock and roll and its many offshoots that it is arguably the genre’s defining instrument. A successful rock guitarist is often held in particularly high esteem among fans of the genre, especially if he or she is especially virtuosic, technically savvy, or compelling as a live performer. Used both to accompany vocals and as a solo instrument, the electric guitar is typically played far more loudly and virtuosically in the rock realm than would befit most theater settings. Yet because the role of instruments in the theater is secondary, the status of the electric guitar changes drastically when it is used in that realm.

Confined to the orchestra pit or to a small part of the stage, the guitar player cannot engage in the same relationship with an audience that he or she might in a live rock performance. Further, because its loud volumes and harsh timbres threaten to drown even the strongest singers, the electric guitar is often supplanted by the keyboard as the instrument used most often for accompaniment in rock or rock-influenced musicals. Electric guitar solos are generally reserved for instrumental interludes or to accompany highly melodramatic, wordless

²⁷ Personal communication with Barney Miller. 3 December 1998.

scenes, especially those that include particularly upsetting subject matter. For example, the score of *Godspell* features a single electric guitar solo, which accompanies the death throes of Jesus after he is crucified at the end of the musical. Similarly, a sole electric guitar solo is featured in *Bright Lights Big City*; it accompanies the lead character's cocaine-induced emotional collapse, also near the end of the musical.

If, in the musical theater realm, the relegation of the guitar to secondary status behind the synthesized keyboard was not problematic enough, the use of the guitar solo as an assaultive device used to heighten unpleasant stage imagery drives home the notion that while rock is regularly brought to the musical stage, a clear understanding of the nuances of the genre is usually left behind. The use of guitar solos in such contexts works to reinforce the misconception that rock's relationship to volume is spawned negatively from aggression, rather than, as scholars like Robert Walser have argued, from an interest that both fans and performers share in attaining feelings of physical and emotional empowerment.²⁸ While regularly used as a signifier for rock, then, the electric guitar is rarely employed with much respect for its defining role in the genre.

Alterations in the genre's form and instrumentation can adversely affect the sound of a rock song, and this helps to explain why rock music often tends to sound flat and lacking in appropriated energy when it is used in the musical theater. Mark Stewart, who was the lead guitarist in the orchestra pit of *The Who's Tommy*, touches on some further reasons that rock fails to transfer to the musical stage:

²⁸ Walser, 1993: 45.

Rock and roll takes an enormous amount of virtuosity. The very fact that it sounds so simple is proof in the pudding. Things cannot sound so simple unless they are being done very well. Music, when it is being done very well, sounds easy. So when someone is playing, laying down a rock thing, and it sounds easy, they're doing something difficult very well. There's lots of things that have to be in place. Classical guitarists with the finest technique can't play rock to save their lives. Why? Because it's an entirely separate kind of music that takes an entirely separate kind of skill and technique. But in [the case of pit bands] . . . they need someone who could play . . . [while] following a conductor, taking cues from a conductor, taking tempos from a conductor, dealing with emergencies onstage. . . . In a Broadway pit there's a whole set of skills that are extra-musical in a certain sense. . . . You have to have a lot of shit together of another ilk to be able to function. It's not just about making the sound. In this case, it's an oral idiom, rock and roll . . . and here we are putting it into a written and conducted context. There's something really alien about that. So they need somebody who can make that translation—who can rock hard, make all those sounds, really lay it down, but who can function in an atmosphere foreign to that music.²⁹

Katsaros adds that even the differing relationships between musicians can affect the sound of the genre, in noting that while a pit band is assembled by an outside coordinator, and thus made up of a random group of people, “a rock band chooses itself.”³⁰

The “flattening” of rock music in the theater realm can occur for other reasons as well. Speaking generally of theater music, Thomas Brett, a percussionist who has performed in the orchestra pit of *The Lion King* since the show opened in 1997, argues that the work can be challenging due to its particularly repetitive nature:

One thing to think about is that a musical involves playing exactly the same music every night. And so you get a lot of playing under your belt, but I am hard-pressed to think of any other job in music where you always play the same thing. . . . We throw in all sorts of little things all the time, but it's hard not to think of the work in some respects as essentially assembly-line work. Because you know that everything down to the last detail is set. The dialogue

²⁹ Personal communication with Mark Stewart. 13 October 1998.

³⁰ Personal communication with Doug Katsaros. 8 November 1998.

basically comes out the same way, go on stage each night and—the music, even when half the band has subs in on a particular night, the music sounds just about identical. I have talked about this with other musicians too, and that's kind of antithetical to what musicians as artists like to think of themselves as doing, which is sort of constantly growing, constantly changing.³¹

Further, when rock musicians are confined to an orchestra pit, the visual aspects of live rock performance are denied. Stewart argues that the physical distance from the orchestra pit to the audience has psychological consequences as well:

When you're [playing] onstage, the exchange is really direct . . . [but] when you're in a pit, there's a big wall. [The audience doesn't] know who you are and you don't know who they are. . . . It's especially profound . . . in this day and age, because it's very similar to them sitting in their living rooms or in a movie theater, where the music is coming out of speakers. Now . . . when they're on Broadway, most people do know that it's not recorded music, but . . . they're hearing the same thing—they're hearing music coming out of speakers, and they're not seeing any musicians. So they are relating totally to what's on the stage, but there is a separation from their relationship to the band. . . . As a performer, being in a pit and being onstage is profoundly different. . . . When you're onstage, your exchange is clear. When you're in a pit, you can be doing a great job . . . but you are relating to your colleagues. You're sending it out to the audience, but they're not right there. There's something in the way, it's second-hand. . . . At the end, when the audience is clapping, they don't know who I am, and I don't know who they are. It's a different thing.³²

Because of the rift that Stewart describes, as well as because many directors feel that the visual aspects of rock are worth emulating, most rock musicals feature sets in which the band appears onstage alongside the actors.

Even the presence of the musicians onstage, however, is often not enough to overcome the rather limp sound that rock can attain when played in a musical theater context. This is

³¹ Personal communication with Thomas Brett. 22 July 1999.

³² Personal communication with Mark Stewart. 13 October 1998.

because even when the musicians are set onstage—as in the original productions of *Hair*, *Rent*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Bright Lights Big City*, and *Summer '69: The Musical*, among many others—they are comparatively limited in terms of movement. Often confined to small, designated areas, the musicians remain secondary to the action and are thus discouraged from drawing too much attention from the actors. During rehearsals for *Bright Lights Big City*, for example, Paul Scott Goodman was told repeatedly by the director to stop moving around as energetically as was his habit when he played his guitar onstage.

While the limited movement and confined spaces of the musicians may well keep the attention on the actors, they simultaneously counteract a vital aspect of live rock performance. Frith argues that the visual aspects of live rock performance—specifically, the physicality of the performer—are of great importance:

Rock performers are expected to revel in their own physicality . . . to strain and sweat and collapse with tiredness. Rock stage clothes (like sports clothes) are designed to show the musician's body as instrumental (as well as sexual), and not for nothing does a performer like Bruce Springsteen end a show huddled with his band, as if he'd just won the Super Bowl. Rock acts conceal not the physical but the technological sources of their sounds; rock audiences remain uneasy about musical instruments that appear to require no effort to be played.³³

Hence, movement heightens the experience of live music, and limitations on a performer's physicality can have an adverse affect on his or her performance.

A related issue here is one of spontaneity. As acknowledged in the previous chapter, spontaneity is largely an illusion in rock performance: Rock bands rehearse for performances and do not often take as many chances, musically, as the studiously relaxed presentation style

³³ Frith, 1996: 124-25.

of most rock performances might imply. For example, Gracyk notes that in the rock world, with the exception of “jam-bands” that specialize in collective improvisation, like the Allman Brothers, the Grateful Dead, or Phish, live “solos are often brief and largely planned out in advance.”³⁴ The degree of unpredictability that is tolerated in live rock performance nevertheless remains far greater than that considered acceptable in the musical theater.

Such a difference in degree creates additional difficulties in adapting rock for use on the musical theater stage. Musicians used to performing live in the rock realm often need to learn to play differently in the theater realm, since volume, movement, and spontaneity are all limited. The rock musicians who appeared onstage nightly in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* are cases in point. As noted in chapter 5, composer Stephen Trask enlisted the members of his rock band, Cheater, for help in the production, in hopes that the use of experienced rock musicians would make the musical seem more “authentic” to rock fans. While competency of the band certainly added to the success of the production, the members nevertheless experienced a number of difficulties in transferring from rock to theater performance. As a result, although *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* was set as a rock concert, it ultimately did not fully translate as one.

While the band members remained onstage for the entire performance of *Hedwig*, they remained largely silent and motionless during the lengthy segments of dialogue that fell between the show’s eleven songs. Because they were given little to do during these long interludes, many of the band members seemed stiff, uncomfortable, and even bored when they

³⁴ Gracyk. 1996: 170.

were not performing. Even further, while *Hedwig* featured performances that arguably captured the spirit of live rock performance far more competently than any other musical to date, these performances were nevertheless compromised. Trask explains,

The difference [between rock and theater performance] is a thin line. . . . [With *Hedwig*], we're trying to tell a story. Rock shows are basically choreographed. Even if you catch a CBGB show, it's choreographed [in] that you know where everyone stands. They've thought about who stands where. But . . . [here,] the performing environment and the technology . . . is different. Our amps are very low, so you can't really hit the frequency we'd like to. And we've become—we've adapted our method so that we can make the kind of music we want to make. . . . [But] we're just not as loud as we would like to be. The drummer is playing in a way that is unnatural. He's become natural with it, but it is not how he would play. . . . If his volume increases to a certain level, it actually destroys the mix. The mix is not adaptable . . . the way it would be in a rock club. Our amplifiers are on very low settings, so the stage is not filled with sound. The stage sound is very low. It's all in the house. . . . So you can't mix the vocals where you would mix them for a rock song. . . . It was very, very, very difficult [for the band to adjust]. Particularly for the drummer, who doesn't have the volume—he had to change his whole body.³⁵

Despite their relative success in crossing from the rock to the theater realm, then, Trask acknowledges that he and his band found their work onstage in *Hedwig* to be “terribly constraining.”³⁶

Add to the aforementioned limitations the rehearsed, choreographed quality of a musical production, and even the moments in theater that most strive to evoke a feeling of spontaneity can seem rehearsed. Such is the case with the final scene, during which *Hedwig*'s

³⁵ Personal communication with Stephen Trask. 29 July 1998.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

emotional breakdown is accompanied by Trask's thrash metal-inspired "Exquisite Corpse."³⁷

As described in field notes written after the performance on the evening of 13 February 1998,

The directed, carefully choreographed show does sometimes work against the feel of spontaneity you get at a rock concert. The end, especially, when Hedwig has the breakdown, brings this home: He yanks off his wig and most of his clothes, removes the tomato "breasts" from his bustier and smashes them against his torso before flinging them to the ground, kicks over the microphone stand, and falls to the floor, revealing himself moments later to be Tommy Gnosis after all: they are parts of the Platonic whole. This final scene struck me as quite staged—smearing your body with tomatoes definitely aspires to a rock (punk) aesthetic, but here, Mitchell seemed somehow hesitant to cover himself as completely as, for example, Iggy Pop might have. The microphone falls, but it falls in just such a way—I noticed Mitchell look back at it to make sure it had fallen in *just* the right place. He was also *really* self-conscious about the microphone transmitter he had tucked into his shorts at the back—kept reaching to make sure it wasn't falling out. Somehow, even the strobe light seemed too rehearsed. Now, this is not to deny that there is some necessary degree of staging to a rock concert, too. Still, the spontaneity one would witness in a rock show is toned down, here. And after 90 minutes of watching the band sit around trying to stay in character (which looked like it was hard for them to do), the last sequence drove this home.

An increase in choreography and a de-emphasis on spontaneity is often unavoidable, however.

As Trask argues, "There's a *reason* why the microphone has to fall in the same way every night—if the things that are supposed to happen don't happen, it affects the story."³⁸

Unfortunately, cultivating a sense of spontaneity without compromising the production proves very difficult to do.

Perhaps even more problematic than the performance issues addressed above is the fact that, as noted previously, what is considered an acceptable singing voice in musical

³⁷ "Thrash metal" denotes a music style that blends the speed and distortion of punk with the aggressiveness and technicality of heavy metal.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

theater differs vastly from that which is considered acceptable in the rock realm. In the musical theater, careful diction and a relatively smooth, trained-sounding voice are priorities. Further, the rigorous eight-show-per-week schedule most actors follow requires a great deal of care and attention when it comes to the voice.

Rock singers, on the other hand, tend to place far more emphasis on emotional expression than they do on any sort of technique. It is no accident that John Cameron Mitchell, who at Trask's insistence shed some of the more formal aspects of his singing style, subsequently missed a number of shows due to vocal damage during his stint as Hedwig.³⁹ It is simultaneously unsurprising that Mitchell's voice retained enough of a trained quality that at least one critic was compelled to mention that "the commercial strength of his baritone never lets you forget you're watching a piece of musical theater and not just a band performing."⁴⁰ Despite the many brave and often commendable imitations of rock singers that have been offered by actors cast in staged rock musicals, informants for this study most frequently cite the difference in vocal quality as the chief reason that rock music fails to translate to the musical stage. As one informant quipped, "If Bob Dylan was singing in a musical, the whole theater crowd would walk out."⁴¹

³⁹ Personal communication with Evelyn McDonnell, 30 September 1999.

⁴⁰ Hannaham, 1998.

⁴¹ Personal communication with George Wallace, 23 June 2001.

V. Execution of Performance: Drama

In discussing some of the many differences of opinion that he and John Cameron Mitchell experienced while collaborating on *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Trask remembers that one of the greatest lay with the overall issue of performance approach, specifically the actor's reliance on motivation.⁴² Indeed, not only the approach to but also the preparation for performance differ widely enough in these two different camps that the widespread approach to acting known as motivation can contribute directly to the flat feel that rock can attain when featured in the musical theater.

The roots of the acting tool known as the American Method, from which the idea of motivation emanates, are based in the philosophies developed by the Russian actor, director, and teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky in the early twentieth century:

Stanislavsky advocated a balance between the actor's inner experiencing of the role . . . and its precisely attuned physical and vocal expression. Using the imaginative "magic if" [in which an actor acknowledges the artificiality of her surroundings but nevertheless tells herself that "if my surroundings were real, I would behave in this way, and react in this way," etc.] and "affective memory" [in which the actor infuses his part with personal emotional recall] as bridges between actor and character realities, the "circle of attention" for focusing the actor's powers, and "the through-line of action," broken into units and objectives, to score the role, the system offers a clear and precise groundplan.⁴³

Stanislavsky's philosophies were borrowed and altered by the American director and teacher Lee Strasberg, whose Method, which placed additional emphasis on emotional recall,

⁴² Personal communication with Stephen Trask, 29 July 1998.

⁴³ Banham, 1995: 1033.

“considers the actor as a creative artist who must translate the ideas, intentions, and words of the author into a living presentation.”⁴⁴

While there are many different acting philosophies, the American Method has proven remarkably influential, especially in its emphasis on an actor’s motivation in preparing a role. As Joe Sampson, an actor and instructor in the theater department at Virginia Commonwealth University, argues:

There are a million different schools of thought on acting, but it does all come back to finding the “action” or “objective” to character motivation. Since all drama is based on conflict of some form or other, all character motivation is based on the notion of “what is my character trying to *get*” and “what actions does my character undertake to *get* that thing, or *achieve* that objective.” There are all kinds of different theatre, but the actor’s work is almost universally based on those premises, no matter what the form of the project takes. Audiences don’t want to watch people “feeling” or “being.” They want (whether they know it or not) to watch characters specifically and actively trying to achieve something.⁴⁵

While not all actors ascribe to the Method, the idea of motivation has become deeply ingrained in the work of a vast majority of American stage actors.

Actor and drummer Barney Miller notes that he relies on motivation when acting, but does not feel that he needs it when performing with his band:

I think in acting, there is this intense concern that it won’t be there. The *thing*. The moment: I have to cry, and it’s not gonna be there. I have to hate this guy, and it’s not gonna be there. That’s a big concern for actors, and I think that’s why craft was born. It was basically born so that you would not be acting out of nothing, you wouldn’t be freaked out of your mind—How is this moment going to be here? You would know. That was the big point: you are no longer worried if it is going to be there, you are only worried, what is my task, what is my technical—I am going to do this thing, but [I don’t have to] worry about

⁴⁴ Strasberg. 1987: 198.

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Joe Sampson. 18 November 2001.

being emotional. But I think in a rock performance, there is never that concern . . . I use the craft because I have such a desperate fear that the emotion won't be there as an actor. Whereas when singing [with a rock band], I could be eating chicken and if I step up to sing the song, it would be there.⁴⁶

The idea of motivation is thus foreign to many rock musicians simply because the approach to performance is vastly different in the rock and theater realms.

Of course, the need for motivation is arguably less pressing in many musical theater pieces than it is in many nonmusical works. At least traditionally, the American musical has not placed much emphasis on character development. To date, musical theater characters are often much broader, and the execution of them far more exaggerated, than characters in, for example, a play by Shakespeare or Miller. Nevertheless, many actors apply to musical theater performance some of the same tools they apply to dramas. This is especially true of the contemporary musical theater, many examples of which attempt to portray weightier themes, denser narratives, and richer characterizations than their more frivolous predecessors. In rehearsals for Paul Scott Goodman's *Bright Lights Big City*, for example, a number of actors repeatedly asked, during rehearsals, for help with motivation during scenes.

Joe Sampson avers that although the close connection between "Method" acting and motivation has largely fallen away in recent years, the application of motivation to all kinds of theater, including the musical, is, in his experience, typical:

The word "Method," as it applies to actors and acting has become a rather arcane, and to my mind, meaningless, word. "Method" . . . has origins in the work of Stanislavsky . . . and it has come to be associated with actors who mumble their way through plays and are convinced that the "realism" they are exhibiting is the mark of good acting. In Method's defense, though, I believe

⁴⁶ Personal communication with Barney Miller. 3 December 1998.

that any actor worth his salt uses certain elements of Stanislavsky's teaching. An actor pursues an objective by executing a series of actions, and is thwarted by obstacles. I don't care if an actor is in a Chekhov drama, a Neil Simon comedy or a Rogers and Hammerstein musical, he or she knows the language and subscribes to it. Every actor has his own "method" nowadays, but every actor I have known knows the importance of pursuing objectives. This certainly includes actors in musical theater. Those characters, in their worlds, are real people with real needs. So of course the actors playing those roles are pursuing objectives.⁴⁷

While the reliance on motivation might help many actors prepare for any role they perform, there is nevertheless indication that the tool is not always ideal in the musical theater, and especially not in staged rock musicals.

Looking back on her preparation for the role of Vicky in *Bright Lights Big City*, for example, Natascia Diaz acknowledges that the reliance on motivation was helpful at some points in her performance, but that it occasionally failed her, as well:

At first I did not have any difference—I [prepared] the character just like I do everywhere else. I had her last name, I had where [she] came from, and a whole story, even though you don't see it. . . . I sang the song "Kindness" about [my character's] family. So I had to make that all very real to me, and convince people that I actually knew the people I was singing about. That takes a lot of concentration, whether you are doing it in a rock musical or in a play or on TV. The quality of the energy, though, is really different. I didn't understand that until—I was playing the character the whole time . . . until someone very special to me . . . told me, "You can afford to come out a bit more. The material's very simplistic. You don't need—you're playing stuff that's not there." . . . I was insulted at first but then I tried it and I was set free. . . . Sometimes those broader choices for musicals are more effective. I will always be the actress I am in everything I do. But sometimes the playing of it is a little more complicated than that. [*Bright Lights*] was interesting for me to do. For so long I thought that what I thought was right.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Personal communication with Joe Sampson, 31 July 2002.

⁴⁸Personal communication with Natascia Diaz, 15 April 1999.

The experience that Diaz recalls above implies that while motivation might help musical theater performers with certain scenes, or with particular aspects of their characters, the tool is occasionally detrimental to some of the genre's less subtle moments.

In keeping with this implication, Stephen Trask believes firmly that during rehearsals for *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, John Cameron Mitchell's reliance on motivation was detrimental to a convincing rock performance:

I would react very strongly to things like—requests for “what’s my motivation to sing this verse?” and trying to attach motivations to songs which should exist without them. That’s a [big] issue that came up. . . . Actors need motivation to do *everything* on a stage. Or many actors do. They can’t be in a moment, acting it, if they don’t know why their characters are doing it. [But] motivation for musicians to sing a song is, “I like this song and I think I do it well, and it makes me feel really good to sing it in front of people that I think are also feeling good when I sing it.” That’s *it*. That’s *it* for motivation.⁴⁹

Trask's negative reaction to the use of motivation stems from his conviction that in emphasizing character development, Mitchell was forsaking the cultivated emotional spontaneity expected of live rock performance.

Michael Cerveris agrees with Trask, in arguing that motivation has no place in rock performance:

Stephen and I discussed this very thing. . . . We talked about some of the struggles he and John had coming from different worlds and trying to find common ground, specifically about motivational things. Like when Yitzak steals Hedwig's microphone during “Exquisite Corpse,” and then Hedwig grabs Stephen's microphone and starts singing, that just makes sense from a rock standpoint. If someone takes your mike, you don't waste time worrying about the psychology of the moment. You're in the middle of a song, so you just grab the nearest mike and there's not a lot else to it. But they evidently went through weeks of rehearsal where there was a whole struggle over the

⁴⁹ Personal communication with Stephen Trask, 29 July 1998.

microphone and the next verse of the song became about “Why did you take my microphone?” and all this stuff, and when I was rehearsing it, I didn’t go to any of those places because it just made sense: “We’re doing a song. My mike’s gone. Oh! here’s one!” . . . I come from a rock background and . . . have also done experimental theater . . . [where] you are left to fill in the blanks for yourself about what it’s about, and I love working that way. . . . It’s not exactly movement for movement’s sake, and it is not devoid of meaning, but it’s not the same kind of intellectual motivation that you get filled with in Stanislavsky acting courses. . . . I have not had that problem with being inhibited or crippled by having to have psychological motivation for things, and I think it’s made it easier for Stephen and I to connect. . . . And I think that’s an important thing when you are . . . trying to put those two worlds together—it looks weird when you see somebody trying to force motivation onto what is essentially just a performance.⁵⁰

Indeed, while many actors apply motivation to some aspects of musical theater performance, the tool can fail to translate to the musical stage, and, more importantly here, can directly counteract the emotional energy expected from a compelling rock performer.

Additional problems that are often encountered in the staging of a rock musical—or any theatrical production, for that matter—are spatial ones. While often overlooked, both the location and the space are of great importance to the success of any sort of live performance. Thus, the role of performance space will be the topic of the remainder of this chapter.

VI. Performance Space

In his absorbing *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Marvin Carlson argues,

almost any identifiable space . . . may become a performance space. Through performance it will inevitably take on certain of the semiotic expectations of the theatre itself, but, at least equally important, it will bring to the theatrical

⁵⁰ Personal communication with Michael Cerveris. 25 August 1998.

experience its own spatial and cultural connotations, which the sensitive producer will seek to draw on to maximum effect in the work presented to a public.⁵¹

Theater groups that transform parks, restaurants, or places of worship into performance spaces have repeatedly proven that limiting theater performance to theaters would be as ridiculous as limiting live rock performance to stadium-sized arenas. Nevertheless, both rock and the musical theater have become associated with different spaces in which performances happen. Thus, bringing one genre into a space associated with the other can and does occasionally pose problems.

One of these problems has already been addressed, to some degree, in previous chapters of this study: A musical can arguably be staged, within reason, in any space and any location across the world. Yet the history of the American musical is most closely connected with the history of Broadway, the grand old theaters of which most frequently played host to the genre as it developed through the twentieth century. Due in large part to the obvious commercialism of the Broadway district, the American musical has, like Broadway itself, come to carry with it the type of overt connection to commerce that proves troublesome in the rock realm.

The American musical's close relationship with Broadway is not the only reason that bringing rock into spaces associated with the musical theater can prove problematic. A further space- and location-related difference between the two realms may be found in the relative spatial permanence of a live event, which can affect the impression of spontaneity an audience

⁵¹ Carlson, 1989: 36-7.

receives in viewing it. Staged musicals are usually scheduled to run a number of times per week in an unchanging location over the course of a given period of time. In contrast, live rock events tend not to be as permanent in terms of space or location. Rather, successful rock acts that appear live often perform concerts in many different geographical locations during the course of a national or international tour. At the very most, a rock act might play a smattering of concerts at the same site before packing up and moving on to the next city.

As one informant notes, the comparatively ephemeral appearance of most rock acts contributes to the perception of rock music as a far more spontaneous genre than musical theater:

A rock band, because it tours—you're not as conscious of the fact that they're going through the motions every night. Most bands are probably playing the same show, every city they go to. But something about musical theater being in the same venue and doing it every night is much more noticeable. I don't think it's different for most rock bands, with some exceptions. You're getting the same manufactured set list to promote an album that just came out, every single city, but with the illusion of it being live and spontaneous.⁵²

As noted, rock's overall performance aesthetic is somewhat more relaxed than that of the musical theater. But adding to the sense of spontaneity expected of a good live rock performance is the fact that the performance will likely not be repeated in the same venue. Even if it *is* to be repeated, it certainly will not run eight times a week over the course of weeks, months, or years.

Successful live rock performances are designed not only to cultivate a sense of spontaneity, but also a sense of intimacy, even in the largest of venues. While the role that the

⁵² Personal communication with C.J. Hughes, 23 June 2001.

audience plays in creating a performance will be discussed at length in the final chapter of this study, the role of space in the cultivation of intimacy will be addressed here. Although accepted venues for rock concerts may be far larger than those for the musical theater—it is, after all, more likely that one would see the Rolling Stones perform at Shea Stadium than the cast of *Rent*—the musical theater’s typically presentational style tends to drive a wedge between performer and audience that is never as pronounced in the rock realm.⁵³ This is yet another reason why rock musicals that open on Broadway are often less successful than those that run in smaller houses: Despite experiments in the 1960s and 1970s by directors like Tom O’Horgan, such a style has proven very difficult to negate on Broadway, where it has become deeply engrained, not only as a result of history but also as a result of the performance venues themselves, which tend to drive wedges between audiences and performers due to their sheer size, their proscenium arches, their thousands of seats, and tiers that extend a great distance from their cavernous stages. Indeed, intimacy proves easier to cultivate in smaller, alternative performance spaces. This is thus an additional reason that the theaters Off and Off Off Broadway have proven more nurturing than those on Broadway for the staged rock musical.

In the first place, Off and Off Off Broadway theaters differ from those on Broadway not only in terms of size, but also in terms of both their unadorned facades and the distance at

⁵³ According to Trapido et al. (1985: 676 and 720), representational and presentational styles of theater differ in the following ways: With representational theater, or realism, an attempt is made to create on the stage an illusion of real life. In contrast, the presentational style features characters, plot, and dialogue that are clearly fictitious. Acting styles in presentational theater are thus slightly exaggerated, and the expression of emotions often more formulaic when compared with representational theater. While the distinction between the two styles is not absolute, and the American musical can certainly borrow from representational theater, it is primarily a presentational genre.

which they are often set from other theaters. As Carlson argues, these aspects can create a sense of intimacy that is much harder to attain at larger, more centrally located venues:

[O]fficial invisibility has become a common feature in the new experimental theatres of the East Village, as may be seen in the physical descriptions of a number of such theatres in a 1985 special issue of *The Drama Review* devoted to them: "Without the street number the club would be impossible to find" (Club Chandelier). "The only beacons are some unobtrusive spray-painted letters over a brick wall and the number 118 in black" (Darinka). "There is little to identify the theater from the outside except a small sign on the wall above the door saying 'Limbo.' Otherwise it looks pretty much like the other tenements and storefronts of the neighborhood" (Limbo Lounge). "There is no name, no sign—except for a black-outlined, stacked stone pyramid painted over the door" (Pyramid Club). "To find the theatre it is helpful to know the address, since the storefront that houses it does not call attention to itself—there is no sign on the building indicating that it is a theatre" (WOW Café). As Michael Kirby observes . . . such theatre is "closely tied to the place in which it is created and the socio-cultural milieu from which it is generated," and its integration into its neighborhood is signified by its assimilated façade. These theatres . . . serve a small and intimate public, who know where the theatrical event is taking place and need no external information. Indeed, the absence of external signs reinforces feeling of intimacy, exclusiveness, and focus on the internal event, and creates, as a result of all of this, a conscious and striking contrast to the traditional commercial house with its flashing lights, billboards, and lavish displays of quotes from favorable reviews.⁵⁴

It is this very sense of exclusiveness and intimacy that press agent Tom D'Ambrosio evokes in discussing the hard-to-reach location of the Jane Street Theater, former home of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*: "the location doesn't stand in your way of going, and if it does, then you're square and that's *your* problem."⁵⁵

In the second place, Off and Off Off Broadway theaters—if they were originally built to be theaters at all—are generally much smaller and less ornate than those on Broadway, and

⁵⁴ Carlson, 1989: 125-27.

⁵⁵ Personal communication with Tom D'Ambrosio, 17 June 1998.

their performance spaces are thus more easily adaptable to fit the needs of a specific production. Carlson notes,

The idea of . . . a neutral space, possessing no decorative features of its own and thus totally open to the semiotics of the individual performance, has been enormously influential in modern experimental theatre design, and the flexible “black box” has become one of the most common theatrical configurations of our time. Many later directors and designers have taken the characterless theatre in a direction quite different from the visions of [Adolphe] Appia and [Antonin] Artaud, however. They have retained the concept of a space without the traditional auditorium and stage division, but instead of a featureless box filled by light and abstract features, they have replaced the absent decoration (with all its evocations of a theatrical tradition) with a decoration unique to a specific production, so that the audience, entering the auditorium, is encompassed not within the semiotics of a theatre auditorium, but within those of the fictive world of the play itself.⁵⁶

While not every Off and Off Broadway performance space is a black box theater, a majority are nevertheless much smaller, less ornate, and thus arguably more versatile than their Broadway counterparts, especially when it comes to cultivating a particular mood even before the performance begins.

The Off Broadway musical *Love, Janis* is a perfect example. A two-character musical based on the witty, highly descriptive letters that Janis Joplin wrote home to her family between 1966 and her death in 1970, *Love, Janis* is structurally similar to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*: Monologues fashioned from the letters are delivered directly to the audience, and are interspersed with songs from Joplin’s repertoire. Set in the Village Theater—formerly a well-known downtown concert venue called the Village Gate—the mood of the production is established before the performance begins. This is due in large part to the fact that the theater

⁵⁶ Carlson. 1989: 196-97.

itself is nondescript enough that the many Day-Glo period posters advertising late-1960s Bay Area-based happenings, be-ins, and rock concerts do not have to compete for the audience's attention with such traditional theater trappings as crystal chandeliers or ornate wall and ceiling murals.

Productions like *Hair* prove that it is possible to create a sense of intimacy and cultivate connections between actors and audience members in larger theaters. Yet the many failed productions that have made such attempts on Broadway—*Dude*, for example—nevertheless indicate that such an achievement is remarkably difficult. The smaller and comparatively undistinguished performance spaces set far from the glaring lights and obvious commerce of Broadway allow for more intimacy and exclusivity than their larger, more traditional counterparts. Because these spaces promote a sense of intimacy that is similar to that cultivated in live rock performances, they are often the most effective spaces for rock musicals.

Of course, even those rock musicals that make the most effective and innovative use of theatrical space encounter difficulties in recreating a realistic rock performance. While some of these difficulties have been discussed above, others are not rooted in performance. Rather, they lie in the relationship between audience and performer. Because the collective mood and behavior of audiences work to exert strong influence on performances, the role of the audience in live rock and musical theater performances will be the topic of the concluding chapter of this study.

Chapter VI

The Performer-Audience Relationship: A Comparison

Tell the rabble to be quiet / we
anticipate a riot / This common
crowd is much too loud

—*Jesus Christ Superstar*

In a fall 1997 opinion piece in the Arts and Leisure section of *The New York Times*, Bernard Holland debates whether or not the Lou Reed and Robert Wilson collaboration *Time Rocker*, which was currently being staged at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, was technically an opera. Holland debates many definitions for the term before concluding,

Opera is whatever you put in an opera house. This is not as frivolous as it sounds. Opera houses have orchestra pits, so you assume musicians will be in or near them. They have stages, which have to be filled. . . . Mr. Reed's rock music, in its various modes of hard and soft, became operatic music by virtue of where it was. Play it at Irving Plaza before different people, and it is a different genre. The war between pop and classical may be that simple.¹

While Holland's argument is certainly debatable, his suggestion that audiences contribute to performances and thus, by extension, entire genres, is worthy of investigation.

Audience behavior exerts tremendous influence on the outcome of any performance. This said, recognized and accepted modes of behavior on the part of audiences differ depending on the performing arts genre in question. The function of the audience is therefore of particular interest here: when it comes to rock and musical theater performances, modes of behavior among respective audiences can differ widely in a number of ways. Thus, attempts

¹ Holland, 1997: 37.

to attract and satisfy members of both audiences simultaneously often prove as challenging as attempts to combine the aesthetics of these two divergent performing arts genres themselves.

I: Current State of Research

In *Theatricality*, Elizabeth Burns writes, “Although at different periods [the audience] has been less or more articulate, either vocally or in writing, it has always held the power of making or breaking a play by attendance or abstention, and has always been ultimately responsible for sustaining the performance.”² Further, as Richard Schechner argues in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, a strong performance is contingent upon a positive response from its spectators:

No theater performance functions detached from its audience. Of course, theater and dance (whether aesthetic or ritual) that need audience participation are more dependent on the audience than events where the spectator’s role is that of passive recipient. But even when apparently passive, as at a concert of classical music or a performance of Racine, a full house eager to see this performance, to attend the work of this particular artist, literally lifts a cast of players, propels, and sustains them.³

For all its importance, however, the audience has long been neglected as a topic of study.

In *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett suggests some reasons why audience studies are sorely lacking:

Neither theories of reading nor theatre semiotics . . . goes far beyond the issues facing an apparently individual subjectivity. . . . Indeed, the relationship between production and reception, positioned within and against cultural values, remains largely uninvestigated. . . . The difficulty of examining readers through social co-ordinates [is] evident . . . but, as a public event, theatre

² Burns, 1972: 184-5.

³ Schechner, 1985: 10.

demands that its audiences be examined in this way. And it is perhaps because of this difficulty that theatre audiences have been more or less neglected.⁴

When they are discussed at all, audiences are often oversimplified. Rather than collectives of individuals who have myriad responses and opinions among them, they are often depicted as monolithic entities that think, move, and react as one.

Many twentieth-century writers who have discussed different aspects of popular culture resort to generalization when it comes to audience analysis. Although they had different reasons for arguing as they did, for example, cultural critics as diverse as the arch-conservative T.S. Eliot and the Marxist Theodor Adorno were both quite negative in their assessments of popular culture and, by extension, its audience. Eliot saw popular culture as “an expression of the brutish domination by the coarse majority which threatens *from below* the high culture which is the most precious asset of civilization and which can be maintained only by a privileged elite minority.”⁵ Adorno, on the other hand, believed that popular culture was a form of domination from above, which served to “alienate, manipulate, and obscure class consciousness among a potentially progressive working class.”⁶ Adorno wrote specifically about popular music, which he saw as a synthetic, homogenous form of entertainment that placates, rather than challenges, its audience. According to Adorno, then, all consumers of popular music are anaesthetized by hackneyed music that fails to challenge their intellects.⁷

⁴ Bennett, 1997: 86.

⁵ Manuel, 1988: 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Adorno, 1976: 21-38.

While such writers focused on the presumed intellectual passivity of popular consumers, others have formed similar theories based on the passive physical behavior of comparatively elite audiences. Elias Canetti, for example, argues that audiences are fundamentally capable of acting as instruments of equality, but that most Western theater and art music audiences are too passive to do so, since they are “by architectural and institutional convention restrained from any freedom of the body,”⁸ and have been culturally accommodated to collective stagnation:

People sit there motionless, as though they managed to hear *nothing*. It is obvious that a long and artificial training in stagnation has been necessary here. We have grown accustomed to its results, but, to an unprejudiced mind, there are few phenomena of our cultural life as astonishing as a concert audience. People who allow music to affect them in a natural way behave quite differently.⁹

Building on Canetti’s work, Robert Baker-White posits that the abolition of restraint was a central innovation of the rock concert, and that the “rock concert audience’s unbridled indulgence of its ontological essence as a rhythmic crowd is more honest, more clear, and more open than its traditional theatrical cousin.”¹⁰

Of course, such generalizations about audiences are problematic. Sweeping statements about the anaesthetized qualities of popular culture audiences fail to acknowledge ways that popular music can fuel audiences to dispute social structures, and have been criticized by many scholars as elitist.¹¹ The theories put forth by Canetti and Baker-White are similarly

⁸ Baker-White, 1992: 40.

⁹ Canetti, 1973: 37.

¹⁰ Baker-White, 1992: 41.

¹¹ See, among many examples, Middleton, 1990; and McClary and Walser, 1988. Despite such criticism, however, an elitism similar to Adorno’s continues to appear in the work of contemporary scholars and journalists. Blanket assessments dismissing consumers of popular culture as passive.

thorny; as scholars like Young and Davies have effectively argued, the fact that some audiences are more or less subdued than others does not imply that they are therefore more or less engaged;¹² surely, just as a spectator who sits silently while watching a concert might just as easily be rapt as asleep, a spectator who appears to be actively engaged in a performance might just as easily be going through the motions as truly caught up in the goings-on.

In recent years, an increased number of works dedicated to the study of different types of audiences has begun to appear,¹³ due in large part to an increase in sophistication of research techniques. Many such studies have shed particular light on American theater audiences. For example, the 1997 landmark study *The Audience for New York Theatre*—sponsored by the Theatre Development Fund and the League of American Theatres and Producers, and prepared by Audience Research and Analysis—provides a thorough analysis of audiences on and Off Broadway, in both for- and not-for-profit realms, during the 1997 theater season. This study has proven especially influential as the first to relate current findings to long-term trends; a similar study on Washington, D.C., theater audiences was released in 2000.¹⁴

anaesthetized, or simply stupid still appear frequently in the popular press and in scholarly literature to date, especially when it comes to discussions about popular music or the most recent big-budget Broadway musical. For example, in Brantley, *et. al.*, 1999, theater critic Ben Brantley characterizes the typical Broadway audience as anaesthetized and not willing to attend any challenging theatrical productions that would interrupt its anesthesia; the assumption that problems in the theater are largely the fault of audiences is similarly evident in Singer, 2000, which quotes the writer Ethan Mordden as stating that theater audiences are “stupid,” “lazy,” and thus not capable of understanding “sophisticated” theater music.

¹² Davies, 1999; Young, 1995.

¹³ See, for example, Croteau, 2000; Stempel, 2001; Sauter, 2000; Stokes and Maltby, 1999; Taylor, 1999; and Seiter, 1998.

¹⁴ *Washington Audiences: 2000 and Beyond*, the largest theatre audience survey ever undertaken outside New York, was conducted by Shugoll Research, Bethesda, Maryland. It was funded by the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation and Shugoll Research.

Such analysis allows for new insights into the backgrounds and tastes of theater audiences, and thus, as noted in chapter 3, it is being increasingly relied upon by the theater industry. Don Summa, the press agent for *Rent*, credits *Rent*'s hit status in part to savvy marketing techniques, which allowed for the efficient targeting of potential audiences. "The audience breakdown they can give you from credit cards is amazing," Summa acknowledges. "They basically can give you a zip-code breakdown of where your credit card purchases are coming from, and each zip-code has a personality."¹⁵

Innovations in audience research have thus allowed for a somewhat clearer picture of contemporary performing arts audiences than those of even the recent past. Critics point out, however, that even at its most sophisticated, market research sheds little light on individual interests or tastes; reducing people to zip codes and spending patterns simply results in different types of generalizations.¹⁶ A further problem is that statistical information is occasionally applied somewhat blindly to support, rather than to challenge, the same oversimplified assumptions that have been made about particular audiences for decades.

As was touched upon in chapter 4, a combination of real and imagined characteristics often works to differentiate rock and theater audiences. Extant cultural stereotypes dictate that rock music is a genre most closely associated with young people, while the American musical is more closely associated with the middle aged and elderly. Reports connecting the American musical's decline in popularity with a rapidly aging audience have been appearing in the

¹⁵ Personal communication with Don Summa, 6 October 1998.

¹⁶ See, for example, Bagdikian, 1985; Rothenbuhler, 1996; and Wollman, 1998.

popular press with some frequency since the rise of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s.¹⁷ Further, the stereotype of the ever-aging theater audience is often used to explain away Broadway's conservatism and the industry's tendency to shy away from innovative ventures.

For example, *The New York Times* journalist Mervyn Rothstein blames the 2001-2002 New York theater season—which he views as particularly stale and unimaginative—not only on the aging of Broadway's most beloved actors, playwrights and composers, but on its audience, as well.¹⁸ Citing, and then offering some of his own variations on the Theatre Development Fund's 1997 study, *The Audience for New York Theatre*, he writes,

A study released in 1998 [*sic*] found that the average age of the Broadway audience was 40—a figure that included the many young children taken by parents to the Disney musicals “Beauty and the Beast” and “The Lion King.” Remove the youngsters, of course, and that average age increases sharply. George Wachtel, president of Audience Research and Analysis, which conducted the study . . . said at the time that it represented “a warning” because the number of audience members between 18 and 24 years old “has showed a long-term decline.” In the most recent audience survey by the League, conducted during the 2000-01 season and released earlier this month, the age of the average Broadway theatergoer had crept up to 42.¹⁹

The 1997 study that Rothstein cites is consistent with a number of different studies conducted on theater audiences in recent decades, all of which yield the same results: mainstream theater audiences are primarily made up of white, middle-aged, well-educated individuals with enough expendable income to afford the high cost of a ticket to an evening at the theater.²⁰

¹⁷ See, for example, Kloman, 1968; Gottfried, 1984; Pogrebin, 2000; and Rothstein, 2002.

¹⁸ Rothstein, 2002.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 5.

²⁰ Bennett, 1997: 86-124; Lefkin, 1997.

As illuminating and important as they can be, however, statistics used to paint a clearer picture of an audience can sometimes be misleading, especially when they are used carelessly to back, rather than to delve deeper into, the same oversimplifications that have been perpetuated for decades. Using statistics, for example, to distinguish “aging” theater audiences from what are often similarly oversimplified as “younger” audiences for other forms of popular culture is problematic due in large part to a fact that is too often ignored: rock is no longer a “young” genre, but has been in existence for over 50 years.

As a genre that is now half-a-century old, rock boasts a significant number of performers who have been active for decades, and whose audiences have aged along with them. Thus, while it is true that many rock acts presently attract an audience that is almost entirely built of teenagers or young adults, the fact that there are also plenty of performers who attract a significantly older fan base should not be ignored. At the same time, while many productions on Broadway might indeed attract an audience that is largely middle-aged or elderly, the rise in number of young people attending specific productions should not be overlooked: statistics about the current state of New York theater in general aside, recent shows like *Rent*, *The Lion King*, and *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* have proven attractive to young people.

The average age of theater audiences might well be a matter for concern among members of the theater industry. Yet the use of statistics to support arguments claiming that every problem currently plaguing the theater would be solved if the industry could figure out ways to attract “younger” people is somewhat futile, especially since the old/young dichotomy

that often accompanies comparisons of musical theater and other popular culture forms arguably exists more comfortably in theory than it does in fact. As will be discussed at length below, this dichotomy is perpetuated largely as a result of an interconnected series of behavioral modes that have developed in the rock and theater camps, and that have little or nothing to do with the age of the consumer.

Rock and the musical theater have both been documented enough that relatively clear pictures of their audiences have emerged. Yet in conducting research for this study, I will admit to being humbled by the same obstacles that have caused many of my predecessors and contemporaries to discuss audiences in the vaguest of possible terms. When it comes to audience studies, sweeping generalizations of one kind or another exist, and continue to be perpetuated, for a reason: in reality, audiences, as a collective of individuals with myriad opinions and perceptions among them, are extraordinarily difficult to characterize. I will attempt, however, to support claims made for rock and theater audiences with original research I have conducted in New York City between 1996 and 2001.

II. History of Audience Behavior

The Theater

Most historians who discuss Western audiences agree that theatergoers were once far more active than they tend to be at present. As Susan Bennett argues, during antiquity,

Greek theatre was . . . clearly inseparable from the social, economic, and political structures of Athens. Its social importance is apparent simply from the size of an auditorium. With an estimated 14,000 people attending the City Dionysia, theatre audiences represented the majority, rather than the

“educated” (and other) minorities of more recent years. This was obviously appropriate for a social art form which represented Athenian democracy. Not only its sheer size, but its architectural form illustrates the theatre’s centrality in Athens. . . . The importance accorded to theatre is further substantiated by the economic support it received, with production costs largely met by state funds. Greek theatre, then, clearly illustrates a direct relationship to the society it addresses and, at every level, includes the audience as active participant.²¹

Kurt Lancaster argues further that although slightly less democratic than they are thought to have been in antiquity, Western theater audiences continued to exert a great deal of power through the seventeenth century.²²

This is evident in Richard Butsch’s description of performances in Elizabethan- and Restoration-era England:

In Elizabethan theaters, courtiers and gallants treated theater as their court where they could measure their importance by the attention they received. [After 1660, f]ops sat on stage, interrupted performances, and even on occasion grabbed an actress. All of this annoyed the plebian pit, who shouted, “Away with them.” But pittites were hardly meek. They too ate, smoked, drank, socialized, and engaged in repartee with actors. Restoration theater was more expensive and exclusive. Still, merchants and professional men, civil servants and their wives, and the critics (poets, writers, and competing playwrights) sat in the pit and squabbled, shouted, teased the women who sold oranges, baited the fops on stage, and wandered from pit to gallery and back. Nobility continued to sit on stage and in boxes, treating the theater as a place to chat, play cards, argue, and even occasionally duel.²³

The relationship the audience had with the actors during the Restoration era is exemplified in one of the features of the prevailing rhetorical performance style of the period: the soliloquy. During this era, actors would “step to the front of the stage and speak their parts directly to the

²¹ Bennett. 1997: 2-3.

²² Lancaster. 1997: 76.

²³ Butsch. 2000: 4.

audience rather than to other characters,"²⁴ and members of the audience would sometimes talk back.

Western theater audiences began to change during the seventeenth century, with the establishment of private theaters. During this century and beyond, Bennett notes,

Higher admission prices probably limited the social composition of the audience, and with the beginnings of passivity and more elitist audiences came codes and conventions of behaviour. In terms of English theatre, audiences became increasingly passive and increasingly bourgeois. With the exception of the first forty years of the nineteenth century—when the working class audience created noisy disturbances and occasional riots in the pits—this is a steady progression to a peak in the second half of the nineteenth century. After 1850, with the pits replaced by stalls, theatre design ensured the more sedate behaviour of audiences, and the footlights first installed in the seventeenth-century private playhouses had become a literal barrier which separated the audience and the stage.²⁵

English immigrants and performers brought local theatrical conventions with them when they came to America in the eighteenth century.

In *The Making of American Audiences: from Stage to Television, 1750-1990*, Richard Butsch notes that in the United States, even audiences at the rowdiest forms of popular entertainment followed the same gradual course, from raucous to comparatively subdued, through the during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and especially during the 1880s, when variety shows made a general shift from the saloon to the vaudeville theater.²⁶ With this shift came a dramatic change in the physical structure of the performance space: the balconies, galleries, and rows of seats likely encouraged behavior that was somewhat more genteel than

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bennett, 1997: 3.

²⁶ Butsch, 2000: 108.

that tolerated in the saloon. The advent of electric light at the end of the century, which led to the tradition of slowly dimming the lights to signal the beginning of a performance, helped to further suppress audience interaction. Yet what likely had more of an influence on the changing audience was a new interest among entrepreneurs in attracting a middle-class clientele, “by first attracting a female audience that signified respectability.”²⁷

As Butsch notes, by the turn of the century, attempts to attract middle-class patrons to the variety theater led to

the nationalization and centralization of the industry wrought by Benjamin Franklin Keith, Edward F. Albee, and Frederick Freeman Proctor. These men and their partners built vaudeville theater chains and then combined them into an even more powerful nationwide booking agency that forced many independent theater owners and performers to become dependent clients of a national business. [Performer-turned-manager] Tony Pastor had opened variety to a new audience of women and children. Keith and Albee and Proctor turned this newly respectable entertainment into big business. The United Booking Office had the power to offer or withhold employment from performers in theaters across the country. . . . To theater managers they offered a package of weekly changing bills of acts of predictable quality. . . . Accompanying the structural changes was a shift in control of the theater from audiences to managers. Management made concerted efforts to define vaudeville and resocialize audiences.²⁸

Of all these entrepreneurs, Benjamin Franklin Keith was particularly obsessed with imposing new restraints on both performers and audiences in hopes of luring elite patrons to his theaters. Occasionally known to lecture audiences on proper behavior during intermission, he barred “words unfit for the ears of ladies and children” from his stages, and prohibited spectators from “smoking, spitting, whistling, stamping feet, crunching peanuts, and wearing hats.”²⁹

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 6

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 108-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 111.

Over centuries, then, Western theater audiences on both sides of the Atlantic have been culturally conditioned to behave in particular ways. In general, the history of Western theater has seen a gradual move away from rowdy audiences in favor of far more subdued ones. With exceptions that will be discussed below, Western theater spectators are now expected to sit quietly in their seats, and to refrain from disturbing the actors or one another during the course of a performance. What with modern pre-curtain announcements at many theaters advising audiences to unwrap candies, turn off cell phones, and refrain from taking photographs during performances, it is clear that what has been deemed proper theater behavior continues to be built upon to date.

The Rock Concert

In “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” Frith argues that popular music is associated with youth not simply because young people listen to it, but because music contributes to the very construction of what has been culturally deemed “young”:

Twentieth-century popular music has, on the whole, been a nostalgic form. The Beatles, for example, made nostalgic music from the start, which is why they were so popular. Even on hearing a Beatles song for the first time there was a sense of the memories to come, a feeling that this could not last but that it was surely going to be pleasant to remember. It is this use of time that makes popular music so important in the social organization of youth. It is a sociological truism that people’s heaviest personal investment in popular music is when they are teenagers and young adults—music then ties into a particular kind of emotional turbulence, when issues of individual identity and social place, the control of public and private feelings, are at a premium. People do use music less, and less intently, as they grow up; the most significant pop songs for all generations . . . are those they heard as adolescents. What this suggests . . . is not just that young people need music,

but that “youth” itself is defined by music. Youth is experienced, that is, as an intense presence, through an impatience for time to pass and a regret that it is doing so, in a series of speeding, physically insistent moments that have nostalgia coded into them. . . . [Y]outh music is socially important not because it reflects youth experience (authentically or not), but because it defines for us what “youthfulness” is.³⁰

In other words, as one informant notes,

The theater always strikes me as sort of an adult place. You’re more likely to behave with your grownup voice and your grownup posture and your grownup neckties, whereas in rock—when I go to a rock concert, I throw on the same kind of jacket I wore when I was 15, and I untuck my shirt, and I’ll curse out loud, whereas I wouldn’t, probably, at the Saint James Theater. There, I’m not gonna pass around a joint. There’s also this notion that [rock] is childish music . . . whereas theater at least pretends to be a grownup place.³¹

Just as the comparatively placid behavior of theater audiences aids in the cultural construction of the theater as a site for grownups, the comparatively unruly behavior associated with the rock concert aids in its construction as a site for the young.

The emotional reserve expected of most theater audiences is hardly expected of those at most rock concerts. In fact, it might well be argued that non-theatrical live entertainments such as sporting events and rock concerts currently provide the outlet once afforded to Western theater audiences, in that such events allow, and even encourage, the uninhibited behavior that has gradually become prohibited in the theater. As Frith notes, at rock concerts, as at sporting events,

The usual cultural constraints on expression are suspended, and at the height of enjoyment . . . one can and does hug strangers, leap into the mosh pit, turn

³⁰ Frith, 1987: 142–43.

³¹ Personal communication with Jacob M. Rye, 23 June 2001.

cartwheels on the floor. Such body movements feel spontaneous, unmeaningful of anything except a diffuse joy.³²

While audiences at even the most energetic musical theater productions tend to remain relatively subdued, live rock events may be seen, in contrast, as “a frenzied entertainment of the emotions, not an emotional entertainment of the mind.”³³

It should be noted that in the decades since its inception, rock music has broken off into myriad subgenres, all of which enjoy their own followings. And, as Frith argues, fans of different popular subgenres tend to have slightly different ways of registering their appreciation in live settings.³⁴ It follows, then, that some rock subgenres elicit less energetic responses from fans than others do. Despite differences in audience behavior across subgenres, however, one would be hard-pressed to find a style of rock music that drew audiences who were as consistently subdued as those at most theater venues.

There are a number of related reasons that rock audiences tend on the whole to be less restrained than those at the theater, and many of these have been touched upon in previous chapters of this study. As noted in chapters 2 and 5, rock’s lack of reliance on linear narrative allows audiences to engage with the music very differently from the way they would at most theatrical productions. As noted in chapter 4, rock music was initially closely linked to a counterculture that was interested in challenging, rather than encouraging, extant social conventions,³⁵ and while rock’s close connection with the counterculture has long been

³² Frith, 1996: 216

³³ Conard, 1971: 106.

³⁴ Frith, 1996: 225.

³⁵ For further discussion of rock’s early connections to the counterculture, see Scudder, 1984.

severed, associations with freedom and abandon remain important aspects of its overall aesthetic.

Further, as discussed in chapter 2, rock music is most reliant on sound recordings for its dissemination, whereas musical theater remains, first and foremost, reliant on live performances. This fact is particularly important to understanding the different audiences being discussed here. Scudder argues that with the advent of the sound recording, and especially during the rise of rock 'n' roll,

Live music remained important as a social occasion, but it was no longer necessary for hearing music. Consequently, rock fans are not polite audiences; they *listen* to the music at home and enjoy the *social* occasion of concerts by making a lot of noise.³⁶

In contrast, musical theater audiences, who are somewhat less likely to have heard the score to a piece before attending a musical theater production (especially a new one), are more compelled to be subdued than rock audiences.

There are other reasons that, for most rock audiences, exercising the restraint expected at the theater is simply not necessary. A predominant reason is that rock music is usually performed live at very high volumes, which, Baugh argues, are “more properly felt by the body than judged by the mind.”³⁷ While one might argue that rock does not always demand the involvement of the body to be enjoyed, live events nevertheless seem to encourage such involvement far more than other forms of listening.

³⁶ Scudder. 1984: 16.

³⁷ Baugh. 1993: 23.

Indeed, field notes recorded after a concert performed by the heavy metal group Judas Priest at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City on 31 October 1998 indicate that extreme volumes allow for, and even encourage, different types of raucous behavior:

The music is so shockingly loud that you actually cease to hear it at all. Instead, you *feel* it coursing through you, hammering you over the head, thundering upwards through your feet and legs, shaking and rattling deep in your torso. Some members of the audience responded to the overwhelming sound by banging their heads, punching their fists in time to the music, or raising their arms into the air with thumb, middle, and ring fingers in a circle and first and fourth fingers extended, in a common sign among metalheads. Some people in the audience were truly rocking out, playing air guitar, dancing crazily, and mouthing, singing, or even screaming along with the lyrics (it was so loud that while you could *see* people singing along, you couldn't *hear* them, no matter how intensely they seemed to be singing). Many others stood rooted to their spots on the floor, allowing themselves to become prey to the overpowering noise, letting it rock them hard, not wanting to break the connection by moving around too much. I remember thinking at an AC/DC concert I saw once that the audience seemed fairly laid back, considering how energetic the music was. But I think that this is the way metal audiences tend to behave: If you choose to be loud and obnoxious at a metal concert, no one will stop you—the volume levels will more or less drown out what you do, so you're not likely to bother anyone if you feel like singing or playing air guitar. Then again, you don't have to move around much to become part of the goings on—you will be overwhelmed by the sound no matter what you do, so you might as well stand still and let it invade you.

As Walser notes, then, “the loudness and intensity of heavy metal visibly empower fans, whose shouting and headbanging testify to the circulation of energy at concerts.”³⁸

While not all live rock shows are quite as amplified as heavy metal concerts, loud volumes nevertheless allow audience members to involve themselves in the music in a variety of different ways. Because even the noisiest, most raucous responses are often drowned out

³⁸ Walser, 1993: 2.

by the amplification, spectators at rock concerts have the freedom to respond somewhat more energetically than do theater audiences.

Such energetic responses extend to movement, as well. In contrast to the physical restraint expected of audiences at the theater, those at rock concerts often show their appreciation for or involvement in the performance by moving or dancing along, either in their seats, in the aisles, or along the outside edges of the performance space. Frith argues that moving and dancing are important aspects of listening to popular music in general; they are particularly significant to the concert setting, since they help spectators connect with the performers, the music, and fellow audience members.³⁹

Sardiello's research on Grateful Dead concert rituals supports Frith's assertions:

Participation in the concert ritual culminates during the second set, which reestablishes rapport through longer, more improvisationally oriented songs. It is not uncommon for these songs to blend together for twenty to thirty minutes, leading into a drum duet and free-form jam referred to as the "drums/space" part of the show. During this part of the show, my respondents tended to express their connection with each other and with the music. . . . These feelings are also expressed through dancing. Dancing is, in fact, the most common form of participation in the concert ritual. The more enthusiastic dancers usually meet on the periphery where there is more room for elaborate body movements. Dancing occurs in crowded areas too, although it is restricted to upper-body movements due to a lack of space. This improvisational dance follows the improvisational form of the music and allows for active participation in the ritual performance. Dancing also induces a flow experience that is shared and collectively expressed as a form of *communitas*.⁴⁰

Of course, feelings of euphoria that are induced by the music may be heightened further through the use of drugs and alcohol.

³⁹ Frith, 1996: 142.

⁴⁰ Sardiello, 1994: 128-29.

Daniel Dotter acknowledges that associations between rock 'n' roll and social deviance existed from the genre's earliest inception, but that associations with drug use as a form of deviance did not develop until the 1960s, when the genre transformed into rock and became affiliated with the counterculture.⁴¹ As rock developed, particular drugs often became associated with emergent subgenres; Shapiro notes,

Neither rock 'n' roll, nor the mod or garage bands of the sixties, nor punk in the seventies can be legitimately considered outside the context of amphetamine. The same applies to West Coast rock and acid, and to marijuana and reggae. But this is not to suggest that acid-rock bands used only LSD or that punks stuck only to amphetamine; far from it. Certain drugs influenced the sound and creative context of particular genres more than others, but as the pharmaceutical industry became more competitive and street chemists more sophisticated, so more drugs were added to the music pharmacopeia.⁴²

Despite the decline of the counterculture, as well as crackdowns on drug use in the United States in recent decades, associations between narcotics and rock music continue to exist. For example, it is not uncommon for drugs to be celebrated in song lyrics, for certain drugs to be strongly associated with particular bands, or for drugs and alcohol to be consumed relatively openly in rock concert settings. Even at rock concerts with remarkably tight security, for example, beer is almost always available at concession stands, and individuals or small groups in the audience can usually be spotted smoking marijuana, the distinctive odor of which regularly permeates the air.

As will be discussed at greater length below, dancing and singing might occasionally be permitted, and even encouraged of audience members at some live theater events; further,

⁴¹ Dotter, 1994: 101-03.

⁴² Shapiro, 1988: 99.

cocktails are almost always made available at theaters before the first act and during intermission. Nevertheless, audiences are expected, on the whole, to remain far more passive while at the theater: if an audience member is to consume alcohol, he or she is usually expected to do so only at intermission, and should certainly not behave in an overtly drunken fashion during the performance. It perhaps goes without saying that in most cases, the overt use of drugs by audience members at the theater would not be tolerated.

III. Resultant Relationships Between Audiences and Performers

As noted in chapter 4, performers in the rock realm are often romanticized as “authentic” artists who reveal their true selves to their audiences. As this section will demonstrate, musical theater performers are certainly capable of earning the adoration of their fans, but are nevertheless rarely idealized in quite the same way as rock musicians. The relative presence or absence of authenticity as a guiding ideal exerts influence on the relationships between the audiences and performers of these different genres. The differences in performer-audience relationships are enacted during respective live performances. In the following section, authenticity as it applies to emotional expression as well as the relationship between private and public personae will be examined.

Susan Bennett argues that although theater audiences are encouraged to appreciate actors’ skill over all else, they tend to be conditioned toward a dual recognition of actor and character onstage simultaneously, especially when the actor in question is particularly well-known:

[C]ertain actors acquire a public persona and this . . . can affect an audience's horizon of expectations. With the presence of a "star" on stage, the audience is inevitably aware of a double presence (for example, Dustin Hoffman/Shylock), and it is generally the case, to a greater or lesser degree, that the audience is reading the actor's performance alongside the work being performed.⁴³

As Gaylord implies, however, the more famous the actor, the more this dual recognition can become threatened:

[W]hen a Broadway audience follows the custom of applauding the first appearance of the star onstage, they are, as attendants, applauding the skilled performer qua performer. In the process they break the frame of the specific dramatic event and, momentarily, "bracket" the illusion of the constructed reality on the stage.⁴⁴

Bennett notes that double recognition is not unique to the theater—it exists in the cinema and on television, as well. Nevertheless, she argues, "[w]ith the physical presence of the actor in the theatre and the ever-present possibility of mistakes, forgotten lines, or even accidents, the actor is always less likely to be subsumed by the character portrayed."⁴⁵

While effectively immersing oneself in one's role deeply enough to transport an audience is thus perhaps more challenging for some actors than for others, it is nevertheless a primary aim of acting. One mark of a fine actor is the ability to draw from personal experience in creating a character, but then to immerse oneself so deeply in that character that dual recognition fades. Such an ability allows one actor to play different roles, and, conversely, allows many different actors to interpret the same character. In the realm of the theater, then, the departure of a particularly beloved performer from a production can result

⁴³ Bennett. 1997: 152.

⁴⁴ Gaylord. 1983: 137.

⁴⁵ Bennett. 1997: 153

in slumping ticket sales, or even the occasional closure. Yet successful shows tend to outlast their original casts, and even several replacement casts. This is especially true of the musical theater, which, at least traditionally, is often ensemble-driven, and which arguably often appeals to audiences as much for its spectacle as for its individual players.

Even many smaller, less spectacular musicals survive the departure of their original casts, especially once they have garnered strong reviews or positive word-of-mouth. For example, despite initial concern that *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* would not outlast the departure of John Cameron Mitchell, the musical ultimately went through numerous cast changes during its two-year run, and also spawned a number of productions—and thus, an assortment of Hedwigs—across the world.⁴⁶

Simon Frith argues that “*all* live performance involves both spontaneous action and the playing of a role.”⁴⁷ Indeed, like stage actors, many rock musicians develop public personae that are not necessarily consistent with their private ones. Nevertheless, due in part to the idealized authenticity with which rock and its musicians have been saddled, the distinction between what is real and what is an act tends to get somewhat more muddled in the rock realm. Thus, while a rock musician might indeed be playing a carefully developed role every time he or she walks onto a stage or appears in public, such a role is not as easily separable from the person creating it as one might be in a theater setting, where actors more obviously follow a script and direction.

⁴⁶ Marks, 1998: 2; <http://www.hedwiginabox.com/>

⁴⁷ Frith, 1996: 207.

Frith argues that the blurring between the inner self and onstage persona is precisely what makes performers of popular music appealing to an audience:

Performing involves gestures that are both false (they are only being put on for this occasion) and true (they are appropriate to the emotions being described, expressed, or invoked). Even the most stylized performer, the one with the most obviously formal and artificial gestures, is expressing the self, displaying in public sounds and movements usually thought of as intimate; what the audience wants to see, as Roland Barthes puts it, is “a convinced body, rather than a true passion.” In judging a performer we are, as an audience, measuring her gestures against our sense of what she’s really like, off stage (what her voice and body really do, in this sort of situation), and even if, from the singer’s point of view, this makes it even more important to maintain a clear separation or distance between self and personality, nevertheless, what’s on offer is a kind of vulnerability.⁴⁸

Frith is discussing popular music in general; his argument, however, is especially applicable to rock: because rock musicians do not take on characters that are as fully developed and enacted as those found in the theater, their personae are more likely to be accepted by their audiences as “real,” and their emotions more nakedly exposed.

Indeed, in the years that I conducted research for this study, a significant number of informants noted that much of the appeal of live rock performance is the chance to be in the same room with a particular performer, and thus to experience, first hand, his or her “true” emotional expression. Interestingly, no matter how savvy, critical, or cynical particular informants were about the workings of the music industry or the role of persona in rock performance, most seemed convinced that what they were witnessing during particularly memorable performances was, in fact, “real.” One informant noted, for example,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 214.

I was watching [footage of the version of] “Voodoo Chile” that [Jimi Hendrix] played at Woodstock, and there was no divorce between what he was feeling and what he was playing. I almost cried, it was that moving. When there’s no division between what a person is feeling and what they’re playing on an electric guitar at a loud volume. . . . That’s my paradigm of rock music.⁴⁹

Similar sentiments are evident in the words of a second informant, who explains his appreciation for Bob Dylan as follows:

Whenever Bob Dylan comes to town, I will see him. I have seen him twice in the same week, and I would never skip his coming, even though often the songs are the same. It’s the energy of the performance, the meaning that comes from not only the music, but the performance of the music. As opposed to “Fred Smith sings the songs of Bob Dylan,” which would have very little appeal to me. . . . [Dylan] has developed these songs and ideas, and hearing him speak them and perform them adds to the meaning of them. . . . What I love about [Dylan] is that his songs are beautiful, and incredibly meaningful, but they have certain narrative threads through them that allow them to provide images or tell stories in a way that is incredibly true and evocative. . . . For me, Bob Dylan’s songs gain meaning because of their context—because they come from him and because I know about him, and know where, in his life, they come from. A song is great not just on its own, but in the context of this album meaning this, coming at this point in his life, as part of a development. . . . I can enjoy pop music—I can listen to a good Spice Girls song . . . but I wouldn’t enjoy going to a concert of theirs, because if it is only about the music, it isn’t there for me. That’s not what the performance is about.⁵⁰

Whether my informants have noted an appreciation for rock, the musical theater, or both, most argue that the catalyst for emotional intensity differs between the two specifically because the scripted quality of the latter seems entirely absent in the former; as the second informant cited above adds, one of the most important differences between rock and musical theater

⁴⁹ Personal communication with Dan Ehrenhaft, 23 June 2001.

⁵⁰ Personal communication with Joshua Saltman, 4 October 1998.

performance lies in the fact that “obviously, the performers in a musical have not created what they are performing.”⁵¹

This does not imply that audiences at a performance of one genre are less likely to experience emotional responses than those at the other. As Meyer argues, all music has the potential to arouse emotions in listeners.⁵² A great many musical theater aficionados whom I have interviewed note that they not only attend the theater in hopes of being moved, but that their opinions about particular productions are often based on how emotionally intense their responses are.

What is implied, however, is that emotions seem to be evoked among rock audiences in markedly different ways than they are among musical theatergoers. As rock critic Evelyn McDonnell notes,

People go to rock concerts hoping to see the performer express themselves. . . . And when you go to see a play, you are not looking for the actor to express themselves so much as for them to express the story. You know they're acting.⁵³

Hence, no matter how immersed a rock musician might be in his or her onstage persona, he or she is expected to reveal something “real” to the audience. On the other hand, the musical theater is more firmly rooted in the effective execution of character: actors are expected to give a convincing enough performance that the audience connects with, and is moved by, the actions of the characters, not the people inhabiting them.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Meyer, 1956: 6-13.

⁵³ Personal communication with Evelyn McDonnell, 30 September 1999.

This difference in perception helps to explain why musical theater lovers often discuss favorite musicals in terms of the emotional response they have to the characters and their situations (for example, “I loved *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*—his story was so sad, it moved me to tears” or “I found *Rent* to be really moving—especially the Angel character”), whereas rock fans tend to discuss favorite groups and performers in terms of “real” personalities (as in the Hendrix and Dylan discussions above). It also helps to explain why, during my fieldwork for this study, I occasionally observed audience members waiting at stage doors of theaters after the performance of a musical in hopes of receiving the autographs of particular *characters*, not the actors who portrayed them.⁵⁴

Of course, this does not imply delusion on the part of these particular audience members. It also does not imply that all audience members will willingly accept any actor in any role: plenty of theatergoers express disappointment, and even refuse to attend a performance, upon learning that an actor has been replaced by his or her understudy. What is implied, however, is the fact that the theater realm differs from the rock realm in that in the former, a spectator can more freely choose to suspend reality, and to connect with a character instead of with the actor portraying it. As one informant notes, the same musical theater character—Hedwig, for example, or Max Bialystock in the hit musical adaptation of Mel

⁵⁴ After the performance of *Saturday Night Fever* on 20 October 1999, for example, James Carpinello, who performed as Tony Manero (the lead role created on film by John Travolta) emerged from the stage door en route home. He was instantly surrounded by autograph-seekers who eagerly shouted “Tony!” upon recognizing him.

Brooks' *The Producers*—may potentially be performed by any number of actors, whereas no rock audience would accept an understudy in place of a rock star.⁵⁵

Although many stage actors develop close relationships with the characters they play, such a phenomenon is often not interpreted to be as dangerous as the merging of off- and onstage persona in the rock realm. Because the line between these divided personae is already comparatively blurred in this arena, and because authenticity is so deeply rooted in the rock ethos, rock musicians are regularly depicted as particularly susceptible to becoming prey to their own onstage personae. Rock stars like Alice Cooper, David Bowie, and Janis Joplin, for example, have regularly been described as performers who, ravaged by drugs or alcohol, lost grasp of their private selves at certain points in their career.⁵⁶

The assumption that rock musicians are forever struggling between private and personal lives occurs in less subtle ways, as well: in a recent review of a Nick Cave concert at the Beacon Theatre in New York, for example, Kelefa Sanneh wrote,

“No More Shall We Part” (Reprise), Mr. Cave’s most recent album . . . documents a dexterous songwriter doing battle with his own outsize persona. . . . More often than not, however, [during the performance] the songwriter triumphed over his persona, crafting mysterious allegories enlivened by flashes of wit.⁵⁷

With the subject matter of his album, Cave may indeed be inviting speculation on what is “real” and what is his persona. Yet Sanneh’s review reveals the same conviction with respect artistic authenticity that is evidenced in the words of the Hendrix and Dylan fans cited above.

⁵⁵ Personal communication with CJ Hughes, 23 June 2001.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Somma, 1969: 138; Palmer, 1995: 187-88; and *Alice Cooper: Behind the Music*, first aired on VH1, 1999.

⁵⁷ Sanneh, 2002: E6.

It must be emphasized that rock performers' struggles with their onstage personae is the stuff of legend, which is largely created and perpetuated by rock's writers and fans. The continued and collective belief in such legend, however, is of great importance here: because the promise of seeing something "real" serves to draw many rock audiences, it seems highly probable that many followers of the music genre allow themselves to believe that even performers who are most obviously putting on an act are nevertheless somehow revealing aspects of their true selves.

For example, Nancy Langer, a disc jockey at WYEP-FM in Pittsburgh, recounts her own loss of respect for the band U2, which was the result of her realization that the band's onstage antics, which she had formerly interpreted as "real," were in fact staged:

I [saw] U2 [during] their first big tour. They put on a powerful show. Bono did a lot of strutting around . . . letting the audience know that what he was singing about was important, that he was angry, that we should all be angry. . . . At several points in the show, people would throw stuff up on stage, the usual assortment of flowers, tee-shirts, signs. Bono accepted [them] and incorporated them into the performance, which at the time seemed so cool (so often you see the roadie appearing briefly to whisk such items away, or the gift-giving is reserved for the finale, where the diva du jour can collect her teddy bears and roses while she briefly smiles upon her sobbing masses). Bono held up the signs so that everyone could read [them], he donned a tee-shirt right in the middle of a [song]. It felt like we were connecting with him, like he was accepting and embracing us. Then, someone threw a tee-shirt . . . and Bono . . . stopped the song. He held up the shirt and said something [like], "You threw this shirt up here because it says something about what's happening in Ireland and you think we agree with it, but we don't. So you can take your fucking tee-shirt and shove it up your ass." Then he threw the tee-shirt into the crowd. Silence. Absolute silence. I thought, "He hates us. We fucked up. We're ignorant Pittsburghers. We don't know anything. . . . We suck." Then the show went on. I felt better: maybe they don't hate us after all. I left that night thinking about what an "important" band U2 was. Fast-forward to the *Joshua Tree* tour. . . . My friend Mike goes with us. . . . I tell him my

life-changing U2 story. . . . “Oh yeah,” he says, “they did that in Cleveland, too.” I am crushed. I am disillusioned. I am cynical. I hate Bono.⁵⁸

Langer is not alone in losing respect for a rock band or personality under such circumstances. Many of my informants have recounted similar disappointments upon discovering the rehearsed aspects of live rock performances, and one argued with me extensively when, while watching a videotape of an Elvis Costello performance, I suggested that a mid-song tantrum was likely to have been staged.

The common belief that rock musicians are somehow selling out or being untrue to their fans if they feign emotion is perpetuated not only by what is written about rock, but also by the structure of the rock concert itself. As Gracyk writes, many rock concerts are designed to create a sense of unity and to present performers as at once larger-than-life and the embodiment of their fans:

For the same reasons that live performance is unlikely to become obsolete, packaging rock in terms of “live” performance will persist. The concert experience cements the bond of audience to performer in a way that nothing else can; the structure and pacing of concerts is designed to “gradually heighten” it. Concerts also bond the audience members to one another; if one cannot bond personally with someone a hundred rows away, then at least one is confirmed in one’s taste by the presence of other fans. For a little while, at least, the individual is tangibly immersed in a social community with a shared sense of purpose, an experience that often eludes us in modern culture. . . . The musicians, for their part, are expected to engage in a ritual display of energy and effort, signaling allegiance to the fans. Some [current performers] . . . have followed the lead of earlier punk performers and practiced stage diving into the audience, demonstrating to everyone that their fans will not let them down. In such displays . . . both musicians and audience engage in behaviors that signify their solidarity, as well as their distance from the larger culture. The concert experience is designed to obscure the fact that the event is a

⁵⁸ Personal communication with Nancy Langer. 3 December 2001.

commercial exchange. (Never mind that they aren't giving away those shirts and posters and programs in the lobby).⁹⁹

This sense of bonding can be built upon in a variety of ways, as is evidenced in original field notes taken after Judas Priest's 1998 appearance in New York City:

I observed a great deal of exchange between audience and performer. Maybe in this case it was because we saw Priest at a small venue, or because they have been playing for decades, or because Ripper Owens is still so shell-shocked at the idea of being the new lead singer after ages as the starstruck frontman of an Ohio-based Priest cover band. Anyway, the patter that went on between band and audience seemed trusting and playful, despite the oft-screamed epithet "motherfuckers," which Owens used to address the crowd. Owens would ask us to shout louder and louder, and even though none of us could hear ourselves, we did, and were rewarded with song after song. One of the most striking aspects of the evening was the use of lights. After almost every song, the lights would come up and scan the crowd. The band could watch us, we could watch them, and we could all watch one another, cheering, pounding the air with our fists, reveling in group mentality and the music and the moment. Not only listening, but *watching* was thus clearly a bonding force. At the end of the last encore, the band members came to the edge of the stage, waved at people, saluted them, leaned down and shook their hands and talked to them. It felt like a big, friendly get-together, and like we were all equals.

The illusion of unity thus perpetuated at rock concerts works, as well, to heighten what is known in the rock realm as the D.I.Y. ("Do It Yourself") ethos. This philosophy celebrates the blurred boundaries between production and consumption—and thus, performers and fans—with the philosophy that rock stars are also rock fans, and, conversely, that any fan with the desire also has the potential to pick up an instrument, form a band, make their own music, and become a rock star.

⁹⁹ Gracyk, 1996: 78.

IV. The Middleground: When Rock and Theater Audiences Meet

Performance-Entertainments

As is discussed in chapter 1, the transformation of rock 'n' roll into rock music occurred during the same time that alternatives to the mainstream theater were being explored, especially in the Off and Off Off Broadway realms. During the 1960s and early 1970s, members of the fringe theater noted, often with great interest and not a little jealousy, the excitement generated among audiences at live rock shows. In discussing the 1969-70 Off Off Broadway theater season, for example, Schroeder writes enviously of the crowds flocking to the Fillmore East:

In all of New York during 1969-70, there was only one theater that had to ask police to fend off the crowds. That theater housed none of the serious or camped revivals that clung to the one edge of off off Broadway's spectrum, nor did it contain any of the elitist fantasies that touched at the other. Nor did that theater proffer [Off] Broadway imitations of Broadway, nor did it offer Neil Simon, *Fiddler* or *Dolly*. The only theater in New York that needed help in handling its crowds was hosting The Who and the like. It housed theater that people—actual great masses of actual people—were breaking down the doors to experience. The Fillmore East in lower Manhattan, the theater about which I am speaking . . . is filled the year round with that great new audience the theater's professionals all talk about. . . . Bill Graham sees that the Fillmore East's stage speaks to his audience's life-concerns, and that's how Fillmore East gets filled. Using the same tools that David Merrick uses—words, music, motion, lights, sound, projected live from a stage to a living audience—Graham proves that even today, even among the "alienated," living theater is desperately needed, and urgently sought.⁶⁰

While rock music did not always exert direct influence on the fringe theater during this period, the desire to somehow capture the excitement that was obvious at rock concerts certainly helped fuel explorations into potential new roles for the theater audience.

⁶⁰ Schroeder, 1970: 41-42.

One result was the advent of improvisational theatrical productions that “demand[ed] active participation by spectators . . . [and] blur[red] the boundary between the performers’ space and the spectators’ space,” thereby allowing spectators to aid in the creation of a performance and promoting a “sense of group (or tribal) social interaction or catharsis.”⁶¹ Known in the 1960s as “Happenings,” such performance-entertainments have evolved into what is now commonly referred to as interactive or participatory theater, current representatives of which include the long-running Off Broadway productions *Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding*, *De La Guarda*, and Blue Man Group’s *Tubes*.⁶² Like their predecessors, these productions encourage audiences to respond more actively and viscerally than is typically expected or desired in the mainstream theater.

Many interactive productions are united by a similar philosophy; as *Lifegame* director Phelim McDermott explains, “shows that use audience members in an unscripted way can not only heighten the theater’s live quality but remind people of theater’s group-centered nature.”⁶³ The ways in which this philosophy is often manifested tend to link the genre closely with the staged rock musical: like these, many interactive productions are built on the assumptions that only alternative forms of theater will attract the ever-desirable, ever-ill defined “young” audience to the theater, and that because these “young” audiences have been exposed to too much television and too many video games, they lack the attention span required of mainstream

⁶¹ Lancaster. 1997: 77.

⁶² The influence of interactive theater on the mainstream musical was made manifest, in the mid-1980s, with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a Dickens-inspired whodunnit with alternate endings that allowed audiences to vote on the culprit. The musical opened on 2 December 1985 and ran for 608 performances.

⁶³ Lemon. 2000: 5.

theater and instead require entertainment that taps into, rather than discourages, their nervous energy.⁶⁴

However condescending such underlying assumptions might be, many examples of interactive theater indeed manage to draw on the visceral energy of spectators, thereby eliciting what journalist Brendan Lemon calls the “rock-concert response.”⁶⁵ For example, in Blue Man Group’s Off Broadway piece *Tubes*, which opened in the East Village at the Astor Place Theater in November of 1991 and is running strong over a decade later, the performers take great pains to dispense with plot, dialogue, and linearity. Interested in “break[ing] down the mystery and sanctification surrounding art, in order to make a more spiritual connection with the audience,”⁶⁶ the performers cultivate a relationship with their spectators that becomes “the narrative of the whole show.”⁶⁷

While not usually as participatory as interactive theater, staged rock musicals tend to share an interest in connecting with the audience in ways that are not usually attempted in most mainstream productions. Yet although they draw from rock concerts on the one hand and are philosophically related to interactive theater on the other, rock musicals often fail to transcend their connections to the traditional musical, which dictates specific, contained roles for audiences and performers. Ironically, then, while interactive theater is not as directly influenced by rock music as are staged rock musicals, the former often manages to elicit a more convincing “rock-concert response” from their audiences than the latter. While the

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Diamond, 1993: 117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

presence or absence of narrative has a great deal to do with this, other issues deter audiences and performers from establishing the same relationship in rock musicals as in concerts and interactive theater; these will be detailed below.

Audience Issues with Interaction

Audiences are conditioned to behave in particular ways at particular venues. Susan Bennett writes that

it is evident that [the audience], like the artist, has ideas and values which are socially formed and which are similarly mediated. As the artist works within the technical means available and within the scope of aesthetic convention, so audiences read according to the scope and means of culturally and aesthetically constituted interpretive process.⁶⁸

While there are many kinds of audiences, all of which function according to slightly differing accepted modes of behavior, Clive Barker argues, cultural conditioning dictates that a “unifying principle seems to be that the audience likes to know where it is in a relationship and tends not to like being disturbed.”⁶⁹

When audiences are asked to become involved in the structure of a theatrical event, then, their role in the production changes from that which was culturally defined in the early twentieth century. This fact can cause problems for theatrical productions that attempt to depart from convention by engaging audiences in experimental ways. Performers who expect to draw

⁶⁸ Bennett. 1997: 92.

⁶⁹ Barker. 1978: 8.

audiences away from convention, and to engage them in behavior that is not typical of theater spectators, often have to devote ample time to winning trust and support.⁷⁰

In turn, audiences have to allow themselves to let down their guard and accept, rather quickly, a role that is culturally counterintuitive; if they are unwilling to comply, the performance will fail, no matter how hard the performers work. As Mel Gussow notes of *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding*,

One's enjoyment of the show will be based on what might be called the participatory factor. Eagerness equals entertainment. If you want to have a good time, you will.⁷¹

This, however, is sometimes easier said than done. Although the desire to break down cultural conventions might often be strong, such conventions are not easily destroyed. As Bennett notes, "Where audiences are consulted and involved in the structuring of the theatrical event, and are encouraged . . . to translate their reading of that event into action, then their role no longer maintains the fixity that dominant cultural practice assumes."⁷² The accepted modes of behavior of audiences at one type of performing arts genre often fail to translate to other genres precisely because particular spectators go to particular venues expecting particular experiences.

In terms of the performer-audience relationship, staged rock musicals are often placed in a position that is more awkward than that occupied by interactive theater productions. Whereas the latter often attempt to challenge the cultural conventions of contemporary theater

⁷⁰ See, for example, Diamond, 1993, on Blue Man Group's *Tubes*.

⁷¹ Gussow, 1988: 4.

⁷² Bennett, 1997: 207.

audiences, the former often attempt to do so through the merging of aesthetics extant in the rock concert on the one hand, and the traditional musical on the other. Unfortunately, most tend to do so without much regard to the very important and yet very different behavioral modes of these two genres' divergent audience types. Thus, while staged rock musicals can draw, aesthetically, from both rock and the musical theater, they often fail to cultivate a performer-audience relationship that rests comfortably in either camp.

As a result, and notwithstanding notable exceptions like *Hair*, many rock musicals tend to most closely emulate the musical theater, not the rock concert, in terms of the performers' relationship to the audience. Of course, at staged rock musicals, audiences might cheer a bit louder or respond a bit more enthusiastically to musical numbers than they would at more traditional musicals. In general, however, audiences are usually expected to spend most of the duration of the performance sitting quietly in their seats, focusing on the unfolding plot, applauding only at designated intervals, and otherwise doing their best not to disturb the performers or their neighbors.

Some staged rock musicals attempt to elicit visceral responses among audience members by drawing spectators directly into the action during specific, strictly contained intervals. Such is the case of the recent Broadway version of the film *Saturday Night Fever*, which featured a carefully choreographed curtain call, after which the audience was encouraged to stand up and dance, much as audience members at *Hair* were encouraged to do nightly at the Biltmore Theater three decades prior. Unlike *Hair*, however, *Saturday Night Fever* was not a production that featured any direct-address or performer-audience interaction

prior to the curtain call. As a result, at least at the performance of *Saturday Night Fever* that I attended on the evening of 20 October 1999, the cast's attempts to connect with the audience and convince them to dance fell flat.

Confined to the narrow rows of seats in the auditorium of the cavernous Minskoff theater, most members of the audience seemed confused and somewhat embarrassed by the cast's sudden encouragement. A few people stood and clapped along to the music, but a vast majority showed no interest in letting down their defenses enough to dance, or even to move around very much. One of my companions at the show, in fact, noted that the cast's attempts to encouraging dancing in the aisles worked only to alienate her further from the production:

That was lame. It was enough. They just repeated the best little segments of the dance numbers that we had already seen three times, and I was ready to go home. It was not that exciting the first time, it was *definitely* not that exciting the second time. I did not want to be involved—I did *not* like that. I don't think this is a great venue for audience participation. So that part just didn't work.⁷³

Indeed, in many cases, attempts to challenge an audience's traditional modes of behavior seem to result in wasted energy on the part of the performers, and discomfort or confusion among spectators. The futility of such attempts were made fascinatingly apparent at the recent Broadway revival of *The Rocky Horror Show*, which opened at the Circle in the Square Theatre on 15 November 2000 and ran for 437 performances.⁷⁴

The relationship between audience and performer at *The Rocky Horror Show* has changed dramatically in the years since the bawdy, rock 'n' roll-influenced musical premiered

⁷³ Personal communication with Shuli Passow. 20 October 1999.

⁷⁴ <http://www.ibdb.com>.

at London's Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in June 1973.⁷⁵ The show proved successful enough that producer Lou Adler quickly bought the U.S. rights. He opened a successful production of the show at the Roxy in Los Angeles in 1974⁷⁶ and a far-less-successful Broadway version that closed after 45 performances.⁷⁷

When it first premiered in London, *The Rocky Horror Show* was somewhat more invested in breaking the theatrical taboos of the time than it was in fostering interaction between the cast and the audience; the fact that the musical premiered less than five years after the abolition of theater censorship in Britain does not seem particularly coincidental.⁷⁸ The plot of *The Rocky Horror Show* centered around Brad and Janet, a young, virginal, ludicrously priggish young couple who seek refuge in a spooky, remote castle when their car breaks down in the woods during a rainstorm. The castle turns out to be the dwelling of the cross-dressing Frank 'n' Furter, a self-described "sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania," and his thoroughly bizarre, ambisexual entourage.

Upon their arrival at the castle, Brad and Janet are whisked to Frank 'n' Furter's lab to witness his new scientific creation: Rocky, a near-naked, muscular, blonde, man that Frank hopes will fulfill all his sexual desires. Rocky, who turns out to be as stupid as he is handsome, instantly rejects Frank 'n' Furter's sexual advances and instead takes an interest in Janet who, midway through the show, becomes crazed with lust and succumbs to Rocky's advances. Frank 'n' Furter, initially upset by Rocky's lack of interest in him, inevitably turns

⁷⁵ Larkin, 1995: 3539.

⁷⁶ Denisoff and Romanowski, 1991: 185.

⁷⁷ <http://www.ibdb.com>

⁷⁸ Larkin, 1995: 3539.

his attentions to the sexual initiation of both Brad and Janet. Meanwhile, at some point during the production, a biker named Eddie shows up to sing a song, only to get slaughtered by Frank, who then lies about Eddie's whereabouts when his uncle, Dr. Scott—a former professor of Brad and Janet's—shows up in search of him. Magenta and Riff Raff, Frank's maid and butler, eventually reveal themselves to be, like Frank, aliens from the planet of Transylvania. They kill Frank, Rocky, and other members of the entourage before returning home, leaving Brad, Janet, and Dr. Scott to ponder their future. A narrator, whose role is never clearly defined, wanders in and out of the action to comment on—but never to clearly explain—this musical's loose, silly plot.

In 1976, *The Rocky Horror Show* was made into a feature film, which was a critical and commercial disaster in England. It slowly developed into a cult hit in the United States, however, due in large part to midnight showings at movie houses like the Waverly Theater in Greenwich Village, New York, where audiences began to pay homage to the ridiculous film by dressing up like its characters, performing in film-related stage shows, and heckling or throwing specific objects at particular points during the movie.⁷⁹ (Thus, although audience response differs slightly from region to region, audience members across the country traditionally throw rice during wedding scenes, shoot squirt guns and put newspapers over their heads during the rainstorm, and throw slices of bread when Frank 'n' Furter raises his wine glass and makes a toast; further, whenever Brad or Janet are mentioned by name or featured on screen, it is customary to shout "Asshole!" or "Slut!" respectively.) Although they

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

hit their peak during the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s, midnight showings of *The Rocky Horror Show* may still be found in cities across the United States at present.

While the original stage version of this peculiar little musical must surely have seemed remarkably daring and risqué less than half a decade after the ban on theater censorship was lifted, it is not likely that its messy, convoluted plot and frivolous rock 'n' roll score would have continued to generate much interest in theatrical circles had the film version not become a cult hit. Riding the wave of interest in adapting popular films for the Broadway stage, the recent Circle in the Square revival of *The Rocky Horror Show* attempted to remain as (if not more) true to the film version than to the original stage version, by offering the theater audience a chance to interact with the performers in much the same way late-night moviegoers interact with the film. The result was an impressive, well-cast, well-directed, and innovative production that was not particularly successful in turning a Broadway audience into one more typical of a midnight screening.

The producers and director of the revival obviously worked hard at actively encouraging audiences to emulate those at midnight showings. The production was staged in the round, and the lines between spectator and performer were often blurred through the use of actors who were planted in the audience. Dick Cavett, who originated the role of the Narrator, was set, during the duration of the show, in the middle of one of the aisles, facing the stage. From his seat amidst the audience, he served to bridge the gap between spectators and performers by engaging the former in witty banter about the latter during specific points in the show. The other actors incorporated a lot of direct address into their performances, and

the chorus members frequently ran into the aisles to dance during songs, occasionally selecting spectators at random as dance partners. Theatergoers interested in getting even deeper into the act could buy \$10 feather boas, as well as \$10 bags of glitter, toast, toilet paper, and newspapers to fling during the show. Thus, in a number of different ways, director Christopher Ashley noted, the audience was “actively encouraged to talk back and dance in the aisles.”⁸⁰

Unfortunately, the pains that were taken to engage the audience during performances of *The Rocky Horror Show* were not always as fruitful as they might have seemed. In the first place, the show’s \$80 ticket price made regular returns to the theater far less realistic than repeated viewings of the much cheaper midnight movie version. The steep ticket price also deterred many audience members from purchasing the prop-bags; thus, most of the spectators failed to become involved in the production in the same way that those viewing the film—who traditionally collect household items to toss around in the movie house—typically do. Further, at least during the performance I attended, it was clear that only a handful of the audience members were both familiar with the midnight movie rituals and interested in reviving them in the theater.

In addition, because performers cannot often tell willing spectators apart from ones reluctant to get involved in the act, they can be met with significant resistance when interacting directly with the audience. As I wrote in field notes recorded after the performance on the evening of 7 December 2000:

Trying to interact with bewildered theatergoers during crucial points in the show must prove wearing for these cast members. An example: During the

⁸⁰ Lemon, 2000: 22.

“Time Warp,” members of the cast run out into the house, grab random audience members, and try to convince them to get up and dance in the aisle. I looked around and noticed that a few brave souls willingly got up to cut a rug, but others—like the very large, obviously shy and uncomfortable man sitting in my row—needed a lot of coaxing. This man tried his best to fend off the super-enthusiastic chorus member who had grabbed his hands and was desperately trying to lead him into the aisle. The man finally looked around, saw that other audience members were dancing, and timidly relented, just in time for the music cue to summon the actor back to the stage. The audience member in question was thus left standing, clearly mortified, in the aisle.

Despite the best intentions of performers, then, many interactive productions lose sight of the fact that, in the words of producer Jordan Roth, even in the most active of theater audiences, “there will always be people who would rather watch a story unfold onstage that has nothing to do with them, and where they have no power to affect events.”⁴¹

As I recorded in my field notes, those spectators at *The Rocky Horror Show* who did show interest in getting into the act did not always have a clear idea as to how, exactly, they should do so, thereby dashing the producers’ hopes of recreating the feel of the midnight movie for the Broadway stage:

I take my seat next to three women who have clearly never seen the show in any incarnation. They decide after much deliberation to share a \$10 sack of crap to throw. The bags, it turns out, have instructions in them. I read over their shoulders as surreptitiously as I can, which turns out to be easy since they are intent on getting all the instructions right, and thus study the sheet like they are in junior high and the page holds the answers to a pop quiz. The sheet has two headings, which appear beneath a paragraph telling audience members to get into the act, but never to throw anything directly at the actors. Under the heading “The Props: When to Throw Them” is information as to when, for example, people are supposed to throw an entire roll of toilet paper into the aisle; under the heading “The Lines: When to Shout Them” is information as to when to shout things like “Asshole!” and “Slut!” In stark contrast with the VERY off-color heckles that are usually hurled at screens across the country

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 5.

during midnight showings, “asshole” and “slut” was about as risqué as the instructions got. So much for transgression—everything has to be so damn clean on Broadway. I guessed that the poor women next to me would spend a lot of time trying to read and fish around for props in the dark, but in fact, they gave up quickly and left most of the contents of their bag untouched. These women were not alone: most of the audience seemed to have no clue as to what to do with themselves. The first appearance of Brad and Janet was greeted with a very few (Three? Four? In a house of over 1000 people?) shouts of “Asshole” and “Slut”; the rest of the audience tittered uncertainly and hundreds of heads craned in search of the hecklers. The rest of the show continued much like this: in a sea of bodies occupying an ocean of seats, a prop or two occasionally became visible—maybe 10 newspapers appeared over the heads of as many audience members during the rainstorm; a sad smattering of flashlights popped on during Brad and Janet’s walk to the castle. As the show progressed, an outnumbered handful of voices dutifully chimed the most famous heckles.

The Circle in the Square revival of *The Rocky Horror Show* was, in many ways an excellent and innovative production. Yet its creators failed to grasp the fact that a while a concept might be easily adapted from one medium to another—for example, from stage to film and back again—audience behavior is never nearly as easily adaptable.

The creators of the Broadway versions of *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Saturday Night Fever* are certainly not alone in their attempts to encourage rock musical audiences to behave less like they were at a theatrical production and more like they were at a rock concert. Stephen Trask and John Cameron Mitchell, creators of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, had a unique approach: they attempted to attract rock fans to their musical by appearing in costume and performing at various rock venues throughout New York City. The result, however, was, for the most part, a series of concerts attended by fans of the musical, who often behaved more like theater audiences than like rock concert attendees, despite the rock-concert settings. Rock

fans who had no interest in watching a fictitious band from an Off Broadway musical perform rock songs simply stayed away.

A concert given at the Bowery Ballroom on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on the evening of 17 February 1999 by the cast of *Hedwig* in honor of the release of the show's cast recording was a case in point. As recorded in field notes describing the event, the large theater crowd who showed up at the event simply did not behave appropriately to the setting, thus foiling the overall aesthetic:

Until the show begins, I assume that the audience is made up of rockers, not theater people. Then I notice members of the cast of *Bright Lights Big City* standing behind me, and Stevie remarks that he sees a few guys who were involved in *Corpus Christi*. The show starts; Mitchell comes on as Hedwig and makes a few improvised conversational remarks before the band launches in to the first song on the album (and the show), "Tear Me Down." The music is no different than it is in the show: I was expecting the band to rock out a little more, but the choreography is exactly the same. The theory that the audience consisted largely of theater people is further confirmed as a majority of the attendees begin to sing along. Sure, sing-alongs happen at rock concerts, too. But the record was only just released and there is no airplay for the songs, so there is no way people could have learned the lyrics unless they had been following the show for some time. The strangest, most telling moment of the evening was when Mitchell announced that was going to do a stage dive. He talked about this plan for a very long time, and kept asking the audience if they were ready. He finally backed up very elaborately, reminding people all the while that he was about to jump off the stage, and then finally threw himself into the audience. This is when it occurred to me: this audience *needed* to be told how to behave in this setting. During the show, there was no moshing, hardly any dancing, no unruly behavior. We got as close to the stage as we did because there was nobody up front crowding the stage or moshing. Had Mitchell not carefully set up his plan to stage dive, he would have landed like a stone on the floor of the ballroom.

Hence, regardless of the setting, context, or elaborate pains taken to encourage audiences to

break out of traditional patterns of behavior, theater audiences cannot be taught, in the course of one performance, to be something other than theater audiences.

The same may be said of popular music audiences. On December 31st 1998, Hedwig and the Angry Inch played one of their biggest gigs when they opened for the 1980s pop group Culture Club at a New Year's concert at Radio City Music Hall. Mimi Rupp, an acquaintance who attended the show, recalls that the crowd, which was largely unfamiliar with the show, was not particularly welcoming of the Off Broadway cast:

Hedwig was not connecting with the crowd. She . . . might have been too avant-garde for [them]. The crowd really was not a brain trust, and it was New Year's Eve, not a thinking kind of holiday. People did not appreciate the pathos of Hedwig's character. . . . Hedwig the musical was more engrossing because it contextualizes the songs. At the Radio City show, the songs, which were denuded from their context, were not strong enough to win the crowd over. . . . The crowd was there to see Boy George and dance to nostalgia. . . . The colossal stage didn't benefit the Angry Inch one bit. They are a band who is used to playing hole-in-the-wall joints; they are not pros at staying tight in a large venue like more experienced bands.⁸²

Indeed, another concert attendee noted in an anonymous on-line review of the show that Hedwig and the Angry Inch did not play music that appealed to him and that he was not alone, as evidenced by hecklers in the crowd: "Several people kept yelling that they wanted Culture Club to come on while Hedwig was still playing—I felt that was extremely rude."⁸³

Ironically, for all these attempts on the part of performers of staged rock musicals at eliciting visceral responses from theater audiences, one of the most genuine "rock-concert responses" to be witnessed in the theater of late took place at a production that was neither

⁸² Personal communication with Mimi K. Rupp, 3 February 1999.

⁸³ <http://www.btinternet.com/~s.essom/darkoshirewindtour.htm>

interactive nor a staged rock musical. The theater piece *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* does not fit comfortably in either category, although like staged rock musicals, it did utilize contemporary popular music, especially during the second act. Despite the fact that it is not considered a rock musical, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* warrants consideration here, since it managed to stir its audiences in ways that many rock musicals have tried, and failed, to do.

A musical piece that relied heavily on tap-dance to trace different episodes in African-American history from slavery to the present, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* was developed by the director and producer George C. Wolfe and the choreographer and tap dancer Savion Glover. Initially mounted at the Public Theater in November 1995, the show was enough of a critical and commercial success that it was moved to Broadway, where it reopened at the Ambassador Theatre on 25 April 1996. Here, too, it was successful: it ran for 1135 performances before closing in early January 1999.

Even before the lights had dimmed and act I had begun at the matinee performance of *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* that I attended on 16 December 1998, I noticed that the youthful and diverse make-up of the audience had already set the show apart from most of those on Broadway. As I wrote in fieldnotes,

It was impossible not to notice, once we were all seated and ready to go, that we were maybe the youngest, most multicultural audience I have ever seen in a Broadway theater. This was a matinee, and one right before Christmas, to boot, so the house represented a school trip or three, and as a result, there was much more diversity—black faces, Latino faces, Asian faces, a majority of them young faces—than you normally see in Broadway houses (even when

casts are multi-racial....the times I have seen *Rent*, for example, I have noticed that the show has more people of color in its cast than it does in its audience).

While Broadway's many racial issues (and problems) deserve far more attention than this cursory study allows, it should be noted that to date, a majority of Broadway productions are developed by, aimed at, and marketed to white, mainstream audiences. In contrast, due in large part to its subject matter and its all-black cast (a rarity on Broadway), *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* proved more appealing than much Broadway fare to a more diverse group of spectators.

The unique audience contributed to the performance of *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* that I attended. As I wrote in fieldnotes after the production.

What I found most interesting about this production was the fact that the audience interacted with the performers more in a rock-concert way than in a typically Broadway way, but never to the detriment of the show itself. Whereas shows like *Rent* and *Hedwig* begin like rock concerts, with the audience screaming and playing the role of concertgoers, they usually end up being too plot-based for the audience to sustain its energy and excitement. Once an audience realizes it will miss something dramatic unless it chills out, the energy gets lost. *Noise Funk* had the opposite effect—the show was well received from the outset, and the young audience was definitely more vocal from the start than most Broadway audiences tend to be. But what was so interesting was that the energy, rather than dissipating, just kept on increasing through act I, and especially through act II. Glover's second act solo really seemed to electrify the audience, and the numbers after it kept getting more and more enthusiastic responses. By the time the "Taxi" number started—this was a dance sequence performed by four men in various styles of dress, all of whom try in vain to hail cabs that keep passing them by because they are black—the audience was roaring, screaming, and applauding so loudly that it threatened to drown out the synthesized music emanating from the orchestra pit. At the end of the show, the standing ovation was immediate, and similarly intense.

Such an enthusiastic response was likely the result of a combination of factors. What was being depicted onstage (especially during the taxi-cab sequence) clearly resonated among many of the African-American people in the audience. But more broadly, the structure of the show, which was heavy on images and very light on plot or spoken dialogue, allowed and even encouraged audience members to express themselves in a manner atypical of Broadway, and more in keeping with behavior at a concert venue.

Performers' Issues with Interaction

Of course, audiences will not become increasingly enthusiastic without the tacit support and encouragement of the performers. Rather, audiences feed off the energy and enthusiasm of performers. Conversely, even the most vague discomfort on the part of a performer can work to quash the energy of an audience. This can result in problems in the rock musical realm, since just as a fan of one performing arts genre may have no interest in others, a person who excels at performing one genre will not necessarily shine at another. Thus, just as rock musicians do not necessarily transfer with ease to the world of theater, or vice-versa, actors accustomed to traditional theater are not necessarily at ease in interactive situations.

According to Dick Cavett,

Performers with a genius for handling a live audience—people like Dame Edna or Groucho Marx—definitely have an almost unaccountable gift . . . that is very different from other performing skills. I find that when I'm interacting successfully with the audience, I don't always know what I'm going to say until I say it. Which is what makes it so dangerous. . . . Most actors would rather die than talk to the audience. Doing so takes away their safety net. And

if part of your play or your act is pre-set, then moving from the scripted to the spontaneous can be a huge challenge.⁴⁴

Cavett's experience as a talk show host allowed him to rise to such a challenge as the Narrator in *The Rocky Horror Show*, where his banter with the audience was well worth the price of admission. As I wrote in field notes recorded after the performance of 7 December 2000, however, many of the other actors in the production were clearly not as comfortable interacting with the audience:

Half the cast seemed to welcome interaction, while the other half seemed bothered by the audience. Alice Ripley, as Janet, seemed most at ease when she could stay in character and ignore the heckles that were flung her way. On the other hand, Tom Hewitt did not breathe much new life into Frank 'n' Furter (he did a Tim Curry imitation, and to be fair, it was a damned good one), but he was great at working with the audience. He seemed to draw the most heckles, perhaps because he was so good at playing to them. Ironically, the one actual rock musician in the cast, Joan Jett, was the stiffest of the bunch. Acting is not her language—she was obviously comfortable behind the electric guitar she dons to solo during “The Time Warp,” but otherwise seemed intent on remembering her lines and blocking. She thus established far less of a connection with the audience than I have seen when she plays with her band.

Jett's appearance in this production is particularly telling: performers in all genres keep some emotional and physical distance from their audiences, thereby inducing audience reaction while simultaneously containing it. Yet, as has been noted throughout this study, the ways in which performers interact with the audience differ from genre to genre.

In front of an audience at a rock concert, then, Jett can and does typically address the crowd without consulting a script, resorting to character, or worrying about motivation or scene blocking. On the other hand, in the musical theater, even the most seemingly

⁴⁴ Lemon. 2000: 5.

spontaneous interactions are likely to be carefully scripted or rehearsed, and performers must be mindful of their character, their direction, and the other actors who occupy the stage with them. Saddled with these extra responsibilities, Jett seemed a bit lost.

Many actors who perform in rock musicals state that while audiences may not be as active as those at the average rock concert, they nevertheless bring to the theater a rawer energy than those at traditional musicals. For example, Carla Bianco, who performed in both the Los Angeles and New York productions of *Rent* before appearing in *Bright Lights Big City*, notes,

They get more involved, as if you were in a rock concert, where people stand up and scream and have their lighters—there is more of a sense of that. It's like interactive theater in a way—the energy just gets them going. If they could, if we asked them to and that fourth wall was broken more, I think they would even stand up and start screaming in the middle of numbers. That makes it really exciting. With traditional musicals, I think that fourth wall is really up and they are just watching the piece and they tend to be more quiet. Not as free to laugh as loud, depending on the size of the house. I think there's a heightened energy that just gets them psyched. Especially the young people who come to *Rent*—forget about it, they're not going to be quiet, they're screaming as soon as we walk out, we haven't even said, "Hi."⁸⁵

What is important to note, however, is that while the energy is *comparable* to that in a rock setting, it is not *identical*. AnnMarie Milazzo, a rock musician who appeared in *Bright Lights Big City* and also served as the production's vocal arranger, argues that indeed, establishing the same performer-audience relationship in the theater as in the rock realm is thus impossible:

There's a lot you can't [take with you from the rock to the theater realm]. It's really disciplined. [Rock is, too,] but there's an element of—feeling the audience. There's no fourth wall. And unfortunately there is in theater. So there is no give and take, there's none of that. And you have a set—the music is all set. In terms of my [own] music, [my band and I] are very rehearsed, but it's so different . . . when you are doing theater, you kind of have to ignore [the

⁸⁵ Personal communication with Carla Bianco. 7 April 1999.

audience], which is really weird. [Even when you break the fourth wall] you do. Because other actors are depending on every move. It's all synchronized. So you move on this word, you turn on that. . . . It's a collaboration. Everything is choreographed.⁸⁶

Indeed, as noted in chapter 5, audience response might initially be more energetic at rock musicals than at traditional ones, but it nevertheless tends to conform to behavior typical of the theater, especially once the narrative begins to unfold.

Symbols of the Theater

As is discussed in chapter 5, many rock musicals evoke rock music aesthetics through setting and design, both on the stage and throughout the house, as well. For example, the dilapidated Jane Street theater—with its fraying seats, grungy carpets, and open bar—proved a perfect “rock ‘n’ roll” setting for *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Similarly, the old Village Gate concert venue in which the Janis Joplin-inspired show *Love, Janis* is set is evocative of a late-1960s nightclub.

Despite attempts to evoke settings more typical of the rock than the theater realm, rock musicals nevertheless often fail to transport audiences in comparable ways, since traditional symbols of the theater tend to interrupt the otherwise painstaking evocations. The presence of such symbols as programs and understudy announcements can work to destroy the mood, thereby making it difficult for audiences to become transported, no matter how “authentic” the setting or design might be. Speaking of programs, for example, Bennett notes,

Certainly the amount of information and the signposts a programme presents act as significant stimuli to the audience's decoding activity prior to any

⁸⁶ Personal communication with Annmarie Milazzo, 31 March 1999.

presentation of a fictional on-stage world. Perhaps the most important signpost in the programme is the play's title. . . . [The] elements of pre-production will be emphasized or naturalized according to the ideology of the production itself. Nevertheless, whether in the foreground or not, these elements do serve to prepare further the audience for the reality of the theatrical event. The physical arrangement of a theatre as well as the degree of contact between performers and spectators at this stage may well limit, or even determine, the interpretive strategies adopted by the collective audience.^{*7}

A problem with programs, however, is that while they are a deeply ingrained staple of the theater, they are rarely used in the rock realm. Not only the information within the program, then, but the program itself, can work to break the mood.

The same may be said about such pre-theater fixtures as ushers and pre-show announcements. As I wrote in original field notes recorded after a performance of *Love, Janis* at the Village Theater on 15 May 2001,

Descending into the theater from the street was initially very effective: day-glo period posters of happenings, be-ins, Big Brother and the Holding Company and other San Francisco bands covered the walls; the small stage, which is flanked by an exposed brick wall, was set with all the instruments you would expect of a late-'60s rock band. It all evoked a mood that was instantly shattered by the usher who perkily brought us to our seats and gave us playbills stuffed with understudy slips and the now-ubiquitous market research surveys. Also not particularly evocative of the mood was a large, written announcement at the entry to the performance space, which was reprinted in the playbill for good measure: "Due to the demands of the role of Janis Joplin, Andra Mitrovich and Cathy Richardson will alternate performances." Joanne, my companion at the show, found this announcement to be very funny. "That's so highfalutin," she mused. "I wonder if Janis ever alternated with herself?"

Some productions interested in evoking a rock aesthetic omit certain traditional pre-theater rituals: Both *The Who's Tommy* and *Rent*, for example, featured "surprise" beginnings, in

^{*7} Bennett. 1997: 138-39.

which the show began before the lights in the auditorium were dimmed, while *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* began much later than the traditional five- to seven minutes after the hour.

One production that dispensed successfully with almost all pre-theater rituals was *The Donkey Show*. Although tickets were taken at the door, the production featured no ushers, dimming of house lights, pre-theater announcements, or traditional distribution of programs. The programs, in fact, were not made available to members of the audience until they had entered a long hallway that led to the door to the street. By making programs available to patrons only after they had chosen to leave the theater, the creators of *The Donkey Show* managed to maintain an atmosphere far more evocative of the 1970s disco era than, for example, the more traditionally structured *Saturday Night Fever*.

Press and Industry Issues with the Rock Crossover Audience

Adding to difficulties encountered by those interested in creating rock musicals that feature innovative performer-audience relationships is an interesting double-standard that pervades the mainstream theater: representatives of both the industry and the theater press corps have traditionally showed less patience or respect for rock music than their fringe counterparts, although many have simultaneously acknowledged admiration for, and even a desire to harness, the excitement that is generated among audience members at live rock events. The very existence of staged rock musicals points to the fact that members of the theater industry clearly covet the responses rock performers elude from their audiences; at the same time, however, the spotty history of the rock musical points in part to the fact that the

behavior that accompanies such responses is precisely that which has gradually been excised from theater audiences over centuries, and which is frowned upon at present. Hence, although there is certainly the desire, in the theater realm, to create the same excitement that is often generated at rock concerts, there is simultaneously an air of snobbishness, which dictates that an audience member who exhibits too much energy or excitement—by, for example, laughing too loudly or for too long a time, or talking during a performance—is crass, stupid, or uneducated as to proper theater behavior.

Particularly energetic responses to the theater are, in fact, often treated with scorn and impatience in the press; Lancaster, for example, cites *New York Times* journalist Alex Witchel in relating the following anecdote:

Something funny [and] strange . . . happened at the Manhattan Theater Club recently. When music began playing offstage during a production of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, a spectator shouted, “Ben Hur! Ben Hur! Ben Hur!” A theater critic (unable to understand why someone would behave this way) condemned this behavior and condescendingly wrote seven rules of theater behavior for audiences. These rules ranged from “Once the show begins, keep quiet” to “Go easy on the perfume” . . . [since] “it is the height of disrespect to impose yourself on the show or anyone watching it.”⁸⁸

Witchel is not unique in expressing such condescension; her response to what she perceives as an overactive theater spectator is remarkably similar to greenhorn stories that appeared in the popular press during the course of the nineteenth century.

Butsch explains that greenhorn stories were designed to teach audiences how to behave properly in the theater by example:

⁸⁸ Lancaster, 1997: 75.

Nineteenth-century magazines and theatrical memoirs often recounted tales of greenhorns, or “green’uns,” who reacted to events in the play as if they were real. In a story of Edwin Forrest’s early career in an 1825 Albany performance of *the Merchant of Venice*, a canal boatman was so immersed in the characterization of Iago that he shouted “you damned lying scoundrel, I would like to get hold of you after the show and wring your infernal neck.” In another story set in 1841 Baltimore, a sailor jumped on stage to help a dying heroine, saying “I’ll be damned if a woman should starve and die,” giving her all the money in his pocket. . . . Typically, the green’un was an unsophisticated figure . . . whom the rest of the audience treated with a benign condescension. . . . Green’un stories offered readers an opportunity to feel knowledgeable by contrast, and thus highlighted the value placed on knowledge of the theater. . . . A green’un story is a kind of insider joke shared by readers and the audience within the story, both at the expense of the greenhorn. The core of all insider jokes is to demonstrate membership within the group through understanding the joke, through insider knowledge. Green’un stories, then, represented a measure of the importance to audiences of their knowledge of theater and drama. . . . Ironically. . . this valued knowledge became the fulcrum for the demise of the sovereignty of the audience.⁸⁹

Although the greenhorn character has disappeared, Witchel’s article—and the many like it that appear in the popular press—indicate that these nineteenth-century greenhorn stories have not changed much. A number of theater writers continue to resort to condescension and elitism as means of educating audiences about proper behavior, by implying that the theater community is divided between sophisticated “insiders” who know to keep the intensity of their emotions to themselves, and boorish “outsiders” who should either learn proper behavior or simply stay home.

Such snobbery results in yet another problem faced by staged rock musicals. Many are produced in the hopes that “new” audiences—especially those who listen to a lot of rock

⁸⁹ Butsch, 2000: 57-58.

music but are not regular theatergoers—will be attracted to the show. Yet while this “new” audience might be strongly desired in theater circles, it is simultaneously looked down upon.

The “insider” gossip that swirled around *The Who’s Tommy* is a case in point. Shortly after the musical opened to rave reviews, news of a particularly rowdy crowd that was believed to be flocking to the St. James Theater began to circulate among theatergoers and industry members. In *Newsday*, Margalit Fox reported,

It was a quiet night Wednesday at “The Who’s Tommy.” Only a few people in the audience sang along. Nobody threw up. Visit the St. James Theater on a weekend, however, and it’s a different story. Fridays and Saturdays, observers say, audience members at the new musical based on The Who’s 1969 rock opera are apt to be more familiar with Madison Square Garden than the Great White Way. “You see guys with long hair and leather jackets and studs and you tend to think they’re not your average Broadway audience,” said Wendy Wright, one of the St. James ushers, who’s seen it all since previews began March 29. “Some of them don’t know how to act in a Broadway theater. Occasionally, they’re a bit drunk and throw up. Some of them have to be restrained from singing along.” ... Onstage and off, it is more than a little like going to a rock concert.⁹⁰

Matching the condescending tone of the article was that of the producers: Michael David of Dodger Productions was quoted as saying,

What I think has happened is we have been able to introduce the nontraditional theatergoers into this new “club” called Broadway . . . [and] getting people to come to an address they’re not familiar with: “There’s this club on 44th street and you’ve gotta try it out.”⁹¹

The snobbery inherent in the “insider” view of the audience that *The Who’s Tommy* attracted is evident here. The producers seemed hopeful that the production should attract audience members who would bring with them just enough of an “outsider” sheen to make the

⁹⁰ Fox, 1993: 81.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

production seem more like a rock concert than a Broadway musical, but the very audience members the producers desired were made the subject of scorn when they dared to act too much like they were at an actual rock concert.

The D.I.Y. Ethos

It is worth noting that such superciliousness counters rock music's underlying D.I.Y. ethos. This ethos has subtly influenced both interactive theater and staged rock musicals. Speaking of interactive theater, for example, Jeffrey Finn, a creator of the interactive theater production *Lifegame* argues,

The main thing many of these shows tap is the audience's desire to be a star. . . . In the old model . . . if you came to New York to be a star, you had to have talent. Now you simply have to show up outside the "Today" show, for example, where the camera is rolling, or, increasingly, in theaters where you, Joe Schmo from Wichita, can be plucked from the audience and placed in the spotlight.⁹²

Whether purposely or inadvertently, many rock musicals have borrowed directly from the D.I.Y. ethos by casting young, relatively inexperienced performers with little or no theater background; such was the case with both *Hair* and *Rent*, which featured a significant number of young, inexperienced cast-members who were often heralded in the press and in theater circles not as actors but as "the real thing."

The D.I.Y. ethos occasionally translates very successfully to the theater stage; as is discussed in chapter 5, *The Donkey Show* works wonders with blurring the lines between performers and spectators, and allowing audience members to get involved in the production

⁹² Lemon. 2000: 5.

without being singled out or put on the spot. This show, in fact, seems to be built on the premise that watching unknown theater actors perform classic popular songs is not nearly as fun as singing along to them yourself.

Yet countering the philosophy that anyone can and should be able to join in and become part of the performance is an even stronger and more deeply rooted philosophy that pervades the mainstream theater. This dictates that performers need to be larger-than-life, and devoid of the rough edges that are often celebrated in the rock realm. Writing about the parade of television celebrities who step into Broadway roles to boost ticket sales despite a notable lack of stage experience or talent, Ben Brantley argues that what he calls “the karaoke influence” has no place in the professional theater:

The current lowering of the talent bar doesn’t apply exclusively to the famous and infamous. The karaoke influence shows up even in productions without recognizable names on the marquee. It is . . . dispiriting when an unknown is given a change to carry a show and still registers as a cipher. The ill-advised Broadway versions of “Footloose” and “Saturday Night Fever” were inspired by movies that celebrated dancing. Yet their leading men—Jeremy Kushnier and James Carpinello, respectively—had little kinetic charisma. They weren’t even the best dancers in their shows. It was as if the producers had wanted only to provide theme-park-like mnemonic triggers, letting theatergoers fill in the life-giving detail with their memories of the original movies. . . . [P]erhaps the very ordinariness of the central performers let audience members feel a part of things, as if they might run up on stage and join in.⁹³

Thus, like audiences who are too rowdy, the D.I.Y. aesthetic is often viewed with scorn by more traditional theatergoers and industry members. As the harsh treatment of rock musicians-turned-stage actors like Paul Scott Goodman implies, “outsiders” are certainly free to try their hands at acting, but they had better prove their ability to do so.

⁹³ Brantley, 2001: 34.

Conclusion

You can reach a point in the creation of something when the trappings and the tinsel and the construction become so important that it doesn't really matter at all what's inside. The show can be a total contrivance: ultra-formulaic music, jive bits of business for punctuation, caboosees loaded with props, choreographed postures and preenings, even the audience enlisted to give it right back on cue, educated in the process through past concerts and festival movies. The whole thing can be just that vacuous, and because someone has taken the trouble to entertain them, everybody still goes away happy. Show biz is funny that way.

—Lester Bangs

Since the 1950s, the musical theater has been struggling mightily to regain its foothold in American popular culture. As this dissertation has demonstrated, it has regularly attempted to do so by endeavoring to emulate stylistic trends that appear in other, more wide-ranging and influential types of media. Throughout its history, but especially since the 1950s, the theater industry has endeavored to appeal to audiences with innovations in both aural and visual spectacle, resulting in productions that emulate the aesthetics of television shows, studio recordings, and films. This is especially true in recent years, since entertainment corporations that are most accustomed to working with film and television properties have taken a new interest in creating and producing musicals. Accordingly, half a century past what is seen to have been the golden age of the American musical, Broadway has now fully reversed its position: Whereas it once exerted strong influence on Hollywood, Broadway is, at present, a site for a growing

number of big-budget musicals that are based, both thematically and stylistically, on popular movies.

Such general trends toward the increasingly commercial and risk-free, however, obscure a more complex history of the American musical, in which smaller, less expensive, more specialized ventures can be seen to compete against larger, more commercial, more spectacular ones for the attention of the ticket-buying public. In this respect, the American musical is no different from other, more far-reaching types of media—especially film and popular music—which are often depicted as arenas in which smaller, less commercial concerns struggle to be heard over larger, more corporate-driven ones. Like these other forms of media, the largest commercial musical theater properties are often viewed as posing a serious threat to smaller, less commercial ones.

In addition, the American musical is similar to the film and popular music industries in that smaller properties ultimately seem to find ways to adapt and survive in even the most difficult and unfriendly of arts environments. Indeed, just as histories of the American film and popular music industries reveal independent filmmakers and popular groups forever struggling—but surviving—in their increasingly corporate worlds, the death of the American musical at the hands of huge, money-hungry corporations has, at the time of this writing, yet to become a reality. While the most mainstream, big-budget, corporate-driven musicals might well be casting an ever-darkening shadow over the future of the genre's less commercial ventures, the theater industry's growing reliance on the former has nevertheless not yet resulted in the complete destruction of the latter.

Indeed, constant warnings about the certain death of the American musical notwithstanding, this performing arts genre is in fact as diversified and fragmented as all other types of media. Although it tends, most often, to be depicted in linear histories that focus on the ways such luminaries as Kern, Gershwin, Berlin, Porter, Rodgers, and Sondheim built on one another's contributions, the actual development of the American musical is far messier. New subgenres of American musical have developed in response to the changing times, and either succeed or fail depending on how well they fit sociological needs. As this dissertation has demonstrated, countless composers try their hands at musicals, only to be met with critical and commercial indifference that later causes them to be deemed historically irrelevant. Similarly, many lesser-known composers enjoy great success with musicals that enjoy long runs but that are, for whatever reason, also forgotten with the passing of time.

Earning a place in the musical theater canon—as in any canon—thus has a great deal to do with a composer's ability to transcend the topical. This is no small feat, since the musical theater has always borrowed heavily from popular music its time. In this respect, the staged rock musical may be seen as an evolutionary subgenre, which was born from a desire within the theater industry to keep the American musical alive and attractive to a young generation that had diverged widely, both in tastes and in behavior, from those that had come before it.

The staged rock musical, then, is but one example of ways that the theater industry has attempted to keep itself and its art viable and appealing through the emulation of proven trends in the dominant popular culture. The history of the staged rock musical thus reveals a great deal about the way that the American musical theater

the rock realm. The tensions that arise between smaller rock musicals, which aspire to a more “authentic” rock sound, and larger, more mainstream pop musicals, which appeal to broader audiences are similar to the ideological tensions which exist between the pop and rock realms of the music industry.

Yet when it comes to the American musical, individual elements of rock music—the occasional use of its instrumentation, for example, or a nod toward its vocal styles—tend to translate more successfully than attempts at direct imitation. As this dissertation has demonstrated, rock resists absorption as a result of its aesthetic qualities, which differ markedly from those in the musical theater. These include an emphasis on loud volumes and an interest in the aggressive- or extreme-sounding; performance styles that are decidedly less formal than those typical of the musical theater; an overall lack of interest in the narrative structure to which the musical theater so closely adheres; and a strong interest in maintaining a veneer of artistic authenticity and anti-commercialism, despite evidence to the contrary.

Although rock has been absorbed by the musical theater mainstream in the guise of pop musicals, these are largely rejected by many rock performers, industry members, journalists, and fans, who shy away from ventures that flaunt commercialism. As a result, the rock musical that manages to win the grudging admiration of both the mainstream and the fringe is a rare creation indeed. Nevertheless, as the phenomenal success of both *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Rent*—which are, ultimately, two very different types of rock musical—have proven, the staged rock musical, like the American musical itself, has never died, and in fact shows no signs of waning.

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Be that as it may, while divergent aesthetics, performance styles, and ideologies certainly work against attempts to merge rock music and the American musical, it is possible that the biggest problem inherent in attaining such a union lies in the fact that the popular music world tends to be ephemeral, forward-looking, and accepting of change, while the musical theater realm seems forever to be stepping ahead with one foot, while keeping the other rooted in its canonized, celebrated, illustrious past. For all of its parallels to more far-reaching kinds of media, the American musical is, in this respect, most akin to such performing arts genres as the opera or the symphony. Like these, the musical is constantly struggling to remain relevant and viable as a live performing art in an age when electronic media exert the most power and influence.

A problem that the musical and its surrounding industry faces, then, is how to rectify its 100-year-old history with its need to remain fresh and relevant. The current solution—emulating trends in the dominant popular culture—is, in many ways, also a problem. Because it is always chasing the aesthetic and economic developments introduced by more dominant media, the American musical will forever be seen as derivative and anachronistic, and Broadway, its spiritual home, will forever be saddled with the nickname “the Fabulous Invalid.” This is especially the case since stage musicals often take many years to be produced, and thus run the risk of appealing to audiences with stylistic trends that have long since passed out of the dominant popular culture. The resultant perception of the American musical as a corny and aging performing art form is, perhaps, even more of a deterrent to those interested in creating rock musicals than the divergence in aesthetics or ideology.

Then again, as this dissertation has demonstrated, Off and Off Off Broadway have always been slightly less behind the times, and thus slightly more hospitable to rock musicals, than has Broadway. Indeed, as the writing of this dissertation comes to a close, it is worth noting that while hip-hop has begun to show signs of theatrical viability—especially since rap has a closer relationship with linear narrative than does much rock music—its influence remains minimal on Broadway and has to date remained confined to the occasional rap-influenced numbers that have appeared in youth-oriented musicals like *Footloose*, *Rent*, and *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*.

In contrast, Off and Off Broadway have, in the past few years, become home to a number of hip-hop influenced theatrical ventures, most notably Performance Space 122's New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival, which has been growing in popularity and winning the attention of the press since it first appeared in June 2001. If history is expected to repeat itself—and it almost always is—it is only a matter of time before a small, hip-hop-influenced musical opens in a tiny downtown theater, wins the adoration of audiences and the glowing praise of theater critics, and moves uptown where, more than twenty years since rap music was introduced, it will be hailed as “revolutionary”—just like *Hair* was in 1968.

APPENDIX

Interview Subjects

The following individuals were interviewed for this project:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Interview Date</i>
Norma Adler, former program editor, <i>Playbill</i> magazine	date unknown
André Balog, theatergoer	2 March 2000
Martha Banta, assistant director, <i>Rent</i>	24 November 1998
Richard Barone, music director, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i>	25 March 1999
Carla Bianco, actor, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i> and <i>Rent</i>	7 April 1999
Thomas Brett, pit musician, <i>The Lion King</i>	22 July 1999
Catherine Campbell, actor, <i>Footloose</i>	11 November 1998
Michael Cerveris, actor, <i>Hedwig and the Angry Inch</i> and <i>The Who's Tommy</i>	25 August 1998
Bill Compton, <i>Hair</i> aficionado	18 October 1998
Jim Cowdery, composer and musician	1 March 2000
Tom D'Ambrosio, theatrical press agent	17 July 1998
Nina Machlin Dayton, <i>Hair</i> aficionado	28 July 1999
Natascia Diaz, actor, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i> and <i>The Capeman</i>	15 April 1999
Martha Donaldson, stage manager, <i>Bright Light Big City</i>	25 March 1999
Daniel Ehrenhaft, rock musician and aficionado	23 June 2001
Risa Freeman, theatergoer	16 February 2000
Andrew Gans, assistant editor, <i>Playbill</i> magazine	31 July 1998
Paul Scott Goodman, writer, composer, performer, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i>	14 March 1999
John Link Graney, actor, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i>	17 February 1999
Annette Guarrasi, actor	13 July 1999
Walter Michael Harris, actor, <i>Hair</i>	7 October 1998
CJ Hughes, rock aficionado	23 June 2001
Clifford Lee Johnson, director of the musical theater program, Manhattan Theater Club	6 October 1998

Doug Katsaros, musical director and conductor, <i>Footloose</i>	8 November 1998
Nancy Langer, disc jockey, WYEP-FM Pittsburgh	3 December 2001
Marjorie LiPari, actor, <i>Hair</i>	15 December 1998
Galt MacDermot, composer, <i>Hair</i> , <i>Dude</i> , and <i>Via Galactica</i>	22 October 1998
Heather MacRae, actor, <i>Hair</i>	15 December 1998
Evelyn McDonnell, journalist and rock critic	30 September 1999
Ken Mandelbaum, theater critic and historian	3 August 1998
Sandra Mardenfeld, journalist and former program editor, <i>Playbill</i> magazine	9 August 2000
AnnMarie Milazzo, actor and vocal arranger, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i>	31 March 1999
Barney Miller, actor and rock musician	3 December 1998
James LL. Morrison, theatrical press agent	17 July 1998
Natalie Mosco, actor, <i>Hair</i>	3 January 1999
Judy Ng, theatergoer	28 April 2000
Tom O'Horgan, director, <i>Hair</i> , <i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i> , <i>Dude</i> , and <i>Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band on the Road</i>	23 February 1999 and 4 May 2000
Mark Passow, rock aficionado	23 June 2001
Shuli Passow, theatergoer	20 October 1999
James Rado, playwright, <i>Hair</i> and <i>Rainbow</i>	16 January 1999
Mimi K. Rupp, theatergoer	3 February 1999
Jacob M. Rye, rock aficionado	23 June 2001
Joshua Saltman, theatergoer	4 October 1998
Joe Sampson, actor	18 November 2001
Bill Schelble, theatrical press agent	27 July 1998
Connie Schlier, scenic painter	28 April 2000
Stephen Schwartz, composer, <i>Godspell</i>	26 January 1999
Leigh Silverman, assistant director, <i>Bright Lights Big City</i>	11 March 1999
Mark Stewart, pit musician, <i>The Who's Tommy</i>	13 October 1998
Don Summa, theatrical press agent	6 October 1998
Steve Sweetland, voice teacher	4 March 1999

Jessica Swenson, rock aficionado	18 July 2000
Steve Swenson, theater technician	6 October 2000
Stephen Trask, composer and lyricist, <i>Hedwig and the Angry Inch</i>	29 July 1998
Jack Viertel, creative director, Jujamcyn Theaters Corporation	20 October 1998
Tom Viertel, theater producer	24 November 1998
George Wallace, rock aficionado	23 June 2001

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