

Arushi Grover

Kate Rosenberg

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American Musical Theatre: Social Progressivism and the Facade of Revolution

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 19th century and into the early to mid-20th century, the New York theater and music scene featured a hivemind of composers, playwrights, lyricists, dramatists, directors, and, otherwise, artists, all attempting to create new forms of theatre, drama, and performance, trying their hands at creating a truly native form of American art and performance, (Carter 1-3). Prior to this time, and borrowing from the European tradition, opera remained the dominant form of music drama; however, the art was one alien to American audiences, featuring foreign languages—often Italian, German, and French—and one serving the upper class in terms of cultural position and also narrative subjects—often the aristocracy, (Hanning and Weinstock). A separate type of performance, vaudeville offered popular entertainment in the form of burlesque comedy, song, and dance, in a series of separate acts combined to form the bill for a single show or night, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). Composers and dramatists invented new versions of theatrical performance throughout the first half of the 20th century that incorporated song and music, attempting at “the elusive ‘American’ opera” (Tim Carter). George Gershwin, for one, composed *Porgy and Bess*, a “folk opera” first performed in 1935, following the experience Black Americans and trading in folk themes and spiritual songs, (Cooper). Similarly, *Show Boat*, the 1927 musical comedy with music by Jerome Kern and book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, was one of the first attempts at a book musical, what is considered a

play that uses songs to propel a proper narrative with the goal of telling serious drama that can invoke emotions beyond laughter, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

However, it was composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist-dramatist Oscar Hammerstein II that succeeded in the feat, with their 1943 musical, *Oklahoma!*, a work widely considered the first musical of its kind, a work of music drama that is truly dramatically—and soon to be commercially—successful in weaving song and story, (*Oklahoma!*). The American musical is a truly native art form of American music drama and theatrical performance—the descendent of serious European operas, offensive minstrel shows, and entertaining and indulgent vaudeville—whose middle-brow audience can appreciate both the drama and spectacle.

The American musical is seen in its most potent and mainstream form in the Broadway musical; Broadway theater refers to theatrical work and performances that are held in 41 theaters of seating capacity above 500, located in and around Times Square in Manhattan, New York, . Broadway theater is considered the highest commercial theatre in the world, along with London's West End, and today, musicals remains a popular medium in American society, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). Unique to Broadway is the exclusivity of its shows, in terms of geographic accessibility with existing within a couple dozen theaters in New York City, as well as financial accessibility with uniquely highest ticket prices for theatre. Musical theatre is a form of art, theatre and music; however, it is also a form of rhetoric, meaning, and message. The Broadway stage, entwined in the capitalist system of theatrical business in New York, is therefore a reflection of those who allow its existence: the patrons who pay for performances, its wealthy, statistically white, upper-middle to upper class American audience.

The history of American musical theatre shows changes in music, narrative form, and theme that reflect progressive social and political changes and movements of the country. Still, as

a medium bound to the corporate, capitalist, and hierarchical world in which it is created, progress is only depicted to the extent that the upper-middle class to upper class audience's tastes will accept it; thus, American musical theatre can be seen as a reflection of the powerful, the wealthy. However, in changing social dynamics of America from the late 1940's to today, American musical theatre has experienced a paradigm shift from serving the wealthy to pretending to serve the masses through mass-market appeals to social progressivism while continuing to serve the wealthy. This paradigm can be seen through consideration of the neo-Marxist theory of bourgeois theatre, that the most popular theatre is a reflection of those in power; consideration of the function of theatre, an ephemeral art form in an increasingly digital world; and consideration for the idea of revolution through art, and its efficacy to an extent.

BOURGEOIS, FINISHED THEATRE

Theatre practitioner, political activist, and drama theorist Augustus Boal's theory of "Theatre of the Oppressed" theatrical forms that aim to promote political and social change. Boal proposed that bourgeois, or finished, theatre "functions to reproduce elite visions of the world and pacify spectators"; he argues that as the bourgeois exist in a world that they find comfortable and satisfactory, bourgeois theatre takes the world as it is and presents it on stage, (Mandala Center for Change). The function of this is to create a relationship between the artist and audience where the artist portrays a world and conflict that wraps up neatly without questioning the current functioning of the world, and where the audience will be placated in questioning the world, (Mandala Center for Change).. By contrast, Boal's developed practice of "Theatre of the Oppressed" is a reality in which the public at large, the people, do not know what world there will be; therefore, their authentic practice of theatre is "unfinished", attempting to rehearse

differently realities and situations so as to practice different outcomes for the world, (Saxon). As Boal says, “One knows how these experiments will begin but not how they will end, because the spectator is freed from his chains, finally acts, and becomes a protagonist.” The goal of “Theatre of the Oppressed”, as a practice, is to invite the audience to participate in theatre, a different relationship that the comparatively prescriptive theatre that Boal names “bourgeois theatre”, (Saxon).

Thus, in evaluating the history of musical theatre, the idea of bourgeois, finished theatre is helpful in considering how Broadway theatre, as a popular art form in a capitalist business model, uniquely reflects the ideas of the wealthy, but also the dominant socio-political views in a capitalist society, America. As media critic and theorist Lindsay Ellis articulates it, “Echoing Marx, Boal argues that the dominant art is the art of the dominant class, who control the means to disseminate art.” Thus, Broadway musicals being the dominant form of musical theatre, Broadway musicals—as are all the musicals discussed here unless otherwise noted—can be seen as a reflection of their patrons: those with wealth, or, statistically, white, upper-middle class to upper class patrons, as demographic surveys of audiences have consistently shown throughout history, (The Broadway League).

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

1. The integrated musical: Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!”

As discussed earlier, the first American musical of its kind is considered to be Rodgers and Hammersteins’ 1943 musical, *Oklahoma!* In terms of dramatic form, *Oklahoma!*, as a work of music drama, is unique from those that preceded it in its form as not just a book musical, one that has a dramatic script and is intersped with songs, but an “integrated” musical, one that

successful integrates song and dance within the narrative to propel the story; previous music dramas often functioned where the presence of a song would serve as break from the narrative, a period of entertainment and music, and only after the song ended would the narrative continue, (Carter). The contemporary American musical has been proven as an effective form of storytelling, one able to use music, in the form of musical leitmotifs and themes, to tell emotional stories, convey character, and develop a form of entertainment into a narrative art. Compared to similar forms, like operas, the American musical is also more accessible to a broader middle-class audience in a middle-brow form, (Carter). The integrated musical is, in fact, a very natural musical form of storytelling, of theatre, of narrative, an extension of the spoken word and naturalistic performance where musical moments show moments of heightened or meaningful emotionality. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* featured advanced narrative characteristics like a cohesive plot, a dream ballet, and character songs (*Oklahoma!*). The duo's second work together, the 1945 musical, *Carousel*, featured even more advanced "integration", where in the famous and beloved "bench scene", the last leg of Act 1, Scene 1, the spoken dialogue lines and sung lyrics are voiced one after the other, music flowing into dialogue into music, (*Carousel*).

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* is set in the farm country of Oklahoma Territory in 1906, with the story of Laurey McLain and her courting by two suitors, the cowboy Curly McLain and the intimidating and threatening farmhand Jud Fry, (*Oklahoma!*). The original production was a charming picture of life in an expanding America, similar to the idyllic depiction of pastoral life in British pastoral romances (Carter). While *Oklahoma!* was an unprecedented critical and commercial success upon opening night, and is rightly considered imaginative and innovative in terms of dramatic form, the work largely does not challenge any existing norms, functioning as a comfortable, entertaining, and emotional story about Laurey

accepting the hand of Curly to the upcoming box social and the rising tensions within the town as a result, (*Oklahoma!*). *Oklahoma!*, in subject and societal function, was the predecessor for an age of similar works.

2. The Golden Age: R&H and the 1940's-1950's

The Rodgers and Hammerstein duo sparked a Golden Age of musical theatre, of artists creating works à la the duo's new model of musical drama; the duo themselves were incredibly prolific, writing eight musicals together over their careers, five of which were outstanding successes—*Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *The Sound of Music* (1959), (Purdum). While there were many musical theatre writers and works, the Rodgers and Hammerstein canon were critically and commercially popular in their time, as well enduring classics of the medium.

The 1945 musical, *Carousel*, was an adaptation of an Hungarian play, *Liliom*, the setting changed to a New England fishing town in the late 1800's, following the romance of a Billy Bigelow, a carnival barker, and Julie Jordan, a millworker, their first meeting necessitating both of them losing their jobs, (*Carousel*). The musical is functionally a cathartic tragedy; domestic abuser Billy kills himself to avoid being jailed for an attempted robbery to financially support a pregnant Julie, and consequently, Julie and her daughter grow up initially as outcasts, eventually being accepted by their town, (*Carousel*). Much like *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* is very concerned with ideas of community, trading in nostalgic and sentimental ideas of small town America; it was well-received, in part, specifically for its exploration of grief, in a time following the end of World War II and the loss for the American collective, (Tim Carter).

The 1949 musical, *South Pacific*, deals with themes of racial prejudice, following the plot

a spunky American nurse stationed on the idyllic an South Pacific island who falls in love with an French expatriate and plantation owner, finding it difficult to deal with her mixed race children, with the musical having a secondary plot line following a US Lieutenant's romance with a young Tonkinese woman and his deliberation, due to the anticipated social consequences, on whether or not to marry her, (Purdum). The musical is indeed very Orientalist, playing with "exotic" depictions of the isles and their native people; more egregiously, the plot is very American- and Western-centric, in both which characters' perspectives are explored as well as the treatment of the US military as romanticized in experience and righteous in their actions.

The 1951 musical, *The King and I*, set in 1862, depicted an imperialist, white-savior story of an Englishwoman winning the heart of a King Mongkut of Siam (now, Thailand) and enlightening his many, many wives with uniquely Western values of feminism, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

The 1959 musical, *The Sound of Music*, is an enduring and beloved work that shows the life of Maria, a young Austrian postulant, and her journey from the abbey to the becoming the governess, and eventually mother, of the Von Trapp household's seven children, marrying Captain Von Trapp during the Nazis' rise to power and claim to their homeland—a true idyllic, pastoral drama, with the mountains of the Salzburg, Austria as a backdrop, (Bauer).

Most of Rodgers and Hammersteins' works, and all the ones discussed, were critical and commercial successes, setting a precedent for a period of works alike in subject and style, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The Golden Age's musicals featured a *legit* singing and musical sound, almost pseudo-operatic for middle-brow consumption, involved sets, large orchestra, stylized depictions, and period costumes. The aesthetics, along with the subject of small towns and romanticized historical settings, created a language of nostalgia and comfort for

white upper-middle class audiences post-WWII, (Carter). And, from a retrospective gaze on these works, these works are more insidious because they are palatable. The aforementioned five Golden Age musicals are beautiful, complicated works of American drama; they are also—their text, not simply subtext—openly racist, sexist, imperialist, conservative, American-centric, and Western-centric. However, their “classic” aesthetic qualities and their place in the culture sphere results in these works being classic productions that are produced on school and community theatre stages, allowing widespread dissemination of the works and their messages throughout time.

3. The movie musical adaptation: 1950's-1960's

With Golden Age musicals seeing success on New York stages, the 1950's through the 1960's saw the adaptation of many stage musicals into movie musicals. Similar to the reception of many of their stage counterparts, these filmic adaptations were, initially, largely critical and commercial successes, while also broadening the reach of the American musical, (Ellis). While the Broadway stage was fixed to see audiences who could reach them in the handful of Manhattan streets they occupy, filmic musical adaptations functioned as a form of widespread dissemination and democratization for a medium that was comparatively incredibly exclusive. (Regarding foundational knowledge about the business of musicals, filmed adaptations of stage musicals were and are generally released *after* a stage musical has ended its New York run, so that ticket sales for the stage musicals were not negatively affected by audiences seeing the film musical before or instead of the stage.)

Among the filmic adaptations that were well received was *West Side Story* (1957 musical, 1961 film), *Gypsy* (1959 musical, 1962 film), *The Music Man* (1957 musical, 1962 film), and *My*

Fair Lady (1956 musical, 1964 film), (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). Movie musicals are a form of accessibility in allowing for more people to experience the American musical—both Americans around the country, as well as audiences abroad. (Regarding more foundational knowledge about the business of musicals, after Broadway shows ended their run in New York, productions often went abroad to the West End, London’s own Broadway in Piccadilly Circus, London’s own Times Square, or went on national tours to large regional theatres around the United States.) This marked the beginning of the American musical as an export to international audiences.

The Golden Age of musicals did not, in its own time, see a specific end date—although contemporary perspectives consider shows before the 1950’s, “classic”, and after, “contemporary”, for understanding—but the movie musical did see a specific end, in the tradition’s failure, (Ellis). Hollywood’s filmic adaptations of musicals in the late 1960’s, such as *Hello, Dolly!* (1969 film, based on Ernest Lehman’s 1964 Broadway stage musical) and *Camelot* (1967 film, based on Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s 1960 Broadway stage musical), were financial, critical, and commercial failures, (Ellis).

The Hollywood movie musical has become bloated, aesthetically, with stale, inauthentic period costumes and a cheap studio backlot sets; for example, *Camelot* was famously costly, spending million to recreate the fantastical setting of the kingdom in studio sets, and yielded a poor box office, in part, because of the cheap look the faux castles and hills, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). In addition, the careful adaptation, in earlier years, of stage musicals for the screen gave way to creators that depended on the source materials without making use of the medium of film to enhance the work, creating, at best, uninterestingly shot cinematography, and, at worst a visual hindrance to perceiving the story, (Ellis). In subject matter, movie musicals

also failed to keep up with cultural changes, with the fantasy of the idyllic life portrayed in musicals grew old and dated, associated with a previous generation and time. A fair assessment of the death of the Hollywood movie musical would be that actor Julie Andrews kept the industry alive.

In the future, Hollywood's adaptations of musicals would be much more cautious, (Ellis). Based on situations like *Camelot*, filmmakers in contemporary times have increasingly used real-world shooting locations, as opposed to studio sets, to give authenticity to the aesthetics on screen, as well as rising the financial cost of making films, and necessitating safer investments, (Ellis). In the time since, the industry of movie musical adaptations have been less prolific, but more reliably decent—although, one may argue, the majority movie musicals have been unsuccessful works of art and narrative. These issues with movie musicals were largely reflected in Broadway stage musicals as well, along with *legit*, classical-sung style musicals following out of popular favor, and the music style largely following out of favor for the rest of the history of musical theatre. The 1960's showed the failure of nostalgia in new Golden Age musicals and the end of the "classic" musical.

4. Stephen Sondheim and Hal Prince: 1960's–1970's (and onward)

By contrast to the Golden Age's decline during the 1960's was the breakout of composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, along with his collaborator, often director and producer, Hal Prince. Stephen Sondheim was the protégée of lyricist-dramatist Oscar Hammerstein II, of Rodgers and Hammerstein renown, himself, who was a mentor and father-figure to a young Sondheim, (American Academy of Achievement). Notable works of Sondheim's from the 1960's and 1970's include *Company* (1970) and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*

(1979).

In contrast to previous musicals, which offered idyllic escapist fantasies to upper-middle class Manhattan audiences, Sondheim's *Company* portrayed complex and complicated lives of upper-middle class people living in Manhattan (*Company*). *Company* was one of the first musicals to discuss and portray contemporary adult themes and relationships; as Sondheim spoke of the work, "These people really want to escape that world when they go to the theatre, and then here we are with *Company* talking about how we're going to bring it right back in their faces," (American Academy of Achievement).

Similarly, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, was the first horror musical of its stature, and with such critical and commercial success, (Brown). The musical tells an unconventional story, of murderous revenge and cannibalism, about a barber in Victorian London, who returns to the city after fifteen years of unjust imprisonment, to find that the Judge who sent him to jail had raped Sweeney's wife, driving her to consume arsenic, and take his now fifteen-year-old daughter as his ward, whom he is now casting a similarly lustful eye towards, (*Sweeney Todd*). *Sweeney Todd* adapted Christopher Bond's play of the same name, itself adapted from a Victorian penny-dreadful tale, but gave the title character—traditionally characterized with simplistic, devil is motives—an emotional and psychological depth, as a humanized victim, that was unprecedented for musicals. The music of *Sweeney Todd* is similarly complex, borrowing horror and suspense conventions from the scores of Alfred Hitchcock's movies, written by Bernard Herrmann, and using complex characterization through musical leitmotifs and Brechtian choruses; his score for *Sweeney* is his most operatic (Manning). Sondheim's works have always been critical successes, and his works throughout the 20th century all commercial successes, (Brown).

Sondheim's efforts and works as composer and lyricist in the 1960's and onward incited a change to the function of musical theatre as a relationship between the stage and the audience. In comparison to previous works that graced the Broadway stage, and empirically, Sondheim's works did not offer comfort or nostalgia, but sought to challenge the audience. He effectively reinvented the Broadway musical, his shows dealing with "unexpected themes that range far beyond the traditional subjects typically explored by American musicals," (American Academy of Achievement).

Sondheim's works functioning interestingly in the larger context of the Broadway musical scene in New York; a prolific writer, his musicals have consistently existed alongside the more commercial, popular, and mainstream works since his breakout in the 1960's, and his and his works' presence in the New York theatre scene functions as a constant reminder of challenges to the dominant conceptions and styles of musical theatre, (Brantley). For example, *Company*, specifically draws attention to the audience who is attending the performance, creating a meta-awareness of narrative and characters as it unfolds on stage. Meanwhile, regarding *Sweeney Todd*, it is important to note the contributions of collaborator and director, Hal Prince, in the original 1979 production, (Sondheim.com). While Sondheim imagined a complex, dark psychological exploration of his protagonist, Prince imagined the story set against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, where the title character's accomplice, Ms. Lovett's, meat pies made of Sweeney's victims become an explicit analogy for economies that consume human lives and labor, and where the stage becomes "part cathedral, part factory, part prison", demonstrating how society is churning out Sweeneys in its labors, (Brown). This musical operates with an anti-capitalist subtext that symbolizes the function of Sondheim's works in the larger New York musical scene; his works were the darlings of critics, but rarely survived long on their stages

before closing, (Brantley).

5. Rock musicals and social themes: 1960-1980's

Alongside the rise of Sondheim and the decline of the Golden Age, Broadway saw the advent of rock musicals and their reflection of contemporary social and political themes and issues.

The 1967 musical *Hair* was the first rock musical on Broadway, expanding the definition of what an American musical aesthetically sounds like. Part of the changes in music during this time was changes in technology; the *legit*, classical sound of older musicals was borrowed from operas and older forms of American music dramas, both of which were entirely acoustic performances, for which classical singing allowed for the loudest sound to fill an auditorium, (Jones). With microphones increasingly being used in live theatrical performance, rock musicals reflect a technological change that allowed for the rock-style of singing. The advent of rock music on Broadway also reflected the introduction of youth culture in the 1960's on Broadway; the changing form and music of musicals functioned in reaching new audiences and reflecting new widespread realities of audiences and societies, (Jones). The "rock musical" has remained an elusive term, with few but most notable rock musicals in the time since having the title, including *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), *Dreamgirls* (1981), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982); musically, *Hair's* legacy has been introducing alternatives to the traditional orchestral scoring of musical, in the name of popular forms of music, including pop, and eventually rap and hip hop, that accompany new stories and new audiences, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical (1967) was a rock musical that depicted reflections on hippie counterculture and the sexual revolution of the 1960's, (Masterworks

Broadway). The musical caused much controversy and comment for its depiction of anti-Vietnam War sentiment, irreverence for the American flag, profanity, the first onstage nudity in Broadway history, and treatment of drugs. The musical was also notable for its integrated cast, with a third of the cast being Black actors, giving way for actors in the industry, (Masterworks Broadway).

That *Hair* reflected the realities of the hippie counterculture movement at large is accurate; the movement's agents itself can be divided into two camps, one that actively fought for the anti-Vietnam War peace movement, for the right of Black Americans in the civil rights movement, and against a neoliberal government, and one that was the face of bohemian, long-haired, hippies preaching sex, drugs, and rock and roll; while these two schools of conceptions of the movement are not mutually exclusive in people, the distinction between style and substance is significant for understanding the meaning of the style's use in relation to the meaning of the musical, (Thorne). The advent of youth control in America is important, but *Hair*, as a work, works largely to reflect an average reality of American culture in the 1960's, one that doesn't challenge the show's patrons—which was uniquely comprised of more youth than an average Broadway audience, though still wealthy—in commodifying hippie counterculture for consumption, allowing the free-loving feeling of liberation and “sunshine”, as the musical articulates, while not actively, by its own merit, changing the status quo or social norms, (Masterworks Broadway). However, within the context of an ultra-conservative history of shows on Broadway, and in the context of the other shows playing in the same week the show opened—*Hello, Dolly!*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Funny Girl*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, which quite literally features a song titled “Tradition”—*Hair* was revolutionary in moving the norm of Broadway to be more social progressivism, (Mondello). Therefore, *Hair*, the single most

progressive musical in Broadway history, represents and initiates a phenomenon of Broadway in contemporary history of representing a facade of progress without doing the work for it and still claiming it.

6. The megamusical: 1980's

Following the introduction of popular forms of music to the Broadway stage, the 1980's saw the advent of the megamusical, or musical characteristically defined by their emphasis on spectacle, elaborate set pieces, and the "epic" quality that they operate on, giving reverence and nobility to excitement, (Kenrick). Notable megamusicals include Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats* (1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) and Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil's *Les Misérables* (1985) and *Miss Saigon* (1989).

Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* is a story centered around Christine Daae, beautiful operatic soprano singing in the year 1881, and the mysterious, dark, misfigured, and tortured figure, genius composer and architect, that resides beneath the Paris Opera House, (*The Phantom of the Opera*). *Les Misérables*, adapted from Victor Hugo's novel of the same name, follows the life of peasant and eventual business owner Jean Valjean in revolutionary France, among young revolutionaries in the June Rebellion, (*Les Misérables*). *Miss Saigon* depicts a modern-day *Madame Butterfly*, the romance between an American G.I. and a seventeen-year-old Vietnamese orphaned recently and trafficked into working in a brothel, (*Miss Saigon*). Each musical also features a large set piece that defines the spectacle, the chandelier in *Phantom*, the barricade in *Les Mis*, and the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*.

The megamusicals of the 1980's are notable in their music for their incorporation of pop music sounds and conventions into the scores; however, at the same time, they are largely

sung-through musicals that feature little-to-no spoken dialogue. The megamusicals also operate largely with the language of sheer emotionality—*Phantom* operates on desire, deliberations on lust and love, *Les Mis* on vague notions of “revolution”, social justice, and the demanding of humanity for the downtrodden, and *Miss Saigon* on the tragedy of the protagonist and the emotional value of her sacrifice, (Ellis). Therefore, for their sheer emotionality and sung-through structure, these megamusicals are often considered “popular operas” or “pop operas”, a final achievement of “the American opera”, (Jones). The musical and narrative language of these works often lended credence to vaguely progressive values—the acceptance of the Other in *Phantom*, the championing of the poor and the young in an indifferent age in *Les Mis*, and the cultural exchange and understanding reportedly in *Miss Saigon* (Ellis). However, these musicals do not actively make any specific statements, allowing for the socially progressive to champion a representative musical and the socially conservative to dismiss it as melodrama.

An important figure amidst the age of the Broadway megamusical is the British theatrical producer, Cameron Mackintosh. A visionary in the world of theatrical producer, Cameron Mackintosh was the sole producer of each of the four aforementioned musicals, pulling enormous feats like creating the longest running shows on both West End (*Les Mis*) and Broadway (*Phantom*), and the largest advanced ticket sales in theatre history for *Miss Saigon*, (*Music Theatre International*). Mackintosh was also influential in building connections between London’s West and New York’s Broadway, and in making musical theatre a cultural export from America through the numerous and highly successful international tours of the aforementioned megamusicals, (*Music Theatre International*). In terms of Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power in global politics, power can be understood as either hard—military or economic—or soft—political or cultural, (Nye). As an export, American musical theatre works to bolster

America's soft power on the international stage, exporting images of American exceptionalism. This exporting of American socio-political conceptions becomes nebulous in cases like *Miss Saigon*, an imperialist and American exceptionalist work that depicts a Vietnamese woman killing herself so that her son can get a *better* life with his American father and his wife, that has reached stages as far as the east-most borders of Asia in the 2018 International Tour.

7. Corporate consolidation: 1990's-2000's

The 1990's through the 2000's saw the phenomenon of corporate consolidation in New York theatre; where individual theatrical ventures became risky as business moves, larger entities, groups of individual backers operating as corporate entities, or otherwise literal corporations, became the most frequent producer of Broadway musicals. During this period, one can see various forms of "safe investment"-type musicals, including the success of Disney Theatrical Productions, jukebox musicals, and palatable revolution musicals.

The 1990's saw the introduction of Disney Theatrical Production (DTP), the flagship stageplay and musical production company of The Walt Disney Studios, to the Broadway landscape. DTP adapted The Walt Disney Studios' animated films, specifically many of the most popular ones from the Disney Renaissance era, a period when the studio produced many critically and commercially successful films that transformed the company to an animation powerhouse, into stage musicals, (Playbill). Starting with *Beauty and the Beast* in 1994, DTP went on to put on stage musicals of *The Lion King* (1997), *The Little Mermaid* (2008), *Aladdin* (2011), and *Frozen* (2018), (Playbill). The productions of DTP have largely been incredibly commercially successful, with the Broadway production, *The Lion King*, for example grossing \$1.6 billion dollars since it opened, (Playbill). DTP has been a large player in transforming the

business of Broadway musicals into even more of a tourist attraction, as expressed by Stephen Sondheim:

“You have two kinds of shows on Broadway – revivals and the same kind of musicals over and over again, all spectacles. You get your tickets for *The Lion King* a year in advance, and essentially a family... pass on to their children the idea that that's what the theater is – a spectacular musical you see once a year, a stage version of a movie. It has nothing to do with theater at all. It has to do with seeing what is familiar. ... I don't think the theatre will die per se, but it's never going to be what it was....It's a tourist attraction.”
(Clum).

Another strain of corporatism in the art was the advent of jukebox musicals on Broadway. Jukebox musicals are musicals that adapt existing songs into a narrative, (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). These musicals usually took the songs of popular groups or artists, those that are time-tested and proven as financially successful properties, and turned into musicals into either original narratives, like ABBA's songs in *Mamma Mia!* (1999), or into biographical musicals about the artists themselves like *Jersey Boys* (2005), (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

In a different vein, what one many call “palatable revolution” musicals showed the influence of social progressivism on American musical theatre, demanding the message of change and social justice within the confines of the capitalist system. The outcome was musicals that spoke to progressive ideals but did not actively challenge the audience's political conceptions or worldview. For example, Jonathan Larson's *RENT* (1996) was a modern-day adaptation of Puccini's opera *La bohème*, following a group of bohemian artists—a filmmaker, a singer, a singer-songwriter, a percussionist, and a dancer (*RENT*)—in their struggle between

pursuing their art and “selling out” to pay rent, set during the AIDS epidemic, (Ellis). The musical’s narrative dissonance is widely apparent, but the musical’s narrative of middle-class “artists”, who have stable jobs, families, and homes, selling out conflicts greatly in message with the narrative of lower-class queer individuals who have AIDS, who have been failed by their government and society, (Ellis). It uses the rhetoric of “revolution” without depicting or inciting any, merely reassuring the values and world view of a sect of the theatregoing population, (Ellis).

Similarly, *Spring Awakening* (2006) portrays a story of tumultuous discovery of adolescent sexuality, touching on subjects and themes of youth suicide, sexual assault, the lack of comprehensive sex education, and abortion, (*Spring Awakening*). *Spring Awakening* arguably is able to work more effectively as a rhetorical work to change minds than *RENT*; however, the work concludes after musical’s tragedy on the note of renewal with a finale number, “The Song of Purple Summer”, that reassures the audience that the new and younger generation will be unlike the tragedies of the past with more open-minded thinking and an informed public, (*Spring Awakening*). Per Boal’s theory of bourgeois theatre, this explicitly placates the audience against committing change by showing the resolution of the societal conflict as inevitable, a reassuring comfort.

8. The internet and social themes: 2010’s

The 2010’s saw the widespread presence of musicals on the internet. Most notably, the bootleg found widespread dissemination through the digital medium and communications. Bootlegs are video recordings of performances taken by audience members; they are illegal, as they violate the rights to the production for the creators of the shows, and it involves filming actors without their consent, (Steele). Still, the widespread dissemination of bootlegs became very popular and created internet communities over the subject of musicals, (Steele). In a way,

bootlegs represent a democratization of the stage musical, while also showing tensions with populist desires and the exclusivity of stage, especially Broadway, musicals. In general, the only way to be able to watch musicals is by purchasing tickets to shows or by watching professionally shot musical recordings (commonly called “pro-shots”) that have been legally distributed; both of these can be inaccessible in terms of geography, travel, monetary requirements, and time. Bootlegs, on the other hand, exist for free on the internet, and therefore have been one of the dominant forms of the widespread understanding of musicals; for example, I have cited them multiple times as research so far for this paper. (The popularity of streaming services as means to listen to the cast recordings of musicals also plays a part.) They must be seen as a valid source of popular knowledge, if not a morally or legally supported one.

The internet has also seen interesting phenomena in how raising awareness of musicals emphasizes their inaccessibility. Social media presences for Broadway musicals, as well as national and international tours, have functioned as a way for productions to get national and international awareness to gather ticket sales in a world who entertainment is increasingly turning digital, (Zara); however, these social media presences can also function to let people know of what they cannot reach. Individuals that live in a different part of the country or without the financial means to spend hundreds of dollars on tickets may have the impetus to see a musical without the means; this creates a market need that is satisfied with bootlegs.

However, social media presences have also allowed for theatre to gather a great audience in an increasingly digital world, such as in the case of the musical *Beetlejuice*. The 2018 stage musical adaptation of the 1988 film of the same name, *Beetlejuice* had gathered a substantial social media following by the time it announced, in December 2019, that the show would be ending its Broadway run earlier than its intended end date, June 2020, due to low ticket sales,

(Steele). However, the hashtag, #SaveBeetlejuice, began circulating on TikTok, a platform that already displayed and disseminated a lot of content spreading awareness of the musical, (Dickinson). As a result, the show announced that it would be fulfilling its intended run time and rent contract of the Winter Garden Theatre through June 2020, (Passy). (Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the show ultimately held its final performance on Wednesday, March 11, 2020.) However, *Beetlejuice*'s presence on social media, not by its own marketing team but by the efforts of its fans, extended the life of the show on a Broadway stage. The show can be notable for its younger, Gen Z audience that found the title character, who is “sexually fluid and aggressively horny, with an anti-establishment streak a mile long”, and the heroine, Lydia, “a cynical teenage girl with a steampunk-inspired wardrobe whose approach toward the living world and its relentlessly clueless, middle-aged inhabitants could easily be summarized as ‘OK, boomer.’”, appealing, (Dickson). There exist tensions between theatre and the increasingly digital world, but the contemporary youth population’s enthusiasm on social media platforms has been proven to be able to show business results in the physical and financial world.

Contemporary musicals have reflected an increasingly diverse set of social issues, and have been praised for doing so, including the discussion of mental health and youth suicide in *Dear Evan Hansen* (2015) and domestic abuse in *Waitress* (2016); however, these musicals, now more than ever, can be seen as reflections of what an American filmgoing audiences will now largely accept, less as works of social progress, but a reflection of the society’s social progress, (Encyclopædia Britannica).

9. Popular film adaptations and Hadestown: Today

The modern day Broadway landscape features an interesting combination of phenomenon

from the past couple decades. A new trend has been the adaptation of popular films into stage musicals, including *Mean Girls* (2017), *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* (2017), *Frozen* (2017), and *Moulin Rouge!* (2019), (The Hollywood Reporter Staff). An interesting phenomenon has been the divergence in critical and commercial success, where all the four aforementioned musicals were all commercially successful, as well as nominated for Best Musical in their respective years' Tony Awards, (The Hollywood Reporter Staff). The Antoinette Perry Award for Excellence in Broadway Theatre, or more colloquially referred to as the Tony Awards, recognizes excellence in Broadway Theatre, and the biggest award of the night, similar to the Academy Awards, is Best Musical, (Tony Award).

As a case study, the contenders for Best Musical in the 72nd Tony Awards, which were held in June 2018, were: *The Band's Visit*, *Frozen*, *Mean Girls*, and *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the latter three which are adaptations of popular film/television properties, (The Hollywood Reporter Staff). *The Band's Visit*, set in 1996, is a story of a band of Egyptian players who get lost due to a misunderstanding involving accents on the way to their performance and end up in, instead of the central city of Petah Tikvah in Israel, the deserted town of Bet Hatikva, where they meet the residents and stay with them with a day while arranging transportation; the musical play depicts the cultural understanding achieved between the two groups with historical conflicts through the common language of music, (*The Band's Visit*). The musical is a truly humanistic story and makes roads in representing Middle-Eastern actors, audiences, and stories.

Similarly, the following year's Tony Awards winner for Best Musical was *Hadestown*, an anti-capitalist reimagining of the Greek myths of Orpheus and Eurydice and of Persephone and Hades, reimagining Hades' underworld as an industrial factory and his character as a Trumpian one, singing a song, "Why We Build the Wall", a truly prophesying song written in 2006,

(*Hadestown*). Recent critical considerations have differed greatly from that which commercial endeavors have put on. The tension between works with championed ideas and works that have the marketability to last long and generate a great revenue only increases on the Broadway stage.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the history of American musical theatre, specifically on the dominant stages of the art, on Broadway, one can identify a paradigm shift from works that serve the white upper-middle to upper class audiences to works that purport messages of social progressivism while continuing to perpetuate the status quo and serving the white upper-middle to upper class audiences.

The largest tension observed has been that between corporate interests in creating high-revenue consumable works of art and public social changes that necessitate progressive enough messages to appear to promote social reform while not threatening the status-quo reality that benefits the wealthy audiences. The enduring popularity of Disney Theatrical Production and the growing popularity of its precedent in creating a family-friendly fare based on already familiar properties shows the dominance of corporate interests on Broadway. An interesting case is that of the aforementioned 2018 musical, *Hadestown*. The experience of watching *Hadestown* in the Walter Kerr Theatre encompasses the dissonance. The musical was originally envisioned as a small show performed in small nontraditional venues in Vermont; the show found larger and larger stages and now: one views the tragic and moving love story on the Walter Kerr stage that functions with a strongly and explicitly anti-capitalist and environmentalist message. Then, exiting the theatre, one sees the merchandise with the show's logo being sold, and steps out onto a street with a large LED sign of the show's logo, a street that lets out in Times Square, an

American tourist attraction composed entirely of marketing advertisements—such is the experience of Broadway's *Hadestown*, and the function of progressivism in American musical theatre, (*Hadestown*).

American musical theatre also functions, as American culture, as an international export, transferring the corporate confinement of Broadway, the limiting social messages, to locals around the world. The international popularity of the American musical, in London's West End, as well, speaks to the function of the musical in global politics to bolster America's soft power.

Additionally, the case of the failure of social progressivism in the American musical demonstrates how America does not have an appetite for political works; to compare America to another country, France, the political works of each country's respective 1960's hippie counterculture movement, for one, receive romanticized, sanitized enduring depictions in America, à la *Hair*, and continually new depictions of France's May 68 cultural revolution and its relevance and sincere importance, (*Paillard*).

The greatest embodiment of the current function of social progressivism as seen in contemporary American musical theatre is Lin Manuel Miranda's 2015 musical and juggernaut, *Hamilton*. *Hamilton* is a multicultural hip hop and rap musical on the life of founding father Alexander Hamilton, (*Hamilton*). The musical has been notable for being one of the first musicals to feature hip hop and rap musical, and definitely the first to achieve popularity of its kind, and for its multicultural casting of white American historical figures, demonstrating, through casting, the immense contributions of people of color to the American experiment, in its founding and till today(*Hamilton*), . However, *Hamilton* is also a story that is very reassuring about the history and current reality of American, effective prompting a perspective of American exceptionalism; despite the meaning imbued in its casting, its progressive casting allows for the

strictly conservative message of the musical—the musical itself barely passes the Bechdel test, to give a sense of how the musical handles one of the lowest bars of modern progressive issues—to achieve the reputation of a progressive one. The casting becomes insidious in how it allows for the message to reach farther in audience and circulation of the work. In fact, *Hamilton* functions as a very meta-theatrical experience, drawing attention to the function of theatre and performance itself in its finale number, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”, (*Hamilton*). *Hamilton*’s single-most expensive tickets in Broadway and theatre history, (Lawrence), and the majority white audience proves who tells stories—those with power, those who rule, and in this capitalist, those with money: the wealthy.

Ultimately, Broadway musicals reflect tensions between social progress and capital within American society. The Broadway stage will only be as progressive as its wealthy patrons will allow it, and until American society, culture, and social and political sphere are not entirely dependent on the dollar, on capital itself, the American musical theatre will not be a work of social progressivism.

THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

While, social progressivism seems near impossible in the medium of the Broadway musical, bound to the physical real-estate of New York theatres, the coronavirus pandemic, having closed theatres for the foreseeable future, has shown the possibilities of the internet and its democratization in creating new musicals. A very interesting case of internet musical theatre happenings has been *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*. The platform of TikTok showed an unprecedented collaboration amongst users to write, compose, choreograph, block, stage direct, and design costumes, sets, and lighting for a musical adaptation of Pixar’s 2007 film *Ratatouille*

during fall of 2020, (Salaky). The musical will be seeing a one-night performance on January 1, 2021, that will be streamed virtually, that Seaview Productions is giving the “Broadway treatment” for the benefit concert to support The Actors Fund, (TodayTix). While Broadway’s streets may remain stagnant, the internet proves an arena where musical theatre can adapt to new, accessible forms of watching and producing works; while subject to the forms of xenophobia, discrimination, and capitalism that exist on the internet, the digital stage may be a viable prospect for the future of a progressive American musical theatre.

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