

Trapped (But Happy)

Why Broadway Today Can't Innovate Like Broadway Yesterday
And Why It Matters

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Honors Senior Thesis
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June 2017

Acknowledgements

To Dr. Rachel Shteir for teaching me how to write a thesis.

To Alan Salzenstein.

To Natalie Herman.

To Marcie McVay and Nancy Grossman.

To the Belluccia clan: Mom, Dad, Natalie and Anthony.

To the risk takers of the great American musical.

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Introduction

Trying to divide the American musical into distinct periods is challenging. Most everyone can agree that the first period should be called the Golden Age. This age deserves its honor as the most innovative and inspiring period of musical theatre. The Golden Age begins with *Oklahoma!* in 1943 and ends with *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1964.

The second age is less agreed upon. I have named it the Silver Age. It starts with *Hair* in 1968 and ends with *Rent* in 1996. In both of these eras the musical saw great artistic change. Artists of the Golden and Silver Age musical ignited this change of the musical form in response to shifts in American culture.

But now there is a third age. I am not sure that this age deserves a name—especially one linked to a precious metal—but for the purpose of clarity, I will call it the Tin Age. The Tin Age begins with *The Producers* and is continuing today through *Hamilton*.

The difference between today's age compared to the first two is that the artistic reinvention of the first two ages will never come. To understand why, I am going back to the first two phases to look for trends: artistic, cultural and otherwise. Let this paper be something like the dream ballet from *Oklahoma!*, a flashback to what was and a question of what might be.

Though *Oklahoma!* marks the inception of the American musical that is recognizable today, musical theatre as an art form by no means begins in the 1940s. Its vibrant history dates back to the early 1900s. It flourished with vaudeville acts, the Ziegfeld Follies, minstrel shows and musical revues. These theatrical events illuminated New York as the Prohibition era formed a distinct culture of New York theatre. Following the stock market crash in 1929 the flashy, fabulous shows audiences enjoyed seemed inappropriate and financially unrealistic. Artists

looked to the musical as a form to communicate their national concerns—political, economic, or otherwise. Musical books became more refined and political satire sharpened.

Fast forward to 1943. The composing team of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II synthesized the new artistic discoveries and thematic elements of the prior two decades with *Oklahoma!*: the birth of the Golden Age and the birth of the American musical. Uniquely American and acutely in tune with the nation's deepest fears, hopes and tragedies, *Oklahoma!* established a norm and purpose for an artistic medium notorious for escape and laughs.

The American musical in its most complete form is a distinct form of theatre combining intimacy and escape through themes of national identity to both entertain and encourage a criticism of a collective-self. With a unique ability to capture the glittery hopes and dreams and the grim realities of American livelihood, the American musical at its prime reveals and exploits an American people. This paradox, which began with *Oklahoma!*, becomes stronger through new artistic interpretations of the musical form.

Thus, the American musical evolves alongside a nation: when the nation meets trouble or concern, the musical acts as a medium for discussion, critique or education. These three pillars of the American musical (national self-awareness, artistic reinvention and symbiotic evolution) guide the form through the end of the twentieth century producing shows of both commercial and critical merit.

The next reinvention occurred after a period of stagnancy in the early 1960s. By the mid-1960s the Golden Age ended and artists found a new way to communicate American themes in the Silver Age. The free-loving, anti-war musical *Hair* began the new era. The Silver Age

entertained through themes of politics, revolt and was almost always critical of the flaws of the human condition.

Unlike the Golden Age, the Silver Age did not promise a happy ending. Its book and libretto replaced heavy narratives with dark concepts. Silver Age musicals used Brechtian devices like distancing, audience address, alienation and episodic structure. Sexuality communicated critical American themes—this differed from the Golden Age’s gentle lessons of morality and promotion of patriotism. *Rent* concluded the Silver Age in 1996.

In 2001 the Tin Age began with *The Producers*. A musical remake of the 1968 Mel Brooks film, *The Producers* gave the industry new guidelines for success—that is *economic* success. The star casting of Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick and the re-introduction of Golden Age dramatic structure gave permission to future producers to copy its methods. This continued through the first decade of the 21st century, with remarkably few artistic triumphs. I blame the Tin Age’s unfortunate artistic fate in part on the corporate reign on Broadway, the British Invasion of the 1980s and 1990s, and economic shifts in the industry.

Probably the most famous show of the Tin Age is *Hamilton*. Often said to have revived if not revolutionized Broadway, *Hamilton*’s success is a phenomena. *Hamilton* received unfathomable critical acclaim, broke box office records and broadened the musical’s appeal to an entirely new type of audience. Most importantly, it considers American themes in as powerful a way as the great musicals of the first two eras. *Hamilton* is not, however, an artistic success by the standard of the Golden or Silver Age. In the case of *The Producers*, *Hamilton*, and most every successful musical of the Tin Age, a conscious neglect of artistic reinvention implies that this era is comfortable with artistic-repeats rather than change.

Though writers of musicals today express a recognition of cultural and political events in the same way as years past, their books and musical form have resorted to the comfortable blueprint left behind by the Golden Age. So, the vast majority of musicals today exist as a medium for pure entertainment, without substance. Yes, the American musical has always valued entertainment at its purest form, but it also demands a reflection of something real and important, which many musicals do not even attempt today. Furthermore, at its highest form, the authentic American musical innovates artistically. Today's focus on entertainment before meaning creates a vacuum of artistic innovation that will remain until the next era, if ever it comes.

Pre-Historic Age: The Jazz Age and The Depression

In the 1920s musicals were big, flashy and pure fun. Vaudeville flourished, musical revues attracted thousands, and theatregoers looked to Broadway for their nights out. What better place than Times Square in the Jazz Age? The 1927-1928 season saw the highest number of Broadway shows in history, with 264 openings.¹ The musical revue (a show tied together by a series of unrelated songs rather than a single plot) became a popular favorite among audiences: “their flash, color, topicality, and brazenness caught the spirit of the age, and they had their conveniences too, unlike later musical comedies, you could miss the first act and it wouldn't make any difference.”² One review of *Lady Be Good*, a popular musical of the 1920s wrote cheekily, “Let ‘em go, I say. Why worry with plots?”³

1. Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor, *Broadway: the American Musical* (New York: Applause, 2010), 69.

2. *Ibid*, 76.

3. Alan Jay Lerner, *The Musical Theatre: A Celebration* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986).

The emphasis on music, unburdened by an overarching theme or story, attracted the best songwriters of the Jazz Age to the Broadway stages.⁴ The most popular composers, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin, looked to Broadway as a place for artistic expression.

Shifts of cultural norms in 1920s America also prompted changes in the musical. During the 1920s Broadway represented the American melting pot. Immigrants and minorities found work and succeeded in the grungy and new form of popular entertainment. Jews carved out a special place on Broadway too as actors and composers. Shows like *Show Boat* expanded the type of content and representation acceptable on Broadway. So began the formation of a more legitimate and all-encompassing American art form.⁵

In the 1930s, the Great Depression hit Broadway. From 1930 to 1940, New York saw a 50% drop of new musicals than the Jazz Age.⁶ Two different types of musicals, revues and a new type of political satire, competed for audiences' favor in the Depression era.⁷ Though the number of musicals decreased, writers recognized—often through stereotyped characters and rudimentary stories—that musical theatre could serve as a form of political communication.⁸

The Great Depression created a shared national desperation that inspired the decade's artistic expression and content. Audiences flocked to the New York stages to escape and observe; “out of this adversity came an extraordinary decade of artistic growth for the Broadway

4. Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor, *Broadway: the American Musical* (New York: Applause, 2010), 76.

5. *Ibid.* 82-86.

6. Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 57.

7. Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor, *Broadway: the American Musical* (New York: Applause, 2010), 131.

8. *Ibid.*

musical, which, next to the daily newspaper, became the most vibrant and incisive indicator of what was going on in America.”⁹

In 1931 Water Kern’s *Of Thee I Sing*, a satire about political parties dueling over changing the national anthem, won a Pulitzer Prize for its smart and sophisticated critique of a nasty political system.¹⁰ In 1935, George Gershwin’s racially aware *Porgy and Bess* placed a national commentary inside a more refined narrative. It combined opera and theatre, in a snapshot of African-American life in New Orleans. For the first time Broadway audiences saw African-Americans as developed characters rather than tropes or comedic relief.¹¹ John Mason Brown of the New York Evening Post in 1935 called *Porgy and Bess* “The most American opera that has yet to be seen or heard.”¹²

Perhaps the more influential artistic movement in the Golden Age’s development came from Broadway’s straight plays. Eugene O’Neill and Clifford Odets represented a realistic portrait of American life. Their work—naturalist and political—put no filter on the reality of struggles of the 1930s.¹³ The everyday man found his place on the Broadway stages.

Meanwhile Kurt Weil and Bertold Brecht introduced different types of artistic changes to Broadway, especially with their musical play, *The Threepenny Opera*. They incorporated music as a distancing effect, turned the Aristotelian drama on its head, and sharply communicated social concerns. These devices would return again in the Silver Age musical.¹⁴

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid, 139-141.

11. Ibid, 150.

12. Ibid, 152.

13. Anton-Pacheco, Ana, "WORDS LIKE WEAPONS: THE AMERICAN POLITICAL THEATRE OF THE 1930's," *Atlantis* 4, no. 1/2 (1982): 21-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054473>.

14. Ethan Mordden, *Sing for your Supper: the Broadway Musical in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Each significant work made available a new artistic device for the Golden Age musical to utilize. The book musical of the 1940s would combine political awareness, music as a narrative, strong libretto and the need for the escapism within a new form. A synthesis of each of these elements came together to create a single show that changed the musical for good.

The Golden Age and the War

Enter Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, who, with the help of choreographer Agnes de Mille, pieced together each successful artistic element of the past two decades to conceive the fullest version of the American musical. Rodgers and Hammerstein, on the tails of *Porgy and Bess* and *Of Thee I Sing* wrote a commentary of 1940s American life with a captivating book, every-day characters, and dance as a storytelling device.

If the Depression acted as the catalyst for Broadway as medium for political and social satire in the 1930s, World War II was the impetus for significant change in the 1940s musical. The war made mass entertainment a necessity. During the war, musical entertainment did not overly criticize American life, but captured it, without hiding the good or evil. In the 1940s “conflict, fear, prosperity and patriotism” became “continuities” of the American people.¹⁵ This awareness of the national climate gave musical theatre relevancy and poignancy that it had not known before. *Oklahoma*’s music and lyrics fused with libretto to form an artistic product supplemented, rather than distracted by, choreography.

15. Foertsch, Jacqueline, *American culture in the 1940s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 2. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=343572>.

The Artistry of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*

Each time I see the closing tableau of *South Pacific*, I feel the slightest bit unsettled and unfulfilled, with equal parts hurt and hope for the romantic pair. It has taken Nellie seven scenes to overcome her racial prejudices and return to Emile. In the final scene she reaches across a table and takes his hand before the lights dim and the curtain closes. They do not sing together, just hold hands. At first this seems wrong. Following even Rodgers and Hammerstein's last two successes, *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, *South Pacific*'s unremarkable end suggests that conflict of prejudice and cultural difference between the pair has not completely dissolved.

I cannot help but think of the audience members who sympathize with Nellie's racial prejudice in the same way that the rest of us do with Emile's struggles. Audiences of *South Pacific* should not leave feeling good about what they witnessed, rather to question how much of the actions in the beautiful, almost utopian, Pacific island parallel their own behaviors and lives. Here, the creators commented on the nation's sentiments about race and the difficulty of mending brokenness, if possible.

The immense transformation that Rodgers and Hammerstein's first shows launched (*Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *Carousel*, etc.) might be difficult to comprehend when considering their conservative stories against today's conventions. *Oklahoma!*, for example, which began the Golden Age, follows the quarrels of farmers and cowboys in small town America.¹⁶

Artistic, structural and cultural significance made *Oklahoma!* revolutionary. Before 1943, musicals had yet to incorporate dance as a storytelling device, capture fully developed

16. Tim Carter, *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 11-12.

characters, have determinable books and librettos, or have a complex aware of its national environment. *Oklahoma!* did all of these things first.

Choreographer Agnes De Mille played a large role in each of the above innovations, most notably with the dream ballet that closes Act I—the first of its kind. At the end of Act I Laurey realizes that she loves Curly, not dangerous Jud. Oscar Hammerstein originally wanted de Mille to choreograph a circus number for the closing of Act I to communicate this realization of the female protagonist. De Mille refused this request. “Dreams of anxiety are not like a circus,” she said about Hammerstein’s proposition. Instead she choreographed the “Dream Sequence,” an eerie, frightening diversion.¹⁷ The “Dream Sequence” served as a reminder of the dangers behind even the most innocent situations, leaving the audience in unexpected fear at the closing of Act I.

Oklahoma! also set a new precedent for the musical book and libretto. Based on Lynn Rigg’s 1930 play “Green Grow the Lilacs”, *Oklahoma!* established a template for American musicals to follow. In this new formula, a relatable character is affected by one big dilemma, usually an everyday struggle, which he or she must overcome through the course of the evening. Specific types of songs in specific places aid the protagonist in discovering how to achieve his or her want.¹⁸

This musical formula includes an opening number establishing the rules of the play, next, what is known as an “I want song” lays out the protagonist’s quest and desires, then numerous

17. Agnes De Mille, "Agnes De Mille talks about Oklahoma," interview by Sylvia Fine, YouTube, September 24, 2013, accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iW35nQUZdk4>.

18. Jack Viertel, *Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2017). Though Viertel was the most recent to break down this structure, it has been theorized and discussed for years. Other sources to that comment and break down the Golden Age libretto and song structure are Lehman Engel’s “The American Musical Theatre” and Kim Kowalke’s article “Theorizing the Golden Age Musical: Genre, Structure, Syntax.”

other song conventions: a conditional love song, a mid-act dance number, a villain song, a side plot with a second couple, a star number, an end of Act I extravaganza, an Act II curtain song, the “main event” song, a climactic second to last scene song and a finale, complete the piece. These straightforward song formulas outline a simple driving plot that almost always has strong romantic themes.¹⁹

This easy-to-follow structure created a balance between each of the American musical’s elements. In the case of *Oklahoma!*, and in the case of many well-written American musicals, its book fashions an escape from the fears of the American people through simple themes of good and evil.

Oklahoma! sang of manifest destiny, of ambition, evil and the powers of sex.²⁰ Haunted by the ghost of an earlier America filled with goodness and simplicity, *Oklahoma!* looked at the past with nostalgia, the present with anxieties and the future with hope.²¹ Composer Richard Rodgers said, “If this is what our country looked and sounded like at the turn of the century, perhaps once the war is over we can again return to this kind of buoyant, optimistic life.”²²

Agnes de Mille realized the tragic Americanness of the piece, in contrast to Rodger’s patriotic optimism. She recalls watching soldiers who would come home during the war and see the show. Often the house reserved the first three orchestra rows for GI-men. De Mille remembers how the end of the show brought the service men to tears: “It symbolized home and what they were going to die for.”²³ This was the awareness, cynicism and tragic beauty that

19. Ibid, vii-viii.

20. Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2010). [Libretto completed in 1942. Lyrics completed in 1943.]

21. Tim Carter, *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 192.

22. Ibid, 198.

23. Agnes De Mille, "Agnes De Mille talks about Oklahoma," interview by Sylvia Fine, YouTube, September 24, 2013, accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iW35nQUZdk4>.

characterized the Golden Age. Aesthetically and emotionally alluring, yet acutely aware of its audiences' intimate worries, *Oklahoma!* introduced a new type of American art.

Though the Rodgers and Hammerstein cannon led the era of new musicals, other artists caught on to the audience's interest in the new popular narrative possibilities and began to incorporate national themes into the musical book formula. From 1943 through 1965 the Golden Age governed the New York stages.²⁴

Another example of the genius Golden Age musical is *South Pacific* (1949). Rodgers and Hammerstein's third collaboration, is, I believe, the most American of all musicals. Its theme of racial prejudice as harmful made *South Pacific* ahead of its time. *South Pacific*'s most shocking song, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" received attention first from the creative team's artistic advisors who claimed it would hurt box office success, and later from Georgia legislators who deemed it un-American due to its acceptance of interracial marriage. David C. Jones of Georgia introduced a bill attempting to outlaw *South Pacific* through a ban on entertainment with "an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow;" he claimed that a song justifying miscegenation directly threatened American life.²⁵

Set just a few years before its 1949 opening on a US Navy base in the Pacific, the show tells the story of two couples forced to overcome racial differences. The plot, loosely inspired by James A. Michener's memoir *Tales of the South Pacific*, took great thematic and artistic risks that, like *Oklahoma!*, questioned America's past, present and future.²⁶

24. Though there is much discrepancy of the end date of the American musical, I have selected this span of 22 years to represent the Golden Age. More on the end of the Golden Age later.

25. Andrea Most, "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*," (*Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3, 2000): 307. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed May 9, 2017).

26. *Ibid.*, 307-337.

Dramaturg, producer and critic Jack Viertel describes its powers, “once seduced into [a] pleasant place, theatregoers belong to the writers who are free to put them to glorious hell.”²⁷ This “glorious hell” is a simple and stunning one; Brooks Atkinson’s opening night review for *The Herald Tribune* called it “a tenderly beautiful idyll of genuine people.”²⁸ *South Pacific* used a utopian representation of humanity to establish trust. Nellie’s innocence and Emile’s charm make falling for them easy. After the charming characters gain audiences’ trust, themes of “war, racial prejudice, sexual obsession, pandering terrible economic disparity, and human disaster” somehow creep through the story.²⁹ At the height of these threats, Nellie decides she cannot marry Emile after learning of his two Polynesian children:

Nellie: It means that I can't marry you. Do you understand? I can't marry you.

Emile: Nellie—Because of my children?

Nellie: Not because of your children. They're sweet.

Emile: It is their Polynesian mother then—their mother and I.

Nellie: . . . Yes. I can't help it. It isn't as if I could give you a good reason. There is no reason. This is emotional. This is something that is born in me.³⁰

The Golden Age book formula mandates that Nellie and Emile are together. But in *South Pacific* instead of a villain getting in the way, it is her prejudices that prevent her from being with whom she loves.

When conflicts between Nellie and Emile dissolve, the story ends—not with a dramatic closing number like *Oklahoma!* but with Nellie’s uneventful reach across a table to Emile.³¹

Preventing the audience to escape into a grand, emotional state, the ending suggests a difficulty

27. Jack Viertel, *Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built* (Place of publication not identified: Sarah Crichton Books, 2017), 30.

28. Alan Jay Lerner, *The Musical Theatre: A Celebration* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 172-173.

29. Jack Viertel, *Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built* (Place of publication not identified: Sarah Crichton Books, 2017), 30.

30. Andrea Most, "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*," (*Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3, 2000): 307-337. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed May 9, 2017).

31. *Ibid.*

of the time. Golden Age musicals during the war succeeded with equal parts hopefulness and sadness. These years established the unique ability of the American musical to comment on its nation with both sincerity and authority.

The 1950s, *Fiddler on the Roof* and The End of an Era

The year after *South Pacific*, *Guys and Dolls* opened. The structurally strong musical about lovable gamblers, brought back the bigness and humor of the 1920s to the American musical.³² *Guys and Dolls* kicked off the 1950s as “one extended season” that began “splendiferously.”³³ The most important piece of the decade, *West Side Story* (1957) epitomized the Golden Age trend of mixing national commentary with beautiful storytelling. Brooks Atkinson wrote of the final product, “Pooling imagination and virtuosity [the creators] have written a profoundly moving show that is as ugly as the city jungles and also pathetic, tender and forgiving.”³⁴

The first hint of the Golden Age’s end came in 1960 with the death of Oscar Hammerstein II. Though *Gypsy* (1959), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1962) and *Funny Girl* (1964) opened in the early 1960s to successful runs and Golden Age glitz and prominence, they were the last of their kind. *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1964 closed the era with a final farewell to its traditions and triumphs.

Fiddler on the Roof, is both hardly American and totally American at the same time.

Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick who wrote the lyrics and music and Joseph Stein who wrote the

32. Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor, *Broadway: the American Musical* (New York: Applause, 2010), 244.

33. Alan Jay Lerner, *The Musical Theatre: A Celebration* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 178.

34. Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: The Jungles of the City," *New York Times*, September 27, 1957, accessed April 30, 2017.

libretto made up the creative team. Jerome Robbins, however, one of Broadway's first great director-choreographers would hold responsibility for most of its success. The Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the post-World War II decline of antisemitism, allowed *Fiddler on the Roof* to accomplish much of what *Oklahoma!* did by capturing greater American ideologies within a simple story.

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, a Jewish father copes with his daughters' growing up and tries to understand the Tsar's eviction of Jews from Imperial Russia.³⁵ Just like Tevye, 1964 America held on to their traditions. Both uncomfortable with cultural change and terrified of political and social changes, America needed this purifying, sad and hopeful musical. It reminded audiences of the inevitability of change, the consequences of actions, and the importance of appreciating the good in times of difficulty.

The play ends where it begins: an empty stage and a fiddler on a roof. The start of the show welcomes the audience by creating Anatevka, and at the end, the village is empty again, evacuated and no longer inhabited. The fiddler is still there, following Tevya off the stage reminding him to bring tradition with him everywhere he goes³⁶.

Representing a Jewish story on a Broadway stage also made *Fiddler on the Roof* a totally American event. Jewish artists and audiences dominated Broadway in the Golden Age making up near 70% of the audience population in 1957.³⁷ Composers especially used the musical form as a means to discover their own Jewish-American identity and reflect upon assimilation as a significant part of American culture. As minorities and pursuers of the American dream, Jewish

35. Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, *Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2014).

36. Ethan Mordden, *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s* (New York: Palgrave for St. Martin's Press, 2002), 149.

37. Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Picador, 2014).

artists, throughout the musical's history, interpreted American life as it was, wasn't and should be. The results assisted with the formation of the musical's unique critical abilities. In her book "Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical" Andrea Most says, "The process of imagining America on the musical stage is [...] indistinguishable from the story of America itself."³⁸ Most refers to the artistic interpretations of what America might be (and never will be) by minority artists.

From Irving Berlin to Rodgers and Hammerstein to the Gershwin brothers, the language and sounds of early Broadway musicals came from Jewish-American perspectives. They created their best work during the three decades of "depression, war and societal upheaval" by imagining a better America through song, dance and social criticism.³⁹ By the mid-1960s, however, the population on Broadway had shifted. Most discusses how the British influence and the shift of musical style of the 1970s marked "the end of American-Jewish dominance of the form." *Fiddler on the Roof*, she claims, as one of the first and only true Jewish stories on Broadway, marked the finality of this great influence.⁴⁰

Nostalgic about the past and anxious about the future, Broadway bid farewell to an age of simple honesty and a little bit of glitz to welcome something darker and more risqué in its second age. Just like for Tevya, the traditions of the American musical, and their significance for the American people, would not go away in the Silver Age, rather changed into something new.

38. Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-2.

39. *Ibid*, 197.

40. *Ibid*, 196.

An Aside on Commercial and Artistic Success in the Golden Age

The ability for musicals to have both commercial success and an overwhelming social consciousness would be lost by the Tin Age. But in the Golden Age, each of the musicals I have included are doubly able to reflect upon American realities and innovate artistically. These components work symbiotically for the American musical. They receive artistic validity because of their thematic elements and they communicate themes more strongly because of their artistic strengths. They do so through risk and a dedication to the artistic product rather than the monetary results.

Each of the above shows succeeded both commercially and artistically. *Oklahoma!* was the longest running musical for fifteen years,⁴¹ *South Pacific* broke advance sales records,⁴² *West Side Story* returned over 1,521% of its original investment,⁴³ and *Fiddler on the Roof*, was the longest running musical for almost ten years.⁴⁴ And, each had something important to say, whether a nostalgic patriotism, racial commentary or a question of a changing future.

Yet, Broadway's artistic conventions became predictable. America itself had changed, prompting the need for a reinvention of the musical. It was now the late 1960s. The fears and uncertainties of the 1965 season had amplified. War, generational differences and political distrust and anxieties occupied the minds of the American people. Musicals like *Hello Dolly* and *Mame* could no longer address the needs of the American audience. The three-act format with an

41. Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2010), xiii. [Intro by Bert Fink]

42. Alan Jay Lerner, *The Musical Theatre: A Celebration* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 172.

43. Harold Prince, "Broadway Needs Producers, Not Just Investors," *American Theatre Magazine*, January 06, 2017, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/10/25/broadway-needs-producers-not-just-investors/>.

44. The Broadway League, "Fiddler on the Roof," IBDB: Internet Broadway Database, accessed May 04, 2017, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/fiddler-on-the-roof-3213>.

eleven o'clock number and dance break right before intermission was "too formulaic." As critic Tom Prideaux of *Life Magazine* wrote, "The novelty of *Oklahoma!* had worn off."⁴⁵ So Broadway reacted. And *Hair* came along.

Hair and The Silver Age

Sex, drugs, nudity, anti-establishment, rock 'n roll... there weren't many boundaries *Hair* didn't break when it opened in 1968 at the Biltmore Theater. Gerome Ragni and James Rado, two newcomers to Broadway, composed and conceived the show that Joseph Papp first produced as The Public Theater's first production.⁴⁶

Hair disregarded the Golden Age's dedication to the plot heavy book that producers expected. Instead of following the formulaic plot points of the Golden Age, which most audiences now considered conservative, *Hair* refused the "integrated musical."⁴⁷ This rejection furthered its themes of free love, anti-war, open sexuality, religion and anti-establishment. The book wanders aimlessly with the wandering lives of young people rebelling against authority and resisting the draft.⁴⁸ It was risqué. The set was "a totem pole" and "a crucifix tree."⁴⁹

One of the things that changed from the Golden Age was that music from the Silver Age's musicals did not drive popular music tastes. Popular music now influenced Broadway. Rock 'n roll, the sound of the youth, filled the Biltmore theatre eight nights a week in the first

45. Barbara Lee Horn, *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991), 11.

46. Ibid, 33. Both Rado and Ragni would be featured performers in *Hair* too: Rado as Claude and Ragni as Berger.

47. Ibid, 14.

48. Gerome Ragni and James Rado, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 390, accessed April 5, 2017,

<https://stuff.mit.edu/afs/athena/course/21/21m.704/www/mitonly/Libretti/hairlibretto.pdf>.

49. Ibid. 389

ever rock musical. Through the next two decades, more and more musicals drew influences from popular music from rock to disco to soul.

Critics either loved or hated *Hair*. Golden Age orchestrator and composer Lehman Engel wrote irritated about its lack of artistic validity:

Hair throbs and excited like a parade—any parade: circus, Labor Day, Nazi, St. Patrick’s Day, or any other. It is noisier than any parade. It is less disciplined. It is not a theater piece, neither ‘show’ nor revue. Plotless, humorless, self-conscious ... *Hair* is a *thing* and it attempts to destroy what is, without a care.⁵⁰

But Clive Barnes, typically regarded as a conservative critic, called *Hair* “The first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday.”⁵¹

Much like *Oklahoma!*, *Hair* provided an escape through a new form that brought audiences closer to their fears in a comfortable way. The heart of the piece came out through an ensemble of exuberant yet lonely youth who, in songs like “I Got No,” “Easy to Be Hard” and “Three Five Zero Zero,” reveal their smallness against the causes they think they stand for. The most notable moment of this insignificance is the final moment of the piece. The ensemble sings “Let the Sun Shine In.” The tribe dances off the stage, on with their lives while Claude—whose resistance to the draft the story followed—is left behind, lying on the stage, killed by the war.⁵²

This was the Silver Age: no filter, no happy endings and no more musical comedies. Wistful and hopeful endings like *South Pacific*’s no longer had a place on Broadway. Similarly,

50. Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 220.

51. Jerome Ragani and James Rando, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), 390, accessed April 5, 2017,

<https://stuff.mit.edu/afs/athena/course/21/21m.704/www/mitonly/Libretti/hairlibretto.pdf>. 381

52. Ibid.

topics like racial prejudice no longer needed a filter like *South Pacific* did. In *Hair*, for example, race is spoken about explicitly in “Colored Spade,” “Dead End,” and “Black Boys/White Boys.”⁵³

Musicals of the Silver Age focused on concept before plot. This isn’t to suggest that Silver Age musicals never had plots, rather that the plot came secondary to the big picture. (i.e. *Hair* isn’t about Claude. It is about the community, the war, the generation. If you, the audience member, forget about Claude’s personal dilemma, *Hair* has succeeded).

This Silver Age trend became known as the concept musical: “a show in which linear plot is abandoned or downgraded in favor of vignettes; [becoming] a multiple perspective on a subject, like cubist painting or sculpture,” as defined by Musicologist Stephen Banfield.⁵⁴ While a more realistic, emotionally sweeping approach worked for the 1940s and 1950s, Americans of the late 1960s had to face domestic anxieties like the draft, a growing distrust for government and the civil rights movement. These cultural shifts made a concept driven, less predictable form of entertainment more desirable. Thus, the concept musical became the second wave of great artistic change in the musical form.

Besides shift in plot and concept, the Silver Age differed from the Golden Age in the roles of dance and music within the story. In the Golden Age, music often paused the story from continuing to capture a particular moment or feeling. In the Silver Age, the music pushed the character forward. Very rarely is a character in the same place at the beginning and the end of a song in the Silver Age (especially in Stephen Sondheim’s works). While the Golden Age’s

53. Ibid.

54. Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 519.

libretto distinguished its narrative, the Silver Age often had no text. Many Silver Age artists wrote operettas or sung through rock-operas in which ensembles (more so than single protagonists) drove the action. Dance in the Silver Age, where it fit with the story, did the opposite. It distracted from the story instead of moving it forward as dance did in the Golden Age. This separation is seen best in the Silver Age's most dance heavy show, *A Chorus Line*.

Whereas Odets and O'Neill influenced the Golden Age, The Silver Age pulled from innovations in drama in the 1960s. Samuel Beckett's characterization, Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, Jerzy Grotowski's interest in psychology and the effect of music, all inspired Silver Age musicals. Each of these theorists strip down theatre to a raw and cynical state. They make the audience as much a player in the action as the performers. *Hair*, for example, invites the audience on stage, addresses them directly and often mocks them.

The creators of *Hair* worked in the Off-Off Broadway circles that drove innovations in experimental theatre. Ragani and Ragni particularly worked with the Open Theatre, which pioneered experimental storytelling through mime and dance.⁵⁵ The concept musical also drew inspiration from Brechtian devices like alienation, character tropes, and breaking the fourth wall. Brechtian influence continued with Bob Fosse and Stephen Sondheim who made Silver Age themes darker and storytelling sharper.

Bob Fosse and Stephen Sondheim

Stephen Sondheim and Bob Fosse's artistic brilliances are not usually compared. Fosse choreographed and directed, bringing nihilism, existentialism and overt sexuality to the stage. Sondheim composes beautiful melodies, witty lyrics and philosophical ponderings. But they

55. Barbara Lee Horn, *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991), 16-18.

share an artistic sophistication, an ability for cultural critique and an understanding of both psychological and national realities that encompassed the artistry of their era.

If *Hair* broke down the book musical, Stephen Sondheim's *Company* transformed it to create a self-conscious, self-reflective, complex channel for critique.⁵⁶ The songs in *Company*, Sondheim's first big hit as a composer and lyricist, are detached from both character and plot, yet the score has musical intricacies and the characters have hyper-realistic personalities that seem out of place in a piece with such little external action. Each song diverges from the action with complicated narratives, fusing influences from Oscar Hammerstein's storytelling devices with Brecht's distancing devices.⁵⁷

The story of *Company* is simple: Bobby is turning 35 and Bobby is lonely. A series of musical motifs come and go making the monotony of Bobby's days burdensome for himself and the audience. *Company* refined the concept musical.⁵⁸ Unlike revues, concept musicals have a single message to convey. *Company*'s was about marriage, loneliness, and the difficulty of relationships.⁵⁹ About his artistic process, Sondheim said, "one of the things that fascinated me about the challenge of the show was to see if a musical could be done without [a plot]."⁶⁰ So, with the help of Harold Prince he created a series of vignettes tied together "in kaleidoscopic fashion" to comment on the above themes.

56. Robert L. McLaughlin, *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 65.

57. *Ibid*, 68-70.

58. Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 519.

59. *Ibid*, 532.

60. *Ibid*, 531.

Most notably, *Company* has individualistic qualities through collective themes. It offers a realistic and simple representation of being an adult in a nasty world. It puts the New York City elite under a microscope, exposing their problems, psychological complexities and annoyances. This was part of the fun. Clive Barnes' review encourages readers to "Go to a cocktail party before the show, and when you get to the theater you can have masochistic fun in meeting all the lovely, beautiful people you had spent the previous two hours avoiding. You might enjoy it."⁶¹

The characters of the Silver Age, especially in *Company*, lack the zing of those in the Golden Age. They are generally un-charismatic, but a curiosity of their circumstances attracts the audience (in this way, Bobby is similar to Claude, *Hair*'s protagonist). During the Silver Age a dislike of—or even better an indifference towards—the protagonist contributed to the shows artistic cleverness. Audiences of the Silver Age directly watched a critique of their own values and personalities while creators took artistic (and often financial) risk to produce such self-aware and self-critical works.

Distorted narratives accompanied by smart compositions and highly complicated melodies, allowed the Silver Age to have a different effect than the Golden Age. One of the most extraordinary moments in *Company*, for example, comes during "Being Alive," at the end. It is the only time where Sondheim permits a moment of emotional grandeur. His result satisfies the audience but ends the action in a trifling way. For once, the audience does not feel apathy towards Bobby's future as it watches him set his mind on a complete thought. He has both dreaded and wished for marriage through the course of the musical and realizes that his ultimate

61. Clive Barnes, "'Company' Offers a Guide to New York's Marital Jungle," *The New York Times*, April 27, 1970, accessed May 29, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-company.html>.

dissatisfaction with life is simply because he has focused too much on finding something to live for rather than appreciating the act of living itself.

Pain and frustration are primary feelings a person experiences watching a Sondheim show. Bobby's rare moment of vulnerability embodies the concept musical. His realization of the importance of appreciating the boring parts of life and relationships has dissatisfying and philosophical results. Hal Prince says of *Company* that the show's plot points "are sub textual and grow out of subconscious behavior, psychological stresses, inadvertent relations."⁶² "Being Alive" epitomizes this.

At the beginning Bobby shows the distrust for the intimacy of relationships that he has crusaded against since the top of the show. The song's first lines read:

Someone to hold you too close
Someone to hurt you too deep
Someone to sit in your chair
And ruin your sleep
And make you aware of being alive⁶³

By the end of the song Bobby realizes that the intimacy he first distrusted is exactly what makes relationships worthwhile. By the end of the song he begs:

Somebody hold me too close
Somebody force me to care
Somebody make me come through
I'll always be there
As frightened as you of being alive⁶⁴

62. Ibid, 534.

63. Esparza, Raúl. *Company: A Musical Comedy*. By Stephen Sondheim, George Furth, and Lynne Shankel. Nonesuch, 2007.

64. Ibid.

Unlike Nellie in *South Pacific* who needed to overcome prejudice for love, or Tevya who needed a restored understanding of tradition and family, all Bobby needed was to recognize the validity of the everyday.

Company's ability to throw out the noble quest for meaning allowed the American musical to question conventions and norms in a different way. This more cynical approach continued through the rest of the Sondheim cannon (especially in *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods*) and the remainder of the Silver Age.

Bob Fosse had different means of delivering cynicism to his audience. Only he could imagine scantily clad women and jazz hands alongside the lyrics from *Pippin*, “War is strict as Jesus / War it's finer than spring.” His choreographic and directing styles introduced sex as a sophisticated artistic metaphor while amplifying the concept musical with a new type of movement through space. He exhibits uncomfortable shapes of the body that evoke the beautiful and the unnatural, the entertaining and the off-putting. This contradiction exploits his themes. He had the ability to transform eroticism into “an idealized energy that found grace in the grotesque and passion in the perverse” to critique a nation’s ideologies and superficialities⁶⁵.

Pippin (1972) is my favorite Fosse show. Behind the seemingly innocent story of Charlemagne’s son searching for his destiny, lurks commentary on suicide, war, religion, sex, drugs, incest, and even the dangers of show business. In the song “Glory,” Pippin dabbles in war as a possible source of fulfillment, while The Leading Player (the show’s narrator, emcee and ringmaster) sings the lyric at the top to justify the satisfaction of killing. In perhaps the most

65. Jack Kroll, "Curtain Up," *Newsweek* 133, no. 4 (January 25, 1999): 65. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed May 17, 2017).
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-company.html>

Brechtian moment of the Silver Age musical, the distance between the content and the music adds a thrilling eeriness. Joyous music plays and decapitated body parts fly across the stage behind an army of smiling soldiers moving as one. Just as things get weird, a simple, intricate dance begins: “The Manson Trio:” after Charles Manson.

The Leading Player and two women wearing bullet bras made of armor dance “The Manson Trio.” In choreographing it, Fosse wanted to make parallels between the dangers of The Leading Player’s theatrical manipulation and Charles Manson’s cult control while showing the danger of charismatic leadership.⁶⁶ The unraveling of the Watergate Scandal, the end of the Vietnam War, and the string of assassinations that haunted America made this portion of *Pippin* resonate.

Pippin dealt with internal demons too. The show ends with the ensemble asking Pippin to kill himself in one final act that will give meaning in his life. “You mean, you want me to get into that box and set myself on fire?”⁶⁷ Pippin asks. To which the ensemble only smiles and walks closer to him. When he refuses, choosing a self-described un-extraordinary life of marriage instead, the ensemble turns to the audience, inviting them onstage to partake in their final act. When all else fails the Leading Player strips the stage, and turns on the house lights. In the final lines of the play he asks Pippin:

The Leading Player: Do you feel that you’ve compromised?

Pippin: No.

The Leading Player: Do you feel like a coward?

Pippin: No.

The Leading Player: Well, then, how do you feel?⁶⁸

66. Rob Weinert-Kendt, "Diane Paulus brings her magic to Pippin," Time Out New York, March 25, 2013, accessed May 27, 2017, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/diane-paulus-brings-her-magic-to-pippin>.

67. I can't help but think that Artaud's line "I call for actors burning at the stakes, laughing at the flames" from his book *The Theatre and Its Double* inspired this ending.

68. Sam Wasson, *Fosse*, Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2014, 321.

Fosse and composer Stephen Schwartz had conflicting ideas about Pippin's response to the Leading Player. Schwartz wanted the next line, "Trapped, but happy. Which isn't too bad for the end of a musical comedy." Fosse insisted on just "Trapped. Which isn't too bad for the end of a musical comedy," suggesting an unending dissatisfaction with everything we accept as good.⁶⁹ Fosse, regardless of his notorious stubbornness, lost the battle to Schwartz. The final version of the ending included "but happy," which suggested Pippin's satisfaction with his given circumstances.

Fosse saw the musical comedy as an art form with an obligation to address the malice of the world because like Pippin, artists and audiences turn to entertainment as an escape only to return home at the end of the night to emptiness and purposelessness.⁷⁰

What They Did For Love: *A Chorus Line*

While most Silver Age musicals openly critiqued American ideals, *A Chorus Line* (1975) criticized the musical itself. It reversed the stereotype of the musical as innocent and rousing. *A Chorus Line* depicts putting on a show as a manipulative, strenuous and often vulgar process. Then, it celebrates this vulgarity.⁷¹ *A Chorus Line* was the Silver Age's twisted version of the "let's put on a show" musical of the Golden Age (i.e. *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Kiss Me Kate*).

Transferring from The Public Theater, where Joseph Papp produced, and Michael Bennett directed and choreographed, *A Chorus Line* was met with great critical and commercial

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid, 322.

71. Michael Bennett, Nicholas Dante, and Elyria Productions, Inc., *A Chorus Line* (New York: Tams Witmark Music Library).

success. Its inception took place with a series of workshops, the first ever of their kind. Dancers gathered at late hours of the night to share personal stories about working in the industry. They shared “their motives for pursuing careers that were so highly competitive, short-lived, self-effacing, low paying, and fraught with physical and emotional risk.”⁷² Bennett taped and compiled their stories into the musical. Marvin Hamlisch added music.

Instead of a single protagonist, *A Chorus Line* zoomed in on the lives of seventeen chorus dancers auditioning for a show. It broke sales records, ran fifteen years and critics loved it—it gave a popular and financial boost for grim Times Square of the 1970s.

Its plot exposed the monotonies of auditioning and the hopeful togetherness necessary for a dancer in the city. “All this torture they had to go through, to get a job, to be on Broadway [was] to be in an assembly line,” says choreographer Graciela Daniele on the cynicism of Michael Bennett’s *A Chorus Line*.⁷³ The show succeeded because it exposed an important dichotomy of theatre switching back and forth between reality and illusion, hiding from and exposing. Each number built up this tension and desperation. By the end, the audience received what they came for: a beautiful line of dancers in perfect synchronization. Behind the line danced tortured artists desperate for the chance to be seen. Yet their desired result was anonymity: a unified line of chorus dancers, each indistinguishable from the next.⁷⁴

A Chorus Line celebrates and condemns the entertainment industry and the audiences who indulge in it. Though its uses of realism drew influence from trends off-Broadway and the European avant-garde, its placement on the commercial Broadway stage allowed *A Chorus Line*

72. Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 588.

73. *Broadway: The American Musical*, prod. 13 WNET Films and Ghostlight Films (PBS, 2004).

74. *Ibid.*

to comment on the imperfections of the musical itself. Audiences who took guilty pleasure in the pretty escape of musical theatre saw the realities and broken souls of the shows' process and creators. The relatability of that exact brokenness drew audiences in night after night.

Myths About The Silver Age

I have found a critical gap on accepting the 1970s and 1980s as a period of great artistic risk taking and reinvention in the musical. Though most critics and historians regard the contributions of Sondheim, Fosse, *Hair* and *A Chorus Line* as successful, rarely are they grouped together as an advancement of the form. On the contrary, historians discuss Broadway in the 1970s as a dull—possibly even the dullest—moment in musical theatre history.⁷⁵

I believe that these years produced some of the strongest pieces of musical theatre in Broadway's history. This section debunks myths about the Silver Age's lack of collective artistry and looks for reasons they might have come about.

One of the more commonly held beliefs about the Silver Age is that it ruined the Golden Age musical. Or that *Oklahoma!* discovered the correct way to create a musical and every successful musical after utilized its template. This theory views *Hair* and *A Chorus Line* as exceptions, and concept musicals receive praise for style rather than an advancement of the form.⁷⁶ Therefore, this argument demotes the Silver Age to a period of artistic inferiority, a non-age. Those who subscribe to this category consider the Silver Age plotless concept musical to deviate from the musical's true form or artistic storytelling purpose. At the start of the Silver Age

75. Viertel, Jack. "Chicago Humanities Festival." From Hairspray to Hamilton, Venue SIX10, Feinberg Theater, Chicago, November 12, 2016.

76. Ibid.

orchestrator and theorist Lehman Engel wrote, “We have been jolted into many things that do not and will not fit into the musical theater.” He argues that Silver Age musicals lack characterization and narrative, distinct traits to the performing arts.⁷⁷

The recession, the state of Times Square and the dismal box office grosses of the Silver Age also contribute to historians overlooking the musical as a thriving form. And yet, this era produced some of the most socially aware and artistically advancing musicals of Broadway’s history.

This oversight might be blamed on Silver Age musicals that did not value spectacle, resulting in low box office grosses. (Even though the probability of economic failure and the decline of audiences encouraged risks.) Another layer to the backstage complications was the swindling of money by top producers. Beginning in the mid-1960s top producers and general managers began to resell tickets at higher prices and pocket the difference (modern day ticket scalping at its most sophisticated form). Shows could make millions but neither the creatives nor the theatres saw any amount. A legal investigator of these actions said, “The quarters came so fast, who thought about where all those quarters went? Broadway’s a casino, New York City’s very own Las Vegas.”⁷⁸

Also by the early 1980s, alternative outlets for entertainment gained popularity and Times Square became “seedier and seedier.”⁷⁹ An unpleasant New York that provided an opportunity for creators to take risks, inspired dark shows that could reflect a shared time and

77. Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 222.

78. Michael Riedel, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2016), 2.

79. *Ibid.*, 12. [Here Riedel quotes state investigator David Clurman.]

place. The tapering out of the Silver Age made the 1980s even grimmer for Broadway. In 1982 fifteen out of Broadway's thirty-nine houses stood empty, attendance dropped, and twelve out of thirteen musicals flopped.⁸⁰ Producers and critics became anxious about the long-term effects of this lack of interest in the musical form and the downfall of Times Square. Had the Silver Age killed the musical forever? Could a musical ever have equal popular and artistic success as it did in the Golden Age?

A Transition: The British Invasion, Disney and AIDS

The next twenty years gave Broadway the answers to those questions: The economic dip *was* temporary. The musical *would be* a popular form. Works that are both artistically innovative and popular, however, *will* be of the past.

These realizations came by way of a slow death of The Silver Age and the helping hand of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber. With recognition of the hum-drum economic system in the 1980s European composers saw New York theatre as a free-pass to produce their new work. Beginning in 1970 with *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the first hint of Lloyd Webber's eventual reign, and continuing with *Cats* in 1983, European creators found a special niche in Broadway—the bigger the better.⁸¹ These “mega-musicals” guaranteed success: The format combined that of the Golden Age book with an emotional pull, spectacle at its most spectacular, and a completely sung-through score.

80 Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg, *The Broadway musical: collaboration in commerce and art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 35-36.

81. Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1-7.

In a study on Broadway's economics, Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg, cultural journalist and the director of the Musical Theatre Foundation, respectively, write of the British mega-musical: "The form is plastic. It has the earmarks of a winner."⁸² The mega-musical filled a void with their heavy narratives and big sets. (Minimalist sets and small casts no longer had their appeal). The superfluity of mega-musicals, however, embraced everything that the Silver Age worked so hard to get rid of. These large, undemanding escapes promised financial success to producers. Because empty theaters and unhelpful critics waited for any sort of financial potential, producers and presenters jumped on the mega-musical band wagon. In 1988, by the time *The Phantom of the Opera* opened (Lloyd Webber's fourth musical following *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Cats* and *Evita*) the climate in New York had completely transformed.

Lloyd Webber brought back the worst qualities of the elaborate flashy musicals of the Golden Age. By 1988 *The Phantom of the Opera* weakened the Silver Age's already dull shimmer. Broadway's British invasion soon had wiped away all traces of the concept musical's unique storytelling powers. Lloyd Webber's stake meant that for the first time, the most successful musicals on Broadway—once the most glorious forum for stories of American fears and aspirations—were not American. They had grandeur and emotion, but they did not have the tenderness and unique blend of sincerity, guilt, and awareness of "today" that both the Golden Age and Silver Age musicals had.

Before I discuss *The Producers* as the first musical of the Tin Age, a few words on Broadway between 1989 and 2001 are necessary. These twelve years saw a Broadway in flux. Much like the transition years between the Golden and Silver Ages, the transition years between

82. Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg, *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 62.

the Silver and Tin Age produced a combination of mega-musicals and concept musicals. The 1990s had no real identity. In its period of rapid transformation, one final Silver Age musical astounded audiences and reminded Broadway of its artistic and thematic potential.

Rent was Broadway's reaction to AIDS in America: tragic, emotional and reminiscent of the Silver Age's pessimistic yet hopeful national commentary.⁸³ Its sadness about the nation's best and worst qualities hid a hint of optimism. In "La Vie Boheme" the ensemble jokingly toasts the end of Bohemia and a generation: "To Sontag, To Sondheim, to anything taboo," they sing. Years of taboos risks, overt sexuality and the keen artistic knowledge were gone. *Rent*, like all great American musicals, presented an awareness of the past and future. Its young characters forfeited hopes for the future while feeling trapped by consequences of the past. Forced to live each day as it comes they sing, "No other path, No other way, No day but today."⁸⁴

The immense audience popularity and artistic storytelling devices that *Rent* used echoed those of *Hair*. Even Ben Brantley's New York Times review, entitled "Rock Opera A "la Boheme" and "Hair,"" compared the two at length: "Like [*Hair*'s] meandering, genial portrait of draft-dodging hippies, this production gives a pulsing, unexpectedly catchy voice to one generation's confusion [and] pleasure-seeking vitality."⁸⁵ For a brief moment, Broadway remembered the Silver Age's distinctiveness, making *Rent* not only the most significant artistic triumph of the 1990s but also the perfect bookend to the Silver Age.

The second great contributor to the current Broadway scene—Disney Theatricals—flew in like *Mary Poppins* over the audience of the New Amsterdam Theater. In 1994 Disney opened

83. *Broadway: The American Musical*, prod. 13 WNET Films and Ghostlight Films (PBS, 2004).

84. *Rent: 20th Anniversary Tour*, by Johnathan Larson, dir. Evan Ensign, Oriental Theatre, Chicago, May 9, 2017.

85. Ben Brantley, "Rock Opera A la 'Boheme' And 'Hair'" *The New York Times*, February 13, 1996, accessed June 03, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/14/theater/theater-review-rock-opera-a-la-boheme-and-hair.html>.

Beauty and the Beast, its first attempt at a fully realized stage musical. By the opening of *The Lion King* in 1998 they had officially claimed their stake on Broadway. Since then, Disney has held a unique and peculiar position in New York theatre. In many ways Disney is synonymous with American life; it represents the American Dream and the escape to a different world that many good musicals succeed at capturing. Conversely, its position in the entertainment industry (theme parks, films, even its branding) is synthetic. Disney represents a version of what America will never be instead an acknowledgement of what America is. The American musical, historically has always served as an escape, but it also criticizes and questions norms to exploit fears. This connection to truth is what makes it American.

The worst thing about the Disney franchise is its inability to artistically innovate thematically or structurally. Disney displaces stories from animated film to stage attempting to please and deliver the expected. Removing the artistry of the creation of a musical, Disney musicals create a product as close to the original animated film as possible. This allows ample opportunity for innovations in design and aesthetic, which Disney has quickly become a front runner in, but in terms of risks in storytelling, narrative or themes, Disney remains safe, relying too heavily on aesthetics and “Disney magic” to cover up conventions of form.

In a study about Disney’s effect on Times Square, scholar Steve Nelson likens its popular success to vaudeville shows of the 1920s and Lloyd Webber. “Many who fear [...] Disney’s money forget the opulent production values of the classic 1920s revues.” He continues, “Despite prevailing attitudes to the contrary, Disney did not bring technical or P.R. overkill to this town any more than Andrew Lloyd Webber.”⁸⁶ Disney Theatricals resorted back to the spectacle

86. Nelson, Steve, "Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square," TDR (1988-) 39, no. 2 (1995): 71-85. doi:10.2307/1146445, 72.

without substance tradition of the 1920s that the British mega-musicals reintroduced fifteen years prior.

Musicals that rely too heavily on spectacle or emotion retreat from enduring themes and deny themselves a true and active purpose. A big budget became the final characteristic of the Disney musical. Coming out of Broadway's most financially desperate time, Disney's big shows/big bucks concept will inspire many of the producers of the 21st century to follow the same formula for success. The three precedents that Disney introduced, (1) pseudo-Americanness, (2) spectacle without substance, and (3) the necessity of a limitless budget became unspoken requirements of a successful Tin Age musical.

The Dawn of the Tin Age

Step One: We find the worst play ever written.

Step Two: We hire the worst director in town.

Step Three: I raise two million dollars [...]

Step Four: We hire the worst actors in New York and open on Broadway.

And before you can say Step Five, we close on Broadway, take our two million and go to Rio.⁸⁷

It was the start of the new millennium and *The Producers* brought camp to the Broadway stages. The goofy *Guys and Dolls*-esque musical comedy joined the trend of big, money-making enterprises. The story about writing a musical for money, proved ironic when the show broke Tony nomination records, hit a first ever \$100 top ticket price, and brought musical comedy magic back to the Broadway stages: show girls and all.

⁸⁷ *The Producers* Original Broadway Cast Recording, (2001), Sony Classical.

The Tin Age had begun and boy how it glimmered. *The Producers* differed from other popular mega-musicals of the time because of its homage to the Broadway community. Conceived by Broadway producers (as opposed to European or corporate moguls), *The Producers* took hints from the successful mega-musicals of the last twelve years and put their own mark on it. The producing team looked similar to what a producing team today might look like—smart and focused on both making profit and pleasing an audience.

The Producers, a love note to Broadway, had no noble purpose or noble characters. Ben Brantley called it a “sublimely ridiculous spectacle.”⁸⁸ In the best way, *The Producers* delivered joke after joke, utilizing every successful musical-comedy convention. *The Producers*, written by Mel Brooks and directed/choreographed by Susan Stroman, continued Disney’s trend of adapting already popular films to fit the rules and popular appeal of a Golden Age book musical.

The Producers reminded Broadway how much financial promise celebrities brought a show. Though *The Producers* broke records at the Tony Awards⁸⁹, when Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick left the cast, the show began to lose its appeal. Box office sales fell 20% within a year of Broderick and Lane’s departure. By September of 2003 *The Producers* played to an average of 61% capacity, compared to its consistent 100% at the time of their opening.⁹⁰ By 2007, the once biggest competitors to *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Cats* closed.⁹¹

Just as Broadway began to become financially successful again, a national tragedy hit. This time the tragedy was on American soil, right on the island of Manhattan. Here, The Tin Age

88. Ben Brantley, "A Scam That'll Knock 'Em Dead," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2001, , accessed May 21, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/20/movies/theater-review-a-scam-that-ll-knock-em-dead.html>.

89. Kenneth Jones, "Broadway Record-Breaker The Producers Closes April 22," *Playbill News*, April 22, 2007.

90. Jesse Mckinley, "The Producers'; The Case Of The Shrinking Blockbuster," *The New York Times*, November 01, 2003, accessed June 03, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/theater/theater-the-producers-the-case-of-the-shrinking-blockbuster.html>.

91. Kenneth Jones, "Broadway Record-Breaker The Producers Closes April 22," *Playbill News*, April 22, 2007.

would become reminiscent of the Golden Age when the war prompted a wistful patriotism. Broadway would react for similar patriotic purposes but with different artistic responses and audience results.

Escape in the American Musical After 9-11

In a statement following September 11, 2001, New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani asked that three establishments reopen by September 13: the New York Stock Exchange, City Hall and all of the Broadway theatres.

Anthony P. Coles, a deputy for Giuliani's said, "We thought it was an important symbol. We wanted to send the message we were open for business." Giuliani wanted Broadway to represent New York prosperity and remain strong. So the City of New York bought 50,000 theatre tickets at a sum total of \$2.5 million and invested an additional \$1 million as a campaign to promote the Broadway community in the days of mourning.

By September 13, shows had reopened. By September 14, the League of American Theatres and Producers began a series of meetings to get Broadway back on its feet, and by September 28 actors from every show on Broadway gathered in costume to sing "New York, New York" for the first of a sequence of television commercials. The commercials ran in twenty countries and made the Broadway musical a symbol of American pride, victory and togetherness.⁹²

92. Robin Pogrebin, "How Broadway Bounced Back After 9/11; But Downtown Theater Lacked the Right Ties," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2002, , accessed May 21, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/22/theater/how-broadway-bounced-back-after-9-11-but-downtown-theater-lacked-the-right-ties.html>.

Audiences too looked to Broadway after 9-11. The expected response for ticket sales to decrease after the tragedy proved wrong. Attendance spiked back to normal within a month. By May 2002, Broadway box office broke records. Most catastrophes in American history see a decreased audience and a blow to a number of shows produced.⁹³ Then comes a handful of powerful and self-reflective musicals: the greater the issue to grapple with, the greater the artistic and storytelling response. After 9-11, however, the audience gravitated towards shows that allowed a total escape from fears.

While Americans mourned, Broadway became one of the few desired mediums for escape. Musicals with little substance that valued laughs over intellect and blockbusters like *Wicked*, *Hairspray* and *Spamalot* greeted audiences season after season in the early 2000s.

The terrorist attacks on 9-11 preceded political and economic events that characterized the national climate of the third era of the American musical, the Tin Age. I am not arguing that the recession of 2008, the Iraqi war, Trump's election, etc., equal the political and social events in the late 1940s or late 1960s. The weight and national effect, though, are similar, as is the push toward escape in the arts.

However, I am not seeing any artistic or thematic reactions to serious events of today's era that parallel those of the Golden Age. For example, the financial crisis of 2008 effected Broadway very little; it would have been taboo for the Iraqi war to be addressed in musicals; and I do not anticipate the American musical to be the artistic medium that asks any serious political questions in the age of Trump. Not all crises result in great musical theatre but history suggests that the musical has a responsibility to—at the very least—comment on its nation. But the Tin

93.The Broadway League, "Playbill Vault." Playbill, Accessed May 05, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/vault>.

Age musical does not respond to the nation's thoughts in the same way as the Golden Age. Serious content is too much of a box office risk.

“Original” Tin Age Musicals (aka The Selfie Musicals)

Harvey Fierstein in drag bursting out of a bottle of hairspray, Idina Menzel flying and singing some high notes, and a whole lot of “Disney magic” dominate the musical's stages in the Tin Age. The content echoes that of the 1920s and 1930s when artistic quality did not matter and audiences attended the theatre to enjoy themselves. Broadway today is great fun—don't get me wrong, I love a contemporary musical comedy. The problem exists not so much in its entertainment value but in its mimicry of books and artistic conventions of the past, with little attempt to reflect on anything of value.

Among the most important reductive interpretations of the Golden Age book musical are: the mega-musical, (which has already been discussed), the jukebox musical, the Broadway appreciation musical and the personal identity musical. I will discuss the remaining three types from least to most creative.

The jukebox musical, the second repurposing of the Golden Age book, features already popular songs inside a recognizable narrative template. Creators of jukebox musicals purchase the song rights from audience-favorite artists like ABBA, Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, Gloria Estefan or most recently Britney Spears,⁹⁴ to compile them into a show with varying levels of entertainment value. Jack Viertel, who assisted with the creation of *Smokey Joe's Café*, one of the first jukebox musicals explained how “recognizable music has an economic value—

94. Coming to Broadway in 2018!

it's an insurance policy for musicals."⁹⁵ From an economic and pure entertainment standpoint, the concept sells. But, like most Tin Age musicals, the jukebox musical does not take artistic risks nor does it discuss any themes of substance.

Next is "The Broadway Appreciation Musical," my phrase for a genre that leans so heavily on conventions, and references to musicals of the past that it has no room for taking risks (these types are everywhere once you begin to look). Shows like *Hairspray*, *The Book of Mormon*, *Spamalot* and *Something Rotten* exemplify this type of show in the next two decades.

Often a more vulgar version of the classic musical, Broadway appreciation musicals look to classic musical comedies for inspiration. They epitomize escape. Ben Brantley's review of *The Producers*, the first of its kind, calls it, "A big Broadway book musical that is so ecstatically drunk on its powers to entertain that it leaves you delirious, too."⁹⁶ These shows often include jokes about musicals and follow the Golden Age book formula religiously. The *Producers* "I Want Song," is called "I Wanna Be a Producer."

Broadway appreciation musicals come from the minds of huge Broadway nerds. In an interview, the creators of *The Book of Mormon*, Matt Stone and Trey Parker discuss their inspiration from Rodgers and Hammerstein. Stone reveals, "When [the other creators] and I started talking about Mormons, that aesthetic [...] seemed to just fit with musical theatre."⁹⁷ Instead of a genuine need to create art, share a story, or capture a moment of time, creators of the Tin Age look for show topics that best accommodate to the Golden Age book formula. This is

95. Viertel, Jack. "Chicago Humanities Festival." *From Hairspray to Hamilton*, Venue SIX10, Feinberg Theater, Chicago, November 12, 2016.

96. Ben Brantley, "A Scam That'll Knock 'Em Dead," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2001, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/20/movies/theater-review-a-scam-that-ll-knock-em-dead.html>.

97. Stone Matt and Trey Parker, "'Book of Mormon' Trailer," YouTube, May 29, 2015, accessed May 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4-eWO1xu3I>.

the complete opposite of great musicals of the past, whose content dictated the musical's form. Artistic risk in the Golden and Silver Ages came because the themes demanded it of the artists. If they focused first on accommodating to past conventions, Broadway's history would be void of artistic innovation.

The personal identity musical, another term of mine, shares the problems of the other Tin Age musicals, but offers a tiny window of hope. It tackles previously undiscussed internal and psychological themes inside a typically conventional book format. While important in terms of artistry and democracy, personal identity musicals do not result in huge financial successes. They receive critical praise and run a few years but are unable to capture an audience in the same ways as *South Pacific* and are unable to artistically innovate in the ways of Sondheim. Nonetheless, these musicals include the most artistically successful bunch of their era. Meaning, the creators of personal identity musicals take risks in terms of topic and plot while playing with the Golden Age book expectations more creatively than their Tin Age counterparts. Examples of these shows include *Spring Awakening*, *Next to Normal* and *Fun Home*.

Spring Awakening (2006), based on the 1891 German play by the same name, features themes of generational differences, rape, masturbation, and teen suicide. It takes place in the late 19th century but uses a rock opera formula and modern language (something that Rodgers and Hammerstein made popular with their period pieces and *Hamilton* mimicked).⁹⁸ Thematically and stylistically, *Spring Awakening* has strengths, it does not take significant artistic risk.⁹⁹ It instead does what some of the more artistically innovative Tin Age musicals do by combining Golden Age plot points with Silver Age conventions. *Spring Awakening* uses pop music,

98. Sheik, Duncan, and Steven Sater, writers, *Spring Awakening*. Stage Stars Records, 2009.

99. Jack Viertel, *Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built* New York, New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2017), 164-165.

sexuality, dark themes and a strong ensemble within an expected boy-meets-girl coming of age Broadway narrative. Nonetheless, its themes gave *Spring Awakening* prominence and recognition by critics. Its synthesized conventions of the past and present made for a fresh, albeit not groundbreaking show.

One of the nine musicals to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama¹⁰⁰ and an exceptional piece of art, *Next to Normal* (2008) discusses mental illness and death in a nuclear family.¹⁰¹ Though the Silver Age tackled issues from suicide to religion, it largely avoided stories of mental illness. *Next to Normal* succeeded because of its ability to discuss mental illness with authority in a medium that (in the 2000s more than ever) discouraged risky topics. A more democratic representation in *Next to Normal*, and each of these personal identity musicals, became a trademark of the Tin Age.

Even *Next to Normal* (one of my favorites of the Tin Age), follows the Golden Age guidelines. "I Miss the Mountains" is an "I want" song in its purest form.¹⁰² Its incorporation of rock music, though, like *Spring Awakening* suggests a nostalgia for the artistic risks of the Silver Age. *Next to Normal* and *Spring Awakening* proved that today's most thematically advanced shows cannot also be artistic trailblazers, blockbusters, or politically or socially driven in the same ways as the first two eras.

100. "Drama." The Pulitzer Prizes. Accessed May 15, 2017. <http://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/218>. I have found that the Pulitzer Prize winners are generally indicative of artistic or thematic success in the American musical. The full list of Pulitzer Prize musical winners include: *Of Thee I Sing* (1932), *South Pacific* (1950), *Fiorello* (1960), *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* (1962), *A Chorus Line* (1976), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1985), *Rent* (1996), *Next to Normal* (2010), *Hamilton* (2016).

101. Kitt, Tom, and Brian Yorkey, writers. *Next to Normal*. Pocket Songs, 2010, CD.

102. *Next to Normal* deserves extra kudos for being in the small category of completely original musicals. It was not based on a film, book, play or even historical figure. *Hair*, I believe is the only other musical in this study to have that accomplishment.

Like *Spring Awakening* and *Next to Normal*, *Fun Home* (2015) engages with personal rather than collective or national themes. *Fun Home*'s queer woman protagonist, an important first for the Broadway musical, hinted at the possible future of representation on Broadway.¹⁰³ Structurally, a narrator/protagonist tells the story over a span of fifteen plus years using three actresses to portray the main protagonist.¹⁰⁴ Even with its unconventional source material, a graphic novel by Alison Bechdel, it manages to hit Golden Age plot points.

These personal identity musicals suggest that reflecting on a personal identity comes more easily today than reflecting on a collective identity. (This would not be surprising considering millennials are notoriously driven by self.) So, while the smaller personal identity musicals focus on the self, mega-musicals represent Broadway as a symbol for corporate magic, escape and emotion. The consequence of this divide? Even the most thematically sophisticated shows cannot not receive significant box office success. Furthermore, they still use Golden Age conventions.

Then came *Hamilton*.

Hamilton (The Moment You've Been Waiting For)

It is difficult to watch *Hamilton* and not consider American life, culture, and the American Dream. The word "American" is even included in its full promotional title which tacks on "An American Musical" to the now iconic "Hamilton." It is also difficult to watch and not feel like you are a part of an important moment of history: musical theatre history and national history.

103. Ibid.

104 *Fun Home*, by Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron, dir. Sam Gold, Oriental Theatre, Chicago, November 2, 2016.

Hamilton (2015), like the best American musicals, discusses its nation's fears, criticizes its faults and celebrates its beauty. The ability to reflect on American culture characterizes the American musical in its purest form. The line "who lives, who dies, who tells your story," for example, seems needed in today's society. Touching topics of gun violence, immigration, race, politics, and legacy, *Hamilton* exists in the now.¹⁰⁵

Yet *Hamilton*'s adoption of past artistic formulas is exactly what contributes to its popularity. It owes as much to the greats of Rodgers and Hammerstein as it does to *Les Miserables* and the other emotionally driven European mega-musicals. American culture turns to musicals that reflect events thematically and, at its best, through a new artistic form. But while *Hamilton* is in touch with its Americanness, in the same way as *Oklahoma!* or *Hair*, it makes no effort to change the artistic medium, a distinct difference from the greatest socially and politically aware musicals of the Golden and Silver Age. Further, the efforts that critics applaud it for making are repeats of past success.

It is not surprising that Lin Manuel Miranda drew artistic inspirations from classic American musicals like Lerner and Lowe's *Camelot*. *Hamilton* follows the plot-point formula of the Golden Age musical to a T: Hamilton is "not throwing away my shot" in the "I Want Song," King George thinks "you'll be back" in a delicious series of "Villain Songs," and Angelica (and Hamilton) "will never be satisfied" in a heart wrenching "Conditional Love Song."¹⁰⁶

Miranda makes clear the following of this formula in his and Jeremy McCarter's book "Hamilton: An American Revolution, " "My Shot" is, in the lingo of musical theatre, an 'I want'

105 *Hamilton*, By Lin Manuel Miranda, Private Bank Theatre, Chicago, May 10, 2017.

106 Jack Viertel, *Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Built* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2017), 267.

song. [...] Without a song like this, you wouldn't get very far in a musical." Miranda then attributes his influences for "My Shot" to "rappers Tupac Shakur, Mobb Deep, Big Pun, and Notorious B.I.G" and then to *South Pacific*.¹⁰⁷ At first glance, *Hamilton* seems a new, modern musical—perhaps as young and hip as the audiences who love it. Less recognizable is its strict adherence to Golden Age mandates. Once recognized, *South Pacific*'s conventions are as much an influence of *Hamilton* as Tupac's.

Miranda's direct inspiration from mega-musicals might come as more of a shock to musical theatre scholars. Miranda said, "*Les Miserables* was the first [musical] I ever saw and I just remember the effect it had on my parents... and I think that [effect is] probably more responsible for me writing musicals than anything else."¹⁰⁸ He speaks similarly of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

This combination of musical theatre inspirations does not come as a surprise as the story of *Hamilton* captures the honesty of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the often inexplicable emotional grandeur of *Les Miserables*. Its safe dramatic structure, makes the story easy to follow. If *Hamilton* had taken the artistic risks that the Golden and Silver Ages did, it might not have been such a phenomena. *Hamilton* accommodates the mega-musical clichés that Broadway demands and adds political and social awareness—something new for Broadway's Tin Age. This combination made even some of the smartest critics misjudge *Hamilton* as groundbreaking for

107 Jonathan Mandell, "The Very Model of a Modern Major Musical," *American Theatre Magazine*, January 06, 2017, , accessed May 24, 2017, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/09/12/the-very-model-of-a-modern-major-musical/>.

108 "Lin-Manuel Miranda Talks "Hamilton," New York and His Influences," YouTube, December 12, 2015, accessed May 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7YTPuEMgaE>.

the musical theatre. Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review claims in its title that *Hamilton* is "Changing History and Theatre."¹⁰⁹

What strikes me is how many people believe that the Americanness and artistry of *Hamilton* is new. One of the most common reasons for this is *Hamilton*'s incorporation of hip-hop and rap. But historically, music on Broadway changes continuously and naturally.¹¹⁰ Consider the 1920s when the greats of popular music (Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, Kern etc.) composed their best material for the stage; or when ragtime and jazz music infused into the musical, aiding with the creation of Broadway's unique sound in the 1930s; finally, let's not forget what *Hair* did with rock music, how *Spring Awakening* placed pop music alongside a period piece or what Miranda did seven years prior to *Hamilton* with *In the Heights*.¹¹¹

In contrast to the Silver Age which used popular music to innovate the form in a rock opera format, *Hamilton* uses popular music to resort to classical ways of storytelling, much like *Spring Awakening*. In terms of music, the Silver Age trend (most noticeable in *Hair*) of borrowing popular music to strengthen its themes is returned to with *Hamilton*'s incorporation of hip-hop and rap. This choice contributes to *Hamilton*'s appeal and strength, making its themes and narrative cohesive in a way that Broadway might not have seen since *Hair*. In many ways,

109 Ben Brantley, "'Hamilton,' Young Rebels Changing History and Theater," *New York Times*, August 6, 2015, accessed May 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/theater/review-hamilton-young-rebels-changing-history-and-theater.html?_r=0.

110 Danny Hoch, "Sure *Hamilton* is A Game Changer, But Whose Game?," *American Theatre Magazine*, April 23, 2015, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/04/23/sure-hamilton-is-a-game-changer-but-whose-game/>.

111 John McWhorter, "Rap: Broadway's New Jazz?," *American Theatre Magazine*, January 06, 2017, accessed May 24, 2017, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/03/18/rap-broadways-new-jazz/>. See McWhorter's article for more information on the evolution of sound and popular influences on Broadway. He argues that rap will not advance the sound of Broadway as it is vernacular and lacks dynamic emotional capacities needed for a lasting home on musical stages.

Hamilton pieces together things that have worked in the past to create a musical of today, ushering in an intense popularity because today on Broadway, comfort is desirable.

Yet, in many ways *Hamilton* filled a void on Broadway. Written for an audience worried about its nation—a worry that made *Hamilton* all the more relevant after the 2016 election—*Hamilton* became the first real *American* musical since *Rent*. This suggests that *Hamilton*'s most revolutionary component lies in its ability to return American musical theatre to its original purpose of telling American stories—especially ones that appeal to a new, younger or more diverse audience.

So then, is a third change in the musical form really even necessary?

Changes of artistic interpretation in the past two eras asked audiences to think about content in a new way. *Oklahoma!* would not have worked as a revue and *Hair* would not have worked in a standard musical book format. The problem with the popular desire to accept *Hamilton* as the next *Hair* or *Oklahoma!* suggests Broadway has lowered its standards for artistic change or even worse, artistic change no longer has a home in such a commercialized art form.

Money, Money Money: The Non Profit and Commercialization

In addition to the British invasion and corporate producers, the twenty-first century saw a change in how and where theatre is created, funded and demanded. The rise in non-profit theaters re-divided artistic products resulting in lowered expectations for commercial theatre compared to regional theatre.

During the Golden Age, Broadway was the prime source of American theatre. In the Kennedy era, an increase of government attention to the arts resulted in the funding and creation

of regional theatres. The Ford Foundation invested heavily in start-ups, Lyndon B. Johnson signed off on the National Endowment of the Arts and the IRS ruled that arts organizations could accept tax-deductible contributions as not-for-profits. By the early 1980s (the height of the Silver Age) around 1,800 theatres operated in any state.¹¹²

The non-profit business structure released pressure for shows to focus on commercial risks since donors, rather than investors, funded projects and operating costs. So, artistic risks found a new home in regional theatres and Broadway could focus on the commercial end. The non-profit, then, opened the door for serious theatre to exist outside the New York stages, shifting audience's expectations about where they can expect which types of theatre. In a talk by the Executive Director of The Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Roche Schulfer remarked that, because of this change from the mid-1960s to early 1980s, "Broadway is no longer *the* American theatre."¹¹³

But producers began looking to these non-profits as a place to "try-out" their shows. If the show gained enough commercial, critical and investor success it could transfer to Broadway, which has since become an economic bull-pit where budgets, ticket prices and weekly grosses have soared in order to break even, which just one in ten shows do. In the first two ages, writers could work on new musicals constantly. Successful ones could produce something new every year. This is no longer possible. Many brilliant shows simply do not have the commercial value to open on Broadway because so much money is at stake. Hal Prince recalls a conversation he had with Sondheim regarding this:

112 Roche Schulfer and James Annable, "Why Not-For Profit Theater" (lecture, The Goodman Theatre, Chicago, January 25, 2017).

113 Ibid.

Sondheim very sadly said to me when *Assassins* originally opened at Playwrights Horizons, 'Is this it? Am I reduced to writing shows for three instruments for the rest of my life?' That's from Steve Sondheim! I think he's feeling a little sorrier for himself than he should, but it's not an out-of-order question at all. What we need is to fill that gap with regional theaters that can cater to the musical form, be it small or large.¹¹⁴

Prince opens up frequently about his concern that today's musical theatre does not foster creators but investors.¹¹⁵ He believes regional theatres must be the source of innovation for the musical.

Today, common wisdom is that audiences will pay anything for the insurance of receiving something expected and big. Often attributed to Disneyfication,¹¹⁶ Gerald Shoenfeld of the Shubert Organization also played a role in the revitalizing of Times Square. A reaction to the financial schemes endemic on Broadway during the Silver Age prompted his crusade for an environment outside that fit the art inside the theatres. He purchased an open lot for a Marriott hotel (now the most financially successful hotel in the world) and made an agreement with the cities to keep Times Square clean.¹¹⁷ The new Times Square, Disney's increased stake on Broadway, commercialized products, Broadway as a declared symbol of America after 9-11, and the non-profit shift contribute to the problems on Broadway today.

Broadway of the Tin Age is a tickle of tourists' fancies and a jingle in investors' pockets. For artists? Broadway has sacrificed their art in return for economic viability.

114 Bryer, Jackson R., and Richard Allan, Davison, eds, *The Art of the American Musical: Conversations with the Creators*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 169.

115 Harold Prince, "Broadway Needs Producers, Not Just Investors." *American Theatre Magazine*, October 26, 2016, Accessed May 29, 2017. <http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/10/25/broadway-needs-producers-not-just-investors/>. See this transcript from a lecture Prince gave to Broadway Across America on the artistic and economic changes of the American musical: a must read.

116 Wollman, Elizabeth L, "The Economic Development of the "New" Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical," *American Music* 20, no. 4 (2002): 445-65. doi:10.2307/1350153.

117 Michael Riedel, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2016).

A Second Golden Age or Just a Tin Age?

Somehow, regardless of all of these realities, journalists hail Broadway today as “a second Golden Age.” *New York Magazine* lists twenty-eight reasons why Broadway is at the height of a new era. (*Hamilton*, is, unsurprisingly, the first reason, because of its choice in music and ability to attract new audiences.¹¹⁸) *Playbill* attributes the new Golden Age to a sheer increase in popularity, especially its infusion in television and film.¹¹⁹ *TimeOut* looks to box office grosses as the reason for the “new Golden Age.” It continues, “Broadway is, at last starting to sound like America... and will also start to look like America.”¹²⁰

This is half true. Music is at no point of revolution on Broadway. Though *Hamilton* has mastered a utilization of music in a way that works for rather than against its story, I see it as a return to the original powers of music on the Broadway stage. But representation, *TimeOut*'s second point, has begun to look more equal. Shows like *Hamilton* and *Fun Home* open up stories for new audiences, which I hope will become a staple of the Tin Age, as artistic innovation will not be.

An acceptance of artistic mediocrity on the parts of producers and a praise for popularity and commerciality from the audiences characterize the Tin Age. Today might look like a new Golden Age because musicals are on the minds, iPhones and televisions of people across America. Or perhaps this mirage is because the artistic content on stage is a copy and paste of that of the Golden Age. Creators remembered what worked in the past, plopped in audience

118 Jesse Green, "28 Reasons Why New York Theater Is, Improbably, Thriving," *Vulture*, March 08, 2016, accessed May 05, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/03/new-york-theater-new-golden-age.html>.

119 Tepper, Jennifer Ashley. "Are We Living in a New Golden Age of Musical Theatre?" *Playbill*. June 11, 2016. Accessed May 05, 2017. <http://www.playbill.com/article/are-we-living-in-a-new-golden-age-of-musical-theatre>.

120 David Cote, "Could we be in the middle of a golden age on Broadway?," *Time Out New York*, October 1, 2015, accessed May 05, 2017, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/could-we-be-in-the-middle-of-a-golden-age-on-broadway>.

desired themes (from Mormonism to ABBA) and created a good time, but hardly an artistic product.

As a young theatre artist, I am disappointed that Broadway's most popular musicals are popular because they have successfully copied the genius of others. Where are the geniuses of today? And why aren't they creating for the musical—what was once such an American form with room for risks, innovation and the power to provoke?

It seems that there is no room for these creators on Broadway. Recall the makeup of the composers, choreographers and producers of Broadway in the early years of the American musicals. Most of them were immigrants. Minorities and gay men looked to the musical to interpret what Americanness meant to them, what it could and could never be. In the Silver Age, creators were artists. With a lower economic risk than now, the Sondheim and Fosse created unapologetically. Today, as commercial expectations have increased, the artistic interests of producers and creators have shifted. A more expensive product means that producers must be investors rather than artists with a vision. They choose stories to please audiences instead of stories that question who we are. Broadway no longer welcomes the talent that once identified it.

These realizations have led me to three conclusions about today: (1) the American musical is at a third wave, meaning it has begun to regain understanding of the “American” themes musicals can communicate; (2) that, here at the apex of the Tin Age, the resistance to and acceptance of a lack of artistic innovation suggest change in artistic devices and medium is no longer a priority; finally (3) this artistic change *cannot* be a priority today because the industry has changed and is no longer able to foster the type of talent and content that it once did.

So, the American Musical has both moved forward and become trapped. Well-made, large commercially successful musicals will continue to have a home on Broadway, as will smaller stylistic, often boundary-pushing (though not revolutionary) musicals. But Broadway is no longer a forum for artistic innovation like it once was. This isn't to say that the American musical has died or that there is no evolution left on Broadway. The form *will* evolve, as all artistic forms do. It simply has become for a different purpose.

Conclusion

At the end of the dream sequence in *Oklahoma!* Laurey wakes up alongside Jud, whom she just watched murder Curly in a jolting, dreamy ballet. She follows him offstage “mechanically” and the curtain falls on Curly, alone. The house lights raise. When Laurey wakes up she must decide between Jud and Curley. Like Laurey, it's about time we, the musical theatre lovers of America, confront some realities and think about what's next.

Through its history, two elements of the American musical have moved it through time and place: reflections on a national identity and artistic innovations to heighten storytelling. These two elements have the ability to expose fears and hopes of an American people.

In the Golden Age (1943-1964) new musicals responded to World War II and the Great Depression with nostalgic and patriotic shows, reflecting the horrors of American attitudes in a gentle yet entertaining way. The Golden Age introduced a new book format of the American musical that the musical today continues to return to. The second era, the Silver Age (1967-1996), brought a new era of norms. The Vietnam War, generational conflict, a growing distrust for authority, sexual liberation and feminism characterized a generation that reformed and

recreated the American musical. New musicals of this era valued concept over narrative with dark pieces that critiqued the nation in new ways.

The Tin Age (2001- Soon, I hope) sees a nation whose interest in musical theatre and national climate parallel the first two eras. However, changes in producing entities (especially European and corporate), the “new” Times Square, the rise of the not-for-profit, and new interpretations of old forms, resulted in a theatre community wary of pushing artistic boundaries. At the same time, musicals are becoming increasingly more in-tune with its American roots, especially in terms of representation.

The popularity of the American musical has grown so much that it is hard to think that Broadway will not flourish economically in the coming years. Conversely, popular satisfaction with the current product suggests that, at least during the Tin Age, the form will not artistically move forward.

If today’s creators learn anything from the greats of the past, it should not be a lesson of artistic structure or conventions of spectacle. Rather, that with an art form as popular as the musical comes a responsibility to communicate and critique. The game-changers of the past, (Rodgers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, Bob Fosse, etc.) used the musical’s popularity to ignite a fire in the American people and new artistic interpretations to amplify this fire.

I am hesitant in choosing an ending for this paper. I do not want to end like a Golden Age musical, with intense symbolism and emotion. Nor do I want to end this like a Silver Age musical, sad, uncomfortable and weary about the future. And ending like the Tin Age would prove nothing new.

Yet, despite my criticism of the Tin Age, I hold onto a hope for the future of Broadway. Its scope and popularity have intensified since the turn of the millennium and I find it hard to believe that the next generation of theatre artists will not look to the musical as a tool for artistic innovation and social commentary.

After all, the American musical is an inexplicable force of art. It can intoxicate an audience with moments of overwhelming emotion and chilling rawness. Like no other American art form, the musical can tell complex narratives in a simple way with enormous effects. So, let this be a call to the present and future producers, creators, managers and performers. Wake up from your dream ballet and do not permit a “trapped but happy” ending like Pippin. We should not settle with the expiration of our greatest national art form. If there is any time to re-claim the powers and validity of the American musical, it is today.

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