

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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“Do It Again”: Comic Repetition, Participatory Reception and  
Gendered Identity on Musical Comedy’s Margins

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

by

Samuel Dworkin Baltimore

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Raymond Knapp, Chair

This dissertation examines the ways that various subcultural audiences define themselves through repeated interaction with musical comedy. By foregrounding the role of the audience in creating meaning and by minimizing the “show” as a coherent work, I reconnect musicals to their roots in comedy by way of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of carnival and reduced laughter. The audiences I study are kids, queers, and collectors, an alliterative set of people whose gender identities and expressions all depart from or fall outside of the normative binary. Focusing on these audiences, whose musical comedy fandom is widely acknowledged but little studied, I follow Raymond Knapp and Stacy Wolf to demonstrate that musical comedy provides a forum for identity formation especially for these problematically gendered audiences.

The dissertation of Samuel Dworkin Baltimore is approved.

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Stacy Wolf

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University of California, Los Angeles

2013

For my mother, Susan Dworkin Levering,  
and my grandmother, Ruth Glauber Dworkin,  
who shared and nurtured my love of musicals

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“Songbook: Ella Fitzgerald’s voice as musical text and theatrical pretext.”

The first annual Harvard-Princeton Forum on Musical Theater, April 2011.

“Big Black Women on the Great White Way: the curious role of the gospel diva on Broadway.”

The Interdisciplinary Conference on The Diva at Liverpool Hope University, July 2011.

“Why Do We Fall for the Diva of the Rasp? Vocal Cross-Dressing on (and off) Broadway.”

The Sixth Susan Porter Memorial Symposium at the University of Colorado at Boulder, October 2010.

## Chapter One

“Another op’nin’, another show”: incompleteness and repetition in the modern musical comedy

### **Beginning the Beguine**

The introduction of your dissertation is where you prove yourself. You list all of the books that you’ve read, the famous authors you’ve consulted. Theories are repeated and elaborated upon; wordy quotations are teased apart to reveal their relevance. At the end of the introduction, there is an announcement of what is to come, handy summaries of the subsequent chapters for the reader who is looking for the bit that relates to hir own interests.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of a musical comedy is a lot more fun. Sometimes it’s an overture, sampling the songs that are coming up later. Sometimes there isn’t an overture, and the audience has to jump straight into an opening number that (usually) establishes the setting, characters, and/or musical style of the entire show. At the end of this introduction, you can clap; during it, you can hum along. At either time, depending on the performers and the number, you can laugh. Dissertation introductions don’t usually allow for those kinds of engagement.

This introduction attempts to balance the competing imperatives of academic writing and musical comedy. Readers probably won’t hum along with my sentences—though there will be ample lyric quotation for those who have a song to sing, o—but I hope that you will participate in them by

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<sup>1</sup> “Hir” is a gender-neutral possessive pronoun, as well as a gender-neutral object pronoun. It is an amalgamation of “him” and “her,” and replaces both those pronouns, as well as his/her(s). The gender-neutral subject pronoun that I use is “ze,” which replaces he/she.

thinking, as academics do, and by laughing, as musical comedy audiences do. If you feel the urge to clap, be my guest. Nobody needs to know.<sup>2</sup>

This is a story about music, about comedy, and about some of the people who use musical comedy as part of their self-definition. It's not a story about an irrepressible would-be nun who falls for a retired naval captain. Nor is it about a handful of witty Jewish men from New York who, for several decades, hammered out a pretty durable collection of tunes on their upright pianos. This isn't even a story about a singer whose penetrating voice made her synonymous with Broadway for most of those same decades. All of these characters will make appearances from time to time, maybe have one show-stopping number to sing, but the real protagonists of my story aren't characters in musicals, or writers of musicals, or performers of musicals. This is a story about audiences.

Audiences are tricky creatures to pin down. Like musical comedies, they are made of a whole lot of different bits that don't always fit together quite right. My story looks closely at some of those bits, and not so closely at others, but hopefully, like good stories and musicals should, it does something for you even if you aren't smack in the center of my audience. If you watch or listen to musical comedies, or if you read academic books, you are probably somewhere in my cast of characters, even if you only enter in the final act.

So, you know the characters now. The setting isn't quite Broadway, and it isn't entirely Hollywood, though they both creep in frequently. It's middle school auditoria and gay bars, public parks and concert halls. It's at home with the DVD player, on an exercise bike at the gym, on TV

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<sup>2</sup> "I have a song to sing, o," is from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Yeomen of the Guard; or, The Merryman and his Maid* (1888), and "Nobody Needs to Know" is from Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years* (2001). Lyric quotations permeate this dissertation, following the practice of D. A. Miller in his *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical*, about which see chapter three (and most of the rest of this dissertation). Communication through lyric quotation is central to the communities I discuss (see below), and I hope to remain faithful to those communities while making their (our) language accessible to interested readers who do not come from within them. "Begin the Beguine" and "Another op'nin, another show" are Cole Porter songs first used in *Jubilee* (1935) and *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), respectively. "Do it again," besides describing the repetitive practices examined herein, is a George Gershwin and Buddy DeSylva song from *The French Doll* (1922); Judy Garland performed it in her famous Carnegie Hall concert in 1961 and Rufus Wainwright performed it in his 2007 cover of that same concert.

and online, in headphones and in memories. Memories especially, because this is a story about things that happened to me, and to my family and friends, and to people like us, and a lot of it comes out of my memory, framed by my own experiences. This story is familiar to me, and I hope is familiar to some of you; it's a story about that familiarity, about the comfort and the joy of expectations met and experiences shared.

That sounds a bit dull, I think, praising expectations met. Comedy so often thrives on surprise, the unexpected, the unfamiliar. Music catches your attention when it isn't entirely formulaic, when it varies the standard forms in a way that you haven't heard before. Why focus on tired, shopworn routines? What is there to learn from—or to laugh at—in an old joke or an old song, an aptly named “standard”? Am I to go through the weary round again?<sup>3</sup>

This story, like a routine, or a round, or a standard, repeats. If it has a musical idiom, it is a motif of repetition. It isn't the cliché that entertains me, so much as the way that a joke, a gesture, a song becomes a cliché. How do we get from new and interesting to reliable and comforting, and why is reliable and comforting still comical, still powerful, still worth the effort of digesting? All of the characters you've just met, in all of the settings they inhabit, repeat and rehearse and regurgitate and reinterpret and redefine the substance of musical comedy, throughout my story. Writing the story is my own repetition, as it is my exploration of the purpose and point of repetition. What I tell you three times is true, Lewis Carroll's Bellman said, but he was not meant to be taken seriously. I want to tell you a joke three times, and still make you laugh, and to sing you a song three times and still move you, and to examine three overlapping audiences and still convince you that I have something to say about them. And maybe, in the end, you'll believe that what I've told you three times is, after all, true enough.

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<sup>3</sup> Katisha asks this last question in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado; or, the Town of Titipu* (1885), referring to the process of training a suitor to love her.



## “There’s pockets left undone”: a literature revue<sup>4</sup>

Academic books about musical comedy are a fairly new phenomenon, though in the past decade, their number has exploded. In addition to the myriad books on specific subtopics—Bruce McClung’s “biography” of *Lady in the Dark*, Elizabeth Wollman’s *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical from Hair to Hedwig*, Jessica Sternfeld’s *The Megamusical*, among many others—several volumes that address musicals from a broader, more comprehensive standpoint have appeared or reappeared since the turn of the century. These books demonstrate a growing academic interest in what has long been a popular topic for critics, directors, and performers to write about, though I must admit a pang of nostalgia for those heady days, not so very long ago, when a scholar could write anything ze wanted about musicals without having to consult anybody else. Since those days have passed, allow me now to sample some of the extant works on musicals, to perform for you my knowledge of the genre with snippets and tidbits. In the world of academic writing, this is called a literature review. In my world, dancing along the edge between scholarship and musical comedy, this performance of selections is a literature revue.

There have been many collections that address musicals as a whole. *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*’s second edition came out in 2008, while *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* appeared in 2011. Many encyclopedias and reference works have emerged as well. All of these are useful sources, but I have not the space to review these revues here, though I will refer to them from time to time in later chapters. I will focus instead on a few single-authored works that attempt to survey the genre/form/conglomeration that is called variously the musical, the musical theater, the American musical, the Broadway musical—or occasionally the Hollywood musical—and the musical comedy.

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<sup>4</sup> This section’s title originated in the song “It’s a fine life” from Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* (1963).

Geoffrey Block's *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* received a second edition in 2009, substantially expanding Block's engagement with the musicals of Sondheim, and adding *and Lloyd Webber* to both title and topic. Block's historiography of the musical, as his title indicates, begins in 1927 and ends in 1997, when the first edition of *Enchanted Evenings* appeared (and when both the titular composers had, he notes, largely completed their most significant musical output), and is limited largely to Broadway.<sup>5</sup> His "principal analytical question...is how music and lyrics serve, ignore, or contradict dramatic themes and ideas" within shows,<sup>6</sup> and he defends his inclusion of two Kurt Weill musicals, *Lady in the Dark* and *One Touch of Venus*, both of which "still await a fully-staged New York revival" because they were "enormous hits in their time."<sup>7</sup> While Block's analyses are well-plotted and his contribution to the field essential, his limited parameters make *Enchanted Evenings* less comprehensive a history than it might seem. Films do not count unless they are adaptations of stage musicals; Block reiterates Kim Kowalke's complaint that film musicals mostly display "generic deformation," though he has positive words for some of the film adaptations of stage shows that he discusses.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Swain's *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* also appeared in a second edition this century (2002, first edition 1992), and like *Enchanted Evenings* expanded to include more recent megamusicals of the 1980s,<sup>9</sup> in Swain's case *Les Misérables*. Swain, like Block, focuses on

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<sup>5</sup> For those who have chosen to read this story without preexisting knowledge of Broadway, if such readers exist, allow me to quickly explain. "Broadway" refers usually to a handful of large (over 500 seats), commercial theaters in New York City. Today they are located around Times Square, though that location has varied historically. Smaller commercial theaters in New York are called Off-Broadway theaters (100-500 seats), and even smaller ones are called Off-Off-Broadway theaters. This schema for classifying professional shows has one obvious problem: it applies only to staged musicals in New York City.

<sup>6</sup> Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> For more on megamusicals, see Jessica Sternfeld's aforementioned *Megamusicals*.

detailed musical analyses of specific musicals, but unlike Block examines each as a coherent single object, not as a step in a generic development. He amplifies Block's aim of slotting music into a dramatic structure, following Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama* to examine how each of his objects of analysis fulfils the criteria of a successful drama.<sup>10</sup> In so doing, Swain approaches musicals from a perspective directly opposed to my own; his analyses look at shows as Works, as units whose constituent parts (songs) serve the purpose of the whole, while mine see those same shows as conglomerations of songs that can change purpose, meaning, and nearly all of their own constituent parts (notes, tempos, keys, chords, words) when transposed outside of their shows' bodies.

Larry Stempel's *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* appeared in 2010, and took a longer, more comprehensive history of the professional staged musical as its goal, beginning in the nineteenth century and concluding with the generation he identifies as "Sondheim's Children." This expanded historical focus from Block's and Swain's more constrained timelines contrasts with Stempel's even sharper generic focus on musical *theater*, denigrating film and television explicitly: "These types of musicals, by contrast, are similar but technologically based entertainments—not dead exactly, but not quite live either."<sup>11</sup> He claims, rightly, that in live theater "no two performances are ever identical however much they may be alike,"<sup>12</sup> but he takes as self-evident that this is an unqualified good. In this way, though I agree with much of what Stempel has to say about musicals, my project is an argument with his underlying assumptions. That's true in another way as well:

...nobody refers to the field as musical comedy any more—and with good reason. The sense of sheer levity, once highly prized in the field, now has to contend with forces both heavier and darker than comedy alone suggests. Indeed, a certain darkness of subject matter and in outlook, sophistication in means of expression, and high-mindedness of aesthetic ambition characterize much of the most interesting

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<sup>10</sup> Swain, *Broadway Musical*, 1-7.

<sup>11</sup> Stempel, *Showtime*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*



work in the field over the last generation. Such musicals virtually demand to be taken seriously.<sup>13</sup>

I choose the term musical comedy quite explicitly, as I will explain shortly, and in defiance of Stempel's assertion that dark, heavy musicals "demand to be taken seriously." While I am quite sympathetic to his perspective as a scholar whose field of interest has long been ignored as undeserving of study—we musicals fans have to stick together!—I don't believe that taking something "seriously" is necessarily doing it a service.<sup>14</sup> Comedy is not found only in levity; I find something that I call musical comedy in dark moments, even as the Nazis train their headlights and flashlights—silently—on the petrified family Von Trapp.

What all three of these have in common is their focus on shows, on complete works of musical and dramatic craftsmanship presented professionally (usually on stage). As Swain explicitly states, Block argues, and Stempel assumes, music functions within a dramatic structure, and that music either supports or subverts that structure, depending on whether one reads with or against the grain of the production.<sup>15</sup> These histories and surveys are histories and surveys of musicals, not of musical comedy as a phenomenon. They take an atomic view of the musical, while I take a quantum one. My own view would be impossible without knowledge of theirs, but they see stability and a concretized model where I see a network of possibilities within that model.

Bruce Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* takes as its main goal the overturning of this stable mode of analyzing musicals, and my own efforts follow his. Kirle points out that musicals, like Euripidean dramas, "tack on" happy endings that "highlight the

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> David Savran points out that "serious," along with "honest" and "authentic," frequently describes middlebrow culture that aspires to uplift its audience, an aspiration not inherently opposed to comedy, but often regarding it as insufficient (see Savran, *Queer Sort of Materialism*, 25). See also 46-55 for his discussion of "policing the cultural hierarchy," which explicitly critiques the privileging of "serious" theater over its others.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter three for a more detailed analysis of reading musicals queerly.

disturbing and seemingly insolvable problems raised during the course of the drama” and “are far more interesting for the provocative issues they raise” than for said happy endings.<sup>16</sup> Puzzling over academic privileging of text over performance, he reminds readers of musicals’ “collaborative medium... [in which] the very process of mounting a Broadway musical precludes the ultimate authority of the text.”<sup>17</sup> By focusing on collaboration and on production rather than on conclusion, Kirle opens up new avenues for analysis that take into account not only the impossibility of a single authorial meaning for a show tune, but also changing social and historical contexts for shows whose existence is not limited to an original Broadway production.

Two other scholars of the musical comedy must take pride of place in concluding this briefest of revues. The performers who get the eleven-o’-clock numbers are Stacy Wolf and Raymond Knapp. This is not entirely because they are the two most likely to read this, though that certainly helps. Rather, the reason they come last is the same as the reason they are reading this: their work has made the most direct impact on my own. Both break out of the mold set by the scholars reviewed above by focusing on the impact of musical comedy on audiences, and on the intersection between musicals and identity that made me want to write this story in the first place.

In Wolf’s *A Problem Like Maria*, the identity in question is that of a lesbian feminist woman, and she uses that point of view to locate lesbian interpretations made available by the performances of four actors: Ethel Merman, Mary Martin, Julie Andrews, and Barbra Streisand. In centering the audience, and particularly a queer audience, Wolf provides a model for my third chapter and performs the type of fandom I explore in my fourth and fifth chapters. In her more recent book, *Changed for Good*, Wolf provides more of the historical survey that Block, Stempel, and Knapp attempt—she moves decade by decade through Broadway’s twentieth-century history—but

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<sup>16</sup> Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 8.

explicitly a feminist history of the Broadway musical, focusing on what women do in, for, and to the musical. This feminist perspective informs all of my work, but especially chapter five (see below for chapter descriptions).

Raymond Knapp, like Kirle, focuses on cultural and receptive contexts for musicals in his *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*. As he points out in the preface to his first volume, “[American musicals] have mattered tremendously to people...music helps people to form a sense of who they are, whether as individuals or in relation to others.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout the dissertation I proceed from this assertion, as his investigation of musicals-as-identity aligns neatly with my own claim about the cast of characters in my own story, but I want to highlight here his analysis of *Kiss Me, Kate*. After all, that’s the show that gave this chapter its title, and it’s worth at least glancing at it. Knapp points out that *Kate* is a celebration of doubleness, of copies and mirror images. The first number, aptly titled “Another Op’nin’, Another Show,” focuses on the “hopeful, nervous excitement” of a show’s opening night, while its double, “We Open in Venice” bemoans the “routine boredom” of opening night after opening night in various touring cities.<sup>19</sup> This tension between excitement and boredom, between a show “you rehearse and rehearse” that is nevertheless new, and a new show that grows older by the hour<sup>20</sup> as you tour and tour and tour is the nexus of my story. This new/old/excited/bored cycle animates all of the audiences I examine in subsequent chapters.

However, despite Kirle’s, Knapp’s, and other scholars’ extension of analysis beyond musical form and dramatic function, both scholars look at shows, if not as closed objects with clearly

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<sup>18</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, xvii.

<sup>19</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 276.

<sup>20</sup> I choose the phrase “grows older by the hour” to echo “A Weekend in the Country” from Stephen Sondheim’s *A Little Night Music* (1973): “Wear your hair down/and a flower/don’t use makeup/dress in white./She’ll grow older/by the hour/and be hopelessly shattered on Saturday night.” “The Glamorous Life” from that show similarly deals with the repetition characteristic of staged performance.

defined boundaries, then as squishy objects with fuzzy edges. They still, logically enough, discuss shows as their primary mode of analyzing show tunes.<sup>21</sup> What remains to be done is the examination of show tunes not independently of their home shows, but at least venturing outside of them. Over the wall<sup>22</sup> that separates the show from not-the-show, musical comedy audiences are pacing, circling. While some scholars patrol the wall to protect the shows from incursions (“the comedy in [Oscar Hammerstein’s] lyric derives from the comedy of the dramatic situation in the play. That is why the punch line in Ado Annie’s verse of ‘All er Nuthin’ and the ironic refrain from ‘Kansas City,’ both from *Oklahoma!*, work so well”<sup>23</sup>), fans prowl the peripheries of Broadway shows, occasionally darting in to snatch a fragment of song, but usually just tracing and retracing the same path around them, rehearsing their relationship to the musical without ever entering into the sacred inner sanctum of the Original Broadway Production.

This metaphor is far too ominous for a comic topic, with creators besieged in their musical comedy fortress by their fans, protected only by the scholars who laud the impenetrability of the show’s walls. Instead of the oppositional metaphor, how about a happier one that celebrates the tension and difference between the whole and its parts, between the powerful creator (composer, performer) and the powerless fan? For this metaphor, we need to leave behind, at least for now, the specifically musical comedy and examine broader theories of comedy that explain how such tensions and dichotomies work productively to construct the comic. Enter Mikhail Bakhtin, to lead us to the carnival!

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<sup>21</sup> Wolf does less of this in *Problem Like Maria*, though she returns to it in *Changed for Good*.

<sup>22</sup> “Over the wall” is a song from John Kander and Fred Ebb’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993).

<sup>23</sup> Swain, *Broadway Musical*, 85. In holding Swain up as an example of a more show-centric attitude, I do not mean to denigrate his contribution to musicals scholarship. I am grateful for his early example, and I follow it when I do turn to show analysis.

## Sunday in the Park with Mikhail: Carnival and the reduction of laughter<sup>24</sup>

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is well known to scholars, but this is a story of repetition, and of the new meaning that repetition can sometimes reveal, so here it is again.<sup>25</sup> In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin describes carnival as “the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life.”<sup>26</sup> At carnival time, he says, all unbalanced power relationships are reversed, and the humble peasant becomes king for a day—but that day somehow outlives its own boundaries, and there is something of the king about that peasant thereafter. For Bakhtin, “clowns and fools, [who] were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit...represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time.”<sup>27</sup>

Because of this constant dialectical tension between real life and imagined life, this “celebrat[ion of] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,”<sup>28</sup> carnival represents, for Bakhtin, change and mutability. Neither one nor the other, real nor play-acted, the carnivalesque “celebrates the shift itself, the very process of replaceability, and not the precise item that is replaced.”<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin declares, *à la* Kierkegaard, that carnival is “hostile to all that [is]

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<sup>24</sup> *Sunday in the Park with George* is a 1984 musical by Stephen Sondheim, as well as a song in that musical.

<sup>25</sup> It is my hope that some who read this not be scholars; this reprise of Bakhtin is also for those readers.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123 (emphasis in original).

<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 125.

immortalized and completed.”<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin’s depiction of the carnival fits neatly onto musical comedy with very little adjustment. Like Kirtle, he insists on change and process as constitutive elements; in the carnival, as in the musical, all is unstable and constantly on the move, and nothing is certain.

In addition to topsy-turviness and instability, the carnival embodies and necessitates ritual repetition. Bakhtin stresses the interconnectedness of the medieval church calendar and carnival celebrations, declaring the carnival feast “always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historical timeliness.”<sup>31</sup> In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* he goes even farther, identifying “the very core of the carnival sense of the world” to be “*the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal.*”<sup>32</sup> This focus on death and renewal arises from carnival’s ancient precedent in pagan celebrations of seasonal change, and it governs all of the comedy Bakhtin admires, from the medieval plays of Adam de la Halle to Rabelais to Dostoevsky. Seasonal repetition, whether the seasons are Spring and Fall, Christmas and Easter, or summer blockbusters and Academy Awards, is the hallmark of carnival ritual. In insisting on the repetitive nature of the carnival, Bakhtin predicts my focus on the repetitive interaction with musical comedy that many fans enact; for the audiences who animate my later chapters, musical comedy is not a single experience, an instant, but a cycle that returns and returns.<sup>33</sup>

This carnival incompleteness and repetition together form the basis for what Bakhtin calls reduced laughter. Laughter is a focus of both *Problems* and *Rabelais*, with the latter positioning Rabelais’s work in the context of “the history of laughter,” while the former more carefully explains the reduction of laughter in Dostoevsky and other not-immediately-comical writers. Bakhtin’s

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<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 124 (emphasis in original).

<sup>33</sup> In Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil, and Herbert Kretzmer’s *Les Misérables* (1987), Javert sings to the stars that “each in your season returns and returns/and is always the same.” The song is called, appropriately enough, “Stars.”

conception of laughter is broad, encompassing everything from actual, audible laughter to his codification of the Renaissance idea of laughter: “one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole...a peculiar point of view relative to the world.”<sup>34</sup> He deplores the seventeenth-century idea of laughter for its declaration that “that which is important and essential cannot be comical...the place of laughter in literature belongs only to the low genres,”<sup>35</sup> and he claims that this attitude remained prevalent in the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

It is Bakhtin’s idea of laughter as “a peculiar point of view,” not just a diaphragmatic physical convulsion, that allows him to theorize laughter’s “reduction” in Dostoevsky. While he mentions reduced laughter in *Rabelais*, he dismisses it as irrelevant, and declines to explain how “humor, irony, sarcasm” represent a reduction of what he calls “popular laughter,” and what the phrase even means.<sup>37</sup> In *Problems*, however, he elides popular laughter, the subject of an entire chapter of *Rabelais*, and turns his focus onto reduced laughter: “denied direct expression...‘it does not ring out,’ but traces of it remain in the structure of an image or a discourse and can be detected in it.”<sup>38</sup> This structural laughter is still “a specific aesthetic relationship to reality” (echoing his earlier assessment of it as “a peculiar point of view”), but “is muffled down to the minimum: we see, as it were, the track left by laughter...but the laughter itself we do not hear.”<sup>39</sup>

With audible laughter quenched, what remains is nevertheless laughable. Reduced laughter “immers[es] thought itself in the joyful relativity of evolving existence and [doesn’t permit] it to

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<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> While Bakhtin does explore variations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the definition of laughter and the comic, his focus in *Rabelais* on the sixteenth century leads to a telescoping of those later centuries. All of them, he notes, involve a diminution of the prestige of full-throated, sixteenth-century laughter.

<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 120-121.

<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 178 n. 4. Bakhtin does not provide a source for the quoted passage, “it does not ring out.”

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, 164.

congeal in abstractly dogmatic...ossification.”<sup>40</sup> This laughter is a celebration of the carnivalesque rather than the carnival; while medieval folk celebrations rang out with audible laughter, the dialogic novels of Dostoevsky do not. Nevertheless, Bakhtin claims, they are related by this repetitious, inconclusive, cyclic (r)evolution whose objection to closure is, itself, the essence of laughter. It is precisely this laughter, reduced through repetition from sudden and audible to gradual and structural, that seems to me to be a central motivator of the type of musical comedy fandom that I examine here, as well as the type of musical comedy fandom that I enact in my own life.

I want to take Bakhtin’s theory of laughter another step forward, which in his cyclical formation is also another step back. Reduced laughter, he claims, is a muffling of audible laughter, but one that reveals nevertheless their underlying connection. One of his examples of reduced laughter, which he declines to explain, is the single word “humor.” This means, to me, the instigation of audible laughter: jokes. My own Bakhtinian theory of jokes is that the moment of audible laughter occurs, often, when a conclusion is imposed on an eternally inconclusive situation. The obvious falsity and insufficiency of this conclusion is what makes listeners laugh at it—we know things don’t really work like that. The punch line of a joke, the surprise that jolts a listener into laughter, is not only a surprise but also its antithesis: a satisfaction of expectations, a birth and a death wrapped up in one. Arthur Koestler, in *The Act of Creation*, proposes a similar theory of humor:

In the tragedy the tension increases until the climax is reached...In the [comedy], the tension mounts as the story progresses but it never reaches its expected climax. The ascending curve is brought to an abrupt end...which debunks our dramatic expectations...the narrative acted as a channel directing the flow of emotion; when the channel is punctured the emotion gushes out like a liquid through a burst pipe; the tension is suddenly relieved and exploded in laughter.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Koestler, *Act of Creation*, 33.



This definition seems to privilege the unexpected, to deny the comedy of repetition that Bakhtin and I have presented. However, Koestler goes on to assert that, “unexpectedness alone is not enough to produce a comic effect. The crucial point...is that it is both unexpected and perfectly logical—but of a logic not usually applied to this type of situation.”<sup>42</sup> At the nexus of satisfied expectation and interrupted flow, the audible laughter emerges.

This completion-without-resolution, while effective on the level of a single joke, marks musical comedy in less productive ways, especially in the all-too-common second act problems of stage musicals. There seems to be no way to resolve all of the issues that are raised in the first act of a show without letting something go, whether that be credible plot, consistent characterization, musical originality, or, simply, humor. The *deus-ex-machina* ends of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas that impose a resolution by fiat are attempts to expand the punch line model to a larger format. In *Ruddigore* and in *The Mikado*, an authority figure simply declares that the complications that have engendered the entire plots of those two musical comedies are null and void, and everyone gets happily married to the appropriate partners. To Gilbert and Sullivan aficionados, about whom more in chapter four, this satisfies; to less sympathetic audiences, audiences focused more on plot conclusions than on Bakhtinian open-ended laughter, bewilderment often substitutes for laughter, reduced or otherwise.

Echoing Koestler, Mary Hunter in her work on eighteenth-century Viennese *opera buffa*, a close ancestor of the musical comedy I examine here,<sup>43</sup> points out that “the endings of *opere buffe*...are simultaneously inevitable-and-satisfying and arbitrary-and-unsettling...[and] even on a smaller level, endings...are extraordinarily strongly articulated...and they often embody the tensions

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> See Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 17-64 for his discussion of “the Viennese connection” and several twentieth-century musical comedies rooted in Viennese operetta, a stepping stone of sorts from *opera buffa* to English-language musical comedy.

and ambiguities of the genre as a whole.”<sup>44</sup> Hunter reads these endings in a Bakhtinian manner, emphasizing their dialogism and their essential inconclusiveness:

[E]nds of ensembles...often lock the participants in cheerful musical unanimity at the same time as they express conflict, despair, or confusion. What these endings typically embody is not so much ambiguity...as a double perspective through which the observer is always aware of two (or more) “pictures” but can only fully appreciate one at a time. [There is a] constant possibility of double or multiple perspectives, some contradicting others, but some simply alternative.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the multiple perspectives made available by the disjuncture between musical and lyrical emotion, Hunter points out also a disjuncture between *opera buffa* endings and any sense of dramatic realism,<sup>46</sup> a break that is echoed in the musical comedies of later centuries and other countries, wherein music can be used as Koestler’s “logic not usually applied to this situation,” replacing the logic of plot with the logic of song. I will return to this substitution, and to Austria, in chapter three.

### **Reprise: another literature revue**

Bakhtin and Koestler are not, of course, the only theorists of comedy. If I am to prove my scholarly worthiness to analyze the comic, I must point out some others to perform my expertise. Central to my own concept of comedy, and parallel to Bakhtin’s, is the notion of “camp,” a term that musical theater scholar John Clum calls “over-theorized,”<sup>47</sup> which makes it perfect for my theoretical literature revue. Film scholar Richard Dyer calls camp

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<sup>44</sup> Hunter, *Culture of Opera Buffa*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 24; see also 179 for an elaboration of the same idea of musical unity contradicting lyrical conflict.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 215. See also her quotation of Lorenzo Da Ponte’s description of finales on 212.

<sup>47</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 7.

a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalization and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable.<sup>48</sup>

While Susan Sontag has maintained that camp results out of “failed seriousness,” that it can’t be done on purpose,<sup>49</sup> Dyer’s take relies on an intentionality, at least on the part of the audience, and often on the part of the camp performer. Judy Garland, he claims, is received as camp by her audiences, but also performs camp from the introductory verse of “San Francisco” that affectionately jabs at earlier camp icon (and fellow musical star) Jeannette MacDonald<sup>50</sup> to the obvious slippage between voice and image in *The Wizard of Oz*—that vibrato from a prepubescent girl?!—which allows so many gay men to find themselves in Dorothy. The celebration of that which is completely unconvincing is central to the camp aesthetic.

This delight in failure, this “ambivalent making fun” recalls Bakhtin even as it colors his theories a much more startling shade of fuchsia than he perhaps would have imagined them. I will return to the question of camp in chapter three, but it is worth noting here that theorists of this “over-theorized” term have often avoided Bakhtin. Sontag, of course, has the excuse of having written before his works were available in English. Dyer and Clum, writing specifically in the context of musical comedy and camp, make no mention of him, despite the clear resonances between his theories of carnival reversal and Dyer’s own “ambivalent making fun.” Indeed, camp appreciation of, for example, the Joan Crawford melodrama *Mildred Pierce*, seems as likely a source of reduced

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<sup>48</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Sontag refers to intentional camp as “probably...always harmful” in her “Notes on Camp,” and insists it “is usually less satisfying” than accidental camp (pp. 284 and 283, respectively). While her personal taste cannot be taken as general truth, her centering of audience over performer in the hierarchy of meaning making prefigures my own work here.

<sup>50</sup> In his recreation of Garland’s famous 1961 concert tour, Rufus Wainwright follows Dyer’s analysis of the song, interrupting his own performance of it to inform the audience, “personally, I would call this next line a dig.”

laughter as any Dostoevsky novel. One of the aims of my story is to bring these two theories into a more productive dialogue.<sup>51</sup>

Bakhtin himself, displaying the dissertative origins of *Rabelais and His World*, performs a literature revue of theorists of laughter and comic writers before and after Rabelais. His revue focuses especially on classical sources—Aristotle and Hippocrates—and immediate successors—Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Cervantes. Extolling the virtues of carnivalesque writers like Cervantes and Shakespeare, whose works celebrate the grotesque in a manner similar to Rabelais’s, Bakhtin simultaneously sneers at Montaigne for his limited, late-sixteenth-century attitude toward comedy, in which “the question of ordering life and death is already definitely taken out of the realm of gay laughter.”<sup>52</sup> The classical model of Hippocrates, which Bakhtin claims animated literary laughter through Rabelais, instead “had a philosophical character, being directed at the life of man and at...vain fears and hopes related...to life after death.”<sup>53</sup> To Aristotle, quite simply, “‘of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter,’...only from that moment [of laughter] does [a child] become a human being.”<sup>54</sup>

Beyond Bakhtin’s bevy of brilliant bards of buffoonery, both Brecht and Bergson bring bilious blight to his boundless Bacchanalia. (No, that wasn’t necessary, but it’s worth remembering that this is a story about comedy, and about repetition; arbitrarily augmented alliteration is a reminder of both.) Henri Bergson’s theories of laughter are less utopic than Bakhtin’s, acknowledge what Bakhtin skirts by denigrating non-Renaissance laughter as somehow after the fall of comedy: laughter can be mean-spirited, aimed at targets, used to coerce rather than liberate. According to

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<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin’s theories of “dialogism” have been nearly as important as his theories of laughter; the word dialogue seemed an appropriate way to pivot back to Bakhtin.

<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 66.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, 67-68.

Bergson, laughter necessitates “the absence of feeling...a momentary anesthesia of the heart.”<sup>55</sup> Far from the “peculiar point of view” that Bakhtin celebrates, the openness of all things when seen through a laughing lens, Bergsonian laughter “has no greater foe than emotion”<sup>56</sup> and always has a “victim”<sup>57</sup> as its target. Bergson always laughs at, never with.

Bertolt Brecht, theatrical theorist extraordinaire and writer of comedies, was never directly a theorist of comedy. His writings on alienation and epic theater, however, align closely with Bergsonian definitions of the comic. As Louise Bird points out in “The Comic World of Bertolt Brecht,” Brecht identifies plays as comic not when they are laughable, but “because of...underlying irony which reveals—and demands of the audience—intellectual detachment.”<sup>58</sup> This intellectual detachment is the central feature of Brecht’s intentional alienation of the audience, the pillar of his epic theater. Through alienation, “everyday things are removed from the realm of the self-evident,”<sup>59</sup> as in a Bakhtinian carnival, though by opposite means. Instead of Bakhtin’s erasure of the line between performer and spectator, Brecht highlights that line, makes audiences cultivate “an observing, watching attitude.”<sup>60</sup> Brecht’s ironic detachment marries Bergson’s lack of feeling to Bakhtin’s upending of normality, and as Shakespeare knew, marriages are what comedy is all about.

One last comedic theorist to end this revue: Wayne Koestenbaum, in his *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, elucidates many other fragmentary theories of comedy. Writing his theory on Harpo’s

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<sup>55</sup> Bergson, 10-11.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, 13-14.

<sup>58</sup> Bird, “Comic World,” 252.

<sup>59</sup> Brecht, “On Chinese Acting,” 131.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*.

body,<sup>61</sup> Koestenbaum analyzes every facial expression, every gesture, every noise Harpo made during his film career, spinning words into the void that is Harpo's unbreakable silence. He sees in Harpo a version of Bakhtin's carnival king, who "will bop you over the head with his honker, a subaltern's scepter,"<sup>62</sup> but who, far from being deposed after a day, hungers for repetition of whatever it is he happens to be doing, whether as king or as peasant, or as the clown who joins the two. His repetition is "comedy's rhythm: do anything, however trivial, three times,"<sup>63</sup> recalling Lewis Carroll's Bellman. Harpo's honking taxi-horn "contradicts (or confirms!) any statement that precedes it,"<sup>64</sup> recalling the ambivalence of Bakhtin's carnival of birth in death and of laughter both audible and reduced; the horn is certainly audible, but its meaning is open, inconclusive, couched within the carnival sense of the world that Harpo so perfectly embodies. Koestenbaum's own theory of laughter, more Bergsonian, perhaps, than Bakhtinian, comes out of Harpo's humiliation of a peanut vendor in *Duck Soup*: "laughter is an excuse to touch the enemy's shoulder."<sup>65</sup>

While all of these comic theorists have influenced my own thinking about musical comedy, it is to Bakhtin that I will turn to explain myself. His theories have supplanted much earlier writing on laughter, and have formed the basis for much of what has followed. Bakhtin, with shades of Koestenbaum, will be my guide on this exploration of musical comedy and its devotees. His concept of reduced laughter, only sketchily outlined in *Problems*, gradually fills in those outlines throughout my story, though it remains a theoretical concept that is malleable, that can cover a variety of differently diminished laughters. In this malleability, the concept of reduced laughter anticipates Eric

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<sup>61</sup> I identify Harpo by first name here not only to recapitulate Koestenbaum's familiar tone, but also to avoid confusing one Marx with another, very different one. Though they do have similar quantities of hair.

<sup>62</sup> Koestenbaum, *Anatomy*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, 33.

Hobsbawm’s “invented traditions,” which I discuss in chapter three, which “seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour,”<sup>66</sup> but “tend...to be quite unspecific and vague as to the natures of [those] values.”<sup>67</sup> It also recalls Hunter’s claims about *opera buffa* finales, which “often embody the tensions and ambiguities of the genre as a whole.” In short, reduced laughter is itself a comic concept, resisting a unitary definition but gaining meaning through varied repetition. It is this built-in comedy that leads me to use reduced laughter as the foundation for my arguments. However, despite my reliance on Bakhtin’s reduced laughter, despite my focus on repetition and familiarity and cyclic humor, there is still room for some of the humor of misdirection and surprise. So now, despite what you might be expecting, enter *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

### **“Once More, With Feeling”: the carnivalesque television musical**

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a dark comedy, or a black comedy, or a dramedy, or a drama with jokes, or perhaps simply campy melodrama. Its brand of humor always entangled comedy intricately with tragedy and passionate emotion, veering from laughter to tears and back again with aplomb. In Bakhtin’s terms, in *Buffy* “the two aspects, seriousness and laughter, coexist and reflect each other, and are indeed whole aspects, not separate...images.”<sup>68</sup> This carnivalesque setting for musical comedy is rife with possibilities, and Joss Whedon, the series’ creator, drew heavily from that well in “Once More, With Feeling,” an episode that features a variety of twentieth-century musical comedy numbers and tropes. Raymond Knapp’s excellent analysis of “Once More, With Feeling” will serve as a jumping off point for the aspect of *Buffy* that concerns me here: the musical episode’s comedic irresolution.

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<sup>66</sup> Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” 1.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 122.

Knapp emphasizes the way that “Once More,” in his words, “*affectionately* parodies” the musical comedy genre, its creators remaining throughout “fully enamored of what they parody even as they mock it”—a definitively camp attitude.<sup>69</sup> “Once More” uses musical comedy code to further the plot arc and character development of Buffy’s sixth season. Hailed by fans and critics alike as a significant dramatic accomplishment,<sup>70</sup> “Once More” is interesting and exciting because of neither its (melo)drama nor its plot significance. It excites because it is, quite suddenly, a musical comedy. The insertion of music, specifically of sung music, and of tropes of the musical comedy genre, sets “Once More” apart from the rest of *Buffy*; through musicalization, the episode becomes a Bakhtinian carnival.

As Knapp notes, “the situation in...‘Once More, With Feeling’...contains many separate threads, and each of them comes to a head within its musical numbers.”<sup>71</sup> What Knapp does not explore, however, is that while each plot thread comes to a head, none of them actually bursts and releases its pus. Or, to use a less disgusting metaphor, none of the threads is tied off. Each character’s personal plot arc achieves a significant moment of revelation, but not of resolution. For example, Xander and Anya’s “I’ll Never Tell” reveals ominous cracks in their seemingly harmonious relationship by means of “a cutesy ‘list song,’”<sup>72</sup> a musical comedy trope dating back at least to Lepporello’s catalogue aria in *Don Giovanni*, but the cracks are not fully exposed until “Hell’s Bells,” ten episodes later. Similarly, Buffy’s opening number, “Going Through the Motions,” (similar in

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<sup>69</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 202.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey Middents’ “A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in *Buffy* and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling),” which credits the episode with consciously commenting upon the problematic whiteness of the preceding five years of *Buffy*, in Kendra Preston Leonard’s *Buffy, Ballads, and Bad Guys Who Sing: Music in the Worlds of Joss Whedon*. See also Amy Bauer’s “‘Give Me Something to Sing About’: Intertextuality and the Audience in ‘Once More, with Feeling,’” which details the episode’s popularity with fans and critics and redoubles their praise, in Paul Attinello, Janet K. Halfyard, and Vanessa Knights’ *Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

<sup>71</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 196.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, 197.



function to *A Little Night Music*'s "Now/Later/Soon" and the title song of *Ragtime*, among many other explicitly expository opening numbers) lays out what has been the central plot point of the season, that Buffy is unhappy being back on Earth after being dead and in Heaven, a point that she will later reveal to her friends, but whose emotional effects will never really be finally resolved.

The most Bakhtinian nods to musical comedy—as well as some of the campiest moments—occur in the numbers that are less significant to the larger plot arc of *Buffy*. The song fragment "The Mustard," sung by writer/producer David Fury and chorus, recalls scenes from *Oliver!* and *Les Misérables*, among other epic musicals, where crowds of choristers dance elaborately in the street for reasons that would normally not be song-worthy, in this case a successful trip to the dry cleaner's.<sup>73</sup> The title of this chapter on the DVD is "It's an Ensemble Piece," acknowledging the general irrelevance of a choral number to plot, but its necessity in terms of a show's musical profile. Similarly, writer/producer Marti Noxon's "Parking Ticket" fragment echoes the emotive mezzo belters, like Lucille Frank in *Parade* and Florence in *Chess*, who defined the musical comedy sound in the '80s and '90s. These songs, both in their deliberate evocation of characteristic musical comedy gestures and in their fragmentary nature, exude the irresolution and inconclusiveness that characterizes Bakhtin's sense of the comic. Their status as humorous songs is actually beside the point; the funny lyrics emphasize the humor and the comic function embodied in their fragmented reference to musicals, but the lyrics don't actually create their comedy. I will return to this question of fragmentation later.

Knapp calls the final song of the episode, "Where Do We Go from Here?," "lackluster," not in terms of music but in terms of topic.<sup>74</sup> However, the inconclusiveness of the song actually foregrounds the unresolved nature of the musical comedy quite neatly, making viewers aware both

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<sup>73</sup> See again Mary Hunter, *Culture of Opera Buffa*, especially 212-215.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, 202.

that the plot threads, though snipped, are not yet safely knotted, and that the musical comedy, by its very nature, can't do the tying. If it does, laughter, reduced or otherwise, has no chance to flourish. "Why is the path unclear?," the lyrics ask; "When does the end appear?" In a musical, the path is always either unclear or so over-determined as to be palpably phony (see above re: Gilbert and Sullivan). "Once More" manages both, with a stunningly inconclusive final number and a Hollywood-musical ending: the string crescendo and tremolo into the lovers' kiss—though in this case the kiss is between heretofore non-lovers, and what should be an ending instead opens the plot to further complications later in the season. Both of these ending gestures leave the action perpetually unresolved, evoking actual laughter in the case of the cheesy kiss and laughter of the more reduced sort at the song, whose lack of puns and witty wordplay contrasts sharply with the rest of the score, and indeed with the rest of the series.

Emphasizing the open-endedness of the musical comedy form, one song in "Once More" does not even fall within the episode. A year later, in the episode entitled "Selfless," Anya Jenkins flashes back to the unexpected musical comedy interlude of "Once More," and she sings the comic romantic ballad "I'll Be Mrs." To fans of the show, this innocent song slightly reinterprets the rest of "Once More," as well as the character's intervening year of splitting up with her fiancé and turning gradually back toward her demonic heritage, tightening the screws just a little bit more on her torturous (and tortuous) fall from grace. At the same time, the song is lyrically humorous: "What's the point of loving?/I mean, except for the sweaty part," she sings, glancing knowingly straight at the camera, and later, "No need to cover up my heart,/Plus, see above RE: sweaty part." The humorous lyric, in tandem with the string-and-woodwind-heavy orchestration, soothes, removing both Anya and the listener from the grim setting before the flashback (Anya, once more a demon, surrounded by the bodies of the frat boys she's slaughtered, and engaged in a deadly fight with Buffy) and returning her to the Rock-Hudson-and-Doris-Day cuteness of "I'll Never Tell." As

Anya sings lovingly of and to her sleeping beau, fans hope for a *Pillow-Talk*-style happy ending (the happy ending he sleepily requests at the beginning of the scene) instead of the tragedy we've already seen unfold over the previous season.

Melodically, "I'll Be Mrs." is highly repetitive, almost obsessively repeating melodic fragments in a manner that recalls Anya's frankly obsessive infatuation with Xander from their first sexual liaison. The tune constantly aspires to reach a peak on the dominant, A, but often fails, topping out at a G, the less satisfying fourth scale degree. When she finally reaches the A, where she remains for most of the refrain, it feels inconclusive, pointing instead toward an eventual resolution on the tonic. This ultimate resolution is postponed until the final moment of the song, when it is severely undercut by the underlying harmony, the mid-sentence lyric placement (on the word "be" in the phrase "I will be—"), and the note's brevity; the music is suddenly cut off, as the flashback ends and Anya has a sword driven through her heart. Funny stuff, no?

Actually, Anya's stabbing is obviously not funny. It is, however, comical. Here, in place of musical resolution, she receives the final resolution of her life, the significant shock of the moment enhanced tenfold by the abrupt musical cutoff. The song serves as a microcosm of the way the entire earlier musical episode functions, a revelation of emotion by musical-comedy means that leads not to a conclusion, but to a temporary, unfulfilling end. In Bakhtin's terms, the carnivalesque musical comedy "free[s the characters] from the oppression of such gloomy categories as 'eternal,' 'immovable,' 'absolute,' 'unchangeable,' and instead expose[s them] to the gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character;"<sup>75</sup> when the music departs, so too does the laughing aspect of the world, and all is finished and closed.

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<sup>75</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 83.

Of course, this total closure cannot be true. *Buffy* is an episodic television program, and total closure would forestall any future episodes. Whedon avoids this by means of the second of three carnivals that upend the world of *Buffy*: the portal into Hell that lies beneath Sunnydale, CA, filling it with demons and vampires and order-destroying black magic. Anya is one such demon, and cannot be killed with a sword through the heart, and so the appearance of an ending is momentary, lasting only the length of a commercial break. The third carnival in *Buffy*, after the music and the demons, is its very status as episodic television, the cycle that repeats and repeats and can never know an ending. Indeed, even after the cancellation of the series, it continued in comic books and in the spin-off series *Angel*—the carnival of the series, like the musical carnival of “Once More,” spilled beyond its boundaries and impinged upon what Bakhtin calls “the world of practical conditions.”<sup>76</sup>

This uncontainability, symbol of Bakhtin’s carnival, brings me back to the focus I promised from the start: the audience. All of the foregoing analysis of *Buffy* has been in terms of performers, composers, producers, and writers (not to mention those who hold many such roles), not the watchers and listeners, the singers-along and toe-tappers. But without those fans, *Buffy* would not have exceeded the normal bounds of a television show, would not have generated a spin-off, several comic books, and reams and reams of academic (and pseudo-academic) writing.<sup>77</sup> As Bakhtin insists, “carnival does not know footlights... [and] does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates.”<sup>78</sup> This overlap between performer and audience, the intimacy that is realized as identification with, emulation of, or performance as a character or performer, unites the disparate

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> See note 57 above for two recent musicological collections. See also *Slayage*, the journal of the Whedon Studies Association, published online since 2001.

<sup>78</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

audiences I examine in the following chapters. In true carnival fashion, these audiences dash across the footlights, break the hierarchical boundaries of the composer-performer-spectator stratification that marks much of musicological discourse. They laugh in the face of conclusion, even when that laughter is reduced from triumphant cackle to something less audible.

### **I will stop—**

Just such a moment opens Whedon's internet musical comedy, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Produced during the writers' strike of 2007-2008, *Dr. Horrible* was an experiment in new forms of content delivery, an attempt to make an end run around the capitalist market forces that typically govern musical comedy creation in professional contexts, and it tells the story of unlikely supervillain Dr. Horrible, even more unlikely superhero Captain Hammer, and their mutual love interest, Penny.<sup>79</sup> The show opens with Neil Patrick Harris as the titular Dr., practicing his evil laugh in front of his webcam, as he explains to viewers that laughter is important to successful supervillainy; the audible laugh he produces very quickly reduces to a humorous discussion of laughter's function, and Bakhtin couldn't be more pleased.

Dr. Horrible follows on the heels of "I'll be Mrs." in terms of the realization in music of comedy's inconclusiveness. Of the twelve original songs in the musical, only one song has an ending that is unambiguously musically characterized as such. That song, "Bad Horse Chorus," is also the only song with a reprise, retroactively attenuating the finality of its initial iteration. The other eleven songs avoid conclusion in one of four ways: they abruptly cut off before musical resolution *à la* "I'll Be Mrs.," finish on an antecedent phrase (much like Haydn's "Joke" quartet), end with a half

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<sup>79</sup> For a more detailed examination of the creation of *Dr. Horrible*, see Sarah Taylor Ellis' dissertation, "Doing the Time Warp: Embodied Temporality and Musical Theater," completed in 2013 at UCLA.

cadence, or, in the case of the finale, suddenly lose their instrumentation and conclude *a cappella* in an unsettling and unexpected diminution before conclusion.

The “Dr. Horrible Theme,” a brief fragment that plays under the opening credits of each of the three acts, is one of the songs that ends with a half cadence. It sets the tone of the piece, conclusively inconclusive throughout. The musical cues reflect a lack of conclusiveness in the plot, as well as in most of the characters doing the singing. Of the three main characters, Dr. Horrible, Penny, and Captain Hammer, only Captain Hammer has a core identity that remains humorously, unrealistically unaffected by events and people around him. Penny and the good (bad) doctor drift and vacillate, respectively. This incomplete core identity written into fictional characters will return later in the quite real audiences I examine in later chapters.

Captain Hammer’s yen for heroic resolution comes to the fore in his “Everyone’s a Hero,” a pseudo-inspirational anthem championing a kind of arrogant, self-absorbed political correctness. The song leads to an appropriately emphatic, triumphant conclusion, but Dr. Horrible bursts in and freezes Captain Hammer with his Freeze Ray at the penultimate note, leaving the song unfinished. While this situation is perfectly acceptable for Horrible’s own songs, as well as for Penny’s and for the theme music, Hammer is unwilling to accede to the comic irresolution, and when he unfreezes he immediately finishes his number, belting the final note in isolation. Unfortunately for him, another song has occurred in the intervening minutes, and his bombastic high note is now completely without context; it comes across to viewers and to other characters as ridiculous.

In contrast to “Everyone’s a Hero,” Dr. Horrible’s opening number, “My Freeze Ray,” concludes on a metatheatrical pun. The refrain, “with my freeze ray, I will stop the world,” aligns on its first iteration with a sudden freeze of all action on the screen except Dr. Horrible’s singing, but on its third iteration does, in fact, stop mid-refrain, ending the song abruptly on “stop.” Dr. Horrible’s sidekick, Moist, enters and interrupts the song, but Horrible makes no attempt to

continue after the interruption; the lyric, after all, now says, “with my freeze ray, I will stop” (hence the subheading that began this section of my story). His personality, far less pathologically self-assured than Hammer’s, allows for this incoherent musical ending. This is not to say that Dr. Horrible is a comic character while Captain Hammer is not, as they both clearly are, but in terms of laughter, Captain Hammer tends to align with the ordinary kind, while Dr. Horrible and Penny more often invoke reduced laughter.

Penny’s role, as romantic object for both Horrible and Hammer, is somewhat surprisingly “reduced” in and of itself, in an uncharacteristic reinforcement by Joss Whedon of stereotypical gender roles. Her musical profile, however, aligns her clearly with Horrible over Hammer, with the talented singer (Neil Patrick Harris) over the merely serviceable (Nathan Fillion); she (Felicia Day) sings far more frequently with Harris than with Fillion, even when her character is with Hammer. If one reads Horrible and Hammer as representatives of comic irresolution and overdetermination, this places her squarely on the inconclusive side, more inconclusive even than Dr. Horrible. “Caring Hands,” her first musical appearance, is less a song than a pair of phrases (antecedent, consequent) that alternate fitfully until she is interrupted mid-antecedent by Dr. Horrible. “Penny’s Song,” Day’s only substantial solo number, incorporates “Caring Hands” as an introductory verse, develops into a full-fledged song, then devolves back into “Caring Hands,” ending without the final consequent phrase. This time, she interrupts her own singing to note that Hammer is on his way, prompting one of the funniest lines of dialogue, Horrible’s “Oh, goodness! Look at my wrist! I’ve gotta go!” Bakhtin’s open-ended comedy ends, as I described above, with a punch line that replaces a resolution.

*Dr. Horrible* reminds viewers constantly of its musical and comedic openness, and it begs for the kind of fan interaction, the permeable proscenium, that characterizes the carnival. From its genesis outside of, or at least parallel to, traditional capitalist means of production to its inclusion of

fan-produced material on the DVD release, the entire production relies on an audience that does more than passively watch and listen. *Dr. Horrible* is a musical comedy deliberately aimed at a category of fan that makes up only a small slice of a for-profit musical comedy's purchasing audience—comprising the ones on the margins, the ones who really care about that musical comedy, the repeat viewers. The audiences that matter to me here, like *Dr. Horrible*'s, are those audiences to whom musical comedies matter.

However, as *Dr. Horrible*'s success shows (a sequel is in the works, to begin filming in 2013), that audience is larger than, perhaps, lamenters of musical comedy's demise would have you believe. According to standard histories of the Broadway musical (and it is always Broadway, excluding other theatrical venues and everything on a screen), the musical comedy's Golden Age began to decline right around the time that other music became popular—i.e. the dawn of rock 'n' roll, or at the latest the rise of soul, gospel, and psychedelia.<sup>80</sup> This zero-sum game of decrying the fate of good old show tunes at the hands of these (racially, generationally, sexually) marked interlopers misses the continued relevance of musical comedy music across a broad spectrum of audiences, even when the top hits on Billboard's increasingly irrelevant charts have little apparent connection to Rodgers or Hammerstein. As a further example of that relevance, and as partial explanation for the quantity of time and digital ink expended on this project, consider the popular media personality and musical comedy performer/aficionado Stephen Colbert.

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<sup>80</sup> Savran, taking a more Marxist angle in his "Middlebrow Anxiety," points out that this historical moment, the late '50s and early '60s, also aligns with "the end of an era during which a hierarchy of taste was a useful and accurate guide to the disposition of economic, educational, and cultural capital in the United States" (Savran, *Queer Sort of Materialism*, 12).



## Where are the clowns? Stephen Colbert reintegrates the musical<sup>81</sup>

Stephen Colbert hosts the wildly influential Comedy Central program *The Colbert Report* (the final T is silent in both words), which traffics in fake analysis of real news and fake interviews of real people, a traversal of Bakhtin's border between reality and play-acting. Like his mentor and erstwhile employer Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Colbert uses his comedy show as, in Koestenbaum's words, "an excuse to touch the enemy's shoulder." On the *Report*, conservative and/or self-serving politicians and other public figures are forced to confront the apotheosis of those traits, the perfectly conservative and entirely self-worshipping character<sup>82</sup> that Colbert portrays, and through that reflective mockery, they frequently expose their own ridiculousness and hypocrisy. This type of comedy might be called the polar opposite of the "affectionate parody" in "Once More, With Feeling;" instead of mocking while secretly loving the object of mockery, this comedy is whole-hearted approval that (barely) conceals a damning critique. The crowning achievement of Colbert's approach—or, the final sign of our democracy's complete collapse, depending on whom you ask—occurred when his character actually testified before Congress, erasing any remaining boundary between real and play-acted, comic and serious, parody and parodied.

But what does all of this have to do with musicals, you ask. Sure, he's a popular comedian who personifies, in many ways, Bakhtinian laughter, but that doesn't make him a musical comedian. What earns Colbert his musical stripes, what demonstrates the ongoing relevance of musicals to

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<sup>81</sup> "Where are the clowns?" is a line from "Send in the Clowns," the hit song from *A Little Night Music*. The "integrated musical" is the term most usually applied to the style of musical pioneered by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!* (1943). For more on the question of integration in musicals, see Sarah Taylor Ellis's dissertation, "Doing the Time Warp: Embodied Temporality and Musical Theater."

<sup>82</sup> One of the regular segments on Colbert's cable-news-style program is entitled "Who's Honoring Me Now?"

large USAmerican audiences,<sup>83</sup> is his constant interpolation of musical comedy into his “straight” comic routines. Colbert has opened a show by singing the opening line of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, performed a duet of “Summertime” from *Porgy and Bess* with Audra McDonald, who was then playing Bess in the Broadway revival of that show; and even appeared with ~~Dr. Horrible~~ Neil Patrick Harris in a semi-staged production of *Company* with the New York Philharmonic, then discussed that performance on his show afterward with Harris and with *Company*’s composer, Stephen Sondheim—all within the space of one year.<sup>84</sup>

Musical comedy reaches an enormous national audience through Colbert’s performances, and through his off-hand incorporations of musical comedy bits into an otherwise politically focused “news” program. In 2010, when Colbert first interviewed Sondheim, he performed his own new verse for “Send in the Clowns,” explaining that the answer to the line “Where are the clowns?” was that they had gotten stuck in traffic in the tunnel from New Jersey. Upon Sondheim’s suggestion that Bernadette Peters incorporate the verse into the Broadway revival of *A Little Night Music*, Colbert thanked him for coming by casually quoting lyrics from *Sunday in the Park with George*, another Sondheim musical starring Peters. Perhaps as important as Colbert’s digressions into musicals are his nearly as frequent ventures into other genres of music, popular and otherwise. Performing with Michael Stipe of R.E.M., opera singer Plácido Domingo, folk legend Pete Seeger, R&B superstar Alicia Keyes, and country icon Dolly Parton, as well as with Julie Andrews and Tony Bennett, Colbert adds musical comedy to the pop menu again, if indeed it ever left.

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<sup>83</sup> I use the term “USAmerican” throughout this work to denote residents of the United States of America, as distinct from “American,” which includes residents of Canada, Mexico, Central America, and the entire continent of South America, as well as the Caribbean.

<sup>84</sup> January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012; March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012; April 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> 2011; June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011; November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

## Where do we go from here?<sup>85</sup>

You've heard a few tunes now. The overture to this musical has done its job, though the introduction to the dissertation still has work to do. Hopefully you believe now that I know what I'm talking about in both genres—there have been enough footnotes, lyric quotations, names dropped both of scholars and of singers, and seemingly obscure shows compared casually to well-known ones. In the worlds of academics and musical theater folk, those are the primary ways one proves oneself. All that remains, it would seem, is to take you on a strange journey (if I may)<sup>86</sup> through the acts that are yet to come.

There are three specific audiences that I examine in the next three chapters. They have various things in common, and in many cases they overlap, but each merits its own examination. I have called them, for alliteration's sake, kids, queers, and collectors. Each of these audiences, these frames of reference, has governed my own interaction with and relationship to musical comedy at some point, largely interacting and intersecting with one another. All of them repeat, consume musical comedies not as coherent objects or even coherent experiences, but rather as iterations, as revolutions in a cycle of consumption that constitutes them as it redefines the musical comedies in question. All of them, crucially, are generally acknowledged as fertile ground for musical comedy fandom, despite the patent reality that big-budget films and theatrical presentations rarely target only these demographics.

The first audience I examine, in chapter two, is kids. From infants to adolescents, this audience consumes everything repetitively, often beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior. I

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<sup>85</sup> This is the title of the final number from "Once More, With Feeling" (see above).

<sup>86</sup> The Criminologist in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has a few famous lines; this is one of them.

offer one explanation for (or corollary of) this practice: that repetitive media consumption functions as a sort of self-pedagogy. Through the lens of several musical comedies written for children, as well as some that are kid-adjacent, I examine the way that repetitive musical comedy consumption lays the groundwork for eventual musical comedy performance, as well as less explicit performance that isn't limited to musicals.

In my third chapter, I look at queer audiences and the sing-along phenomenon that has governed much of the twentieth-century history of queer USAmericans. The sing-along, whether in bars, in gyms, or at more populous venues such as the Hollywood Bowl, acts as a ritual tradition, repeated weekly or annually, that helps to create and delineate a queer culture. Examining D. A. Miller's *Place For Us*, as well as several venues for queer singing-along, I posit an open queerness that invites and/or coerces everyone in an audience to join into a community formed through musical comedy.

My last audience, the collectors, is in some sense a synthesis of the kids and the queers, both of which groups often include collectors. These folks are the ones who immerse themselves so deeply in the ephemera that surround performers or composers or genres that their knowledge becomes a performance in its own right. Their repetition is not limited to watching the same show or song or performer again and again, though they do that. Collectors, like the scholars they often emulate/anticipate, rehearse an abject obsession that becomes/impersonates expertise, and certain types of musical comedy performance are aimed at just such experts.

My final chapter, the meta-analysis of all of these groups, posits a link between them that goes beyond musical comedy. Each of these audience categories inhabits a tricky gender status that marks them as Other. Gender and musical comedy have been examined at some length by scholars such as Knapp, Wolf, and Miller, and this chapter's story arises from those examinations. Where it differs, however, is in its attempt to claim gender performance as central to musical comedy, as

much as either music or comedy. To me, a person not without gender (I'm male) but without a stable, legible gender performance, immersion in musical comedy has always granted a license to do and be how and who I want to be. This chapter claims, on academic grounds, that I am far from alone.

## Codetta

If any of these stories sounds more interesting to you than the others, please do feel free to skip around, to pick and choose. That's what most of my audiences do. They don't follow a linear narrative; they cannibalize the shows, carnivalize their songs and scenes and meanings. Of course, you can reread as often as you like. There must be a value in rereading, or this project is ended before it's begun.<sup>87</sup> With that unnecessary permission granted, allow me to tack on an unexpected coda, a tangent on the word "cannibalize" earlier in this paragraph.

*Cannibal! The Musical* was an early work by Matt Stone and Trey Parker, creators eventually of *South Park* and of *The Book of Mormon*. A comedy of sex and poop jokes, puns and nonsense words, gruesome murders and miscarriages of justice, *Cannibal* provided a model for Stone and Parker's later works on television and stage. Like *Dr. Horrible*, it gained a cult following, which spawned a stage production in New York, far, far off Broadway. Like "Once More, With Feeling" it affectionately parodied tropes of musical comedy from earlier decades. But *Cannibal* isn't important here—*South Park* is.

*South Park* is animated, and in being animated it carries with it an air of the childish, even when its jokes are far from suitable for young, impressionable minds. Animated adult television like

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<sup>87</sup> The phrase "ended before it's begun" comes to me from the song "When I Fall In Love," made popular by Doris Day. It is not itself a show tune, but it is certainly show tune adjacent; I sang it in high school jazz choir.

*South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy* has demonstrated an openness to musical comedy insertions beyond what is possible in live-action shows like *Buffy*. The “musical episodes” of shows such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Scrubs*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Buffy* have been Events, publicized and received as Big Deals.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, animated shows have musicals constantly, without fanfare, from *The Simpsons*’s definitely-not-a-copyright-violation “Shary Bobbins” episode to *South Park*’s wholesome seasonal special “Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo.” Songs like “Do a Half-Assed Job” from the former and “Lonely Jew on Christmas” from the latter use the triple camouflage of music, comedy, and animation to masquerade as children’s entertainment while targeting adults instead. In doing so they do not merely misdirect. Rather, they provide a repetition of sorts for the former children who loved musical comedy but may have outgrown some of their childhood favorites. That repetition, that nostalgic trip back to childhood that simultaneously carries the musical comedy form forward into adulthood is the focus of my next chapter.

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<sup>88</sup> For more on television musicals, see Robynn J. Stilwell’s “The Television Musical” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*.

## Chapter Two

“You’ve Got Be Carefully Taught”: children and musical comedy, a rehearsal

*Picture, if you will, a small stage with a shabby curtain drawn across it, a curtain of a peculiar shade of orange that was last seen in public in 1978, with some uneven yellow stitching across it to give the sense of burlap. Why one would want to imagine the curtain as burlap may now be beyond the knowledge of most of the young people who surround you, but 1978 certainly wanted that for many of its fabrics. You have been staring at that fabric for what feels like days on this one less-than-enchanted evening, watching it creakily open and jerkily close, hauled back and forth by a stagehand who, though clad entirely in black, is nonetheless completely visible. As your eyes drift from the girl in the black T-shirt and headset back toward center stage, you notice that the boys who have been mumbling to each other uncomfortably for a while seem to be waiting for something. Their gazes are directed neither at each other, nor at you in the audience, but at the woman with the baton and the harried look who is trying rather desperately to get the attention of a violist who seems to have nodded off under the combined heat of the dazzlingly bright lights and her black hooded sweatshirt.*

*Prompted by an elbow from the cellist next to her, the violist jerks upright, and the beleaguered conductor at last drags from the tiny orchestra a discord that surpasses any you have heard all night. The boys on stage are visibly relieved, as one plops himself down onto a wooden cube painted so as to resemble a crate and the other straightens his back, widens his eyes, and, with a deep breath, begins to mouth inaudible words. Moments later, with a loud clunk and a dramatic shriek of feedback, a microphone kicks in, and the boy triumphantly warbles out “hate and fear,” his nervous, tight-lipped smile belying the words. This is the song that critics once bated, that Rodgers and Hammerstein insisted upon including in *South Pacific*, “You’ve Got To Be Carefully Taught,” one of musical comedy’s most famously didactic numbers<sup>1</sup>—and a middle school boy, all unaware of the song’s history, is trying desperately to*

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrea Most’s “‘You’ve Got To Be Carefully Taught’: The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*,” *Theatre Journal* 52 (May 2000), as well as David Savran’s “Middlebrow Anxiety” in his *A Queer Sort of Materialism*,

remember both words and notes while he stares into the blinding lights, happily decrying his character's carefully taught racism. Behind him, sweating through his father's overlarge suit, thirteen-year-old French planter Emile De Becque gasps for air, now grateful that his baton-wielding teacher decided, just before the curtain first reluctantly slid off stage left, to cut "This Nearly Was Mine," the hopelessly unprepared song that should have followed this one, that nearly was his.

The school musical is one of the most common and yet least studied forms of musical comedy in contemporary USAmerica. Jennifer Chapman's "Knowing Your Audience" in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, perhaps the only critical study extant, is necessarily limited in scope as it deals also with the related phenomenon of community theater. The pervasiveness of the high school musical—not to mention the recent (short-lived) craze for *High School Musical*—perhaps explains to some degree the association of the musical comedy with children and adolescents, but not entirely. The plethora of Disney musicals, both animated and otherwise, speaks also to this persistent entanglement, as does the focus of so many musicals on coming of age stories, on musicalizing the transition from childhood to adulthood. Indeed, in D. A. Miller's seminal text *Place for us: essay on the Broadway musical*,<sup>2</sup> he identifies not only a persistent affinity that young proto-gay boys have for the musical comedy, but also a persistent affinity that the musical comedy itself has for "the uncontrollable sniffing of the child," "the dependent condition of the Momma's boy," "the infantile...pleasures which the musical numbers...procure [for] us."<sup>3</sup>

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especially 27-34, for more on the racial positioning of *South Pacific*. See Jim Lovensheimer's "You've Got to Be Carefully Rewritten" in his *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten* for the struggle over this number.

<sup>2</sup> I use the adjective "seminal" quite intentionally; Miller's focus on male sexual desire as expressed through Broadway musicals lends the word a specific relevance.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 113, 110, and 86, respectively. Miller claims that the stage musical, in its purest form, always revolves around the search for, identification with, and flight from the Star Mother, a figure embodied in *Gypsy*'s Momma Rose and reincarnated in *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula. See all of his "On Broadway" chapter, 65-137; the *Little Mermaid* reference occurs on page 136.



In more critically examining children—and young teenagers, for I find it difficult and not entirely helpful to limit myself to those twelve and under<sup>4</sup>—as a marginal audience for musical comedy, I don't mean to challenge this productive partnership. Nor do I mean to use the child-centered-ness of the musical comedy to denigrate the form, as, for example, the popular Canadian television comedy about theater, *Sling and Arrows*, did in its third season, and as even Miller, in his deep affection for the genre, seems to do when he says “the Broadway sound...is still mindlessly singing of that transcendental longing which...I have outgrown, or merely renounced.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, I want to use the musical comedy and its complexities as a way of elevating the child audience to full subjectivity, of taking children, if not seriously (for how can a comic subject be taken seriously without denying its essential purpose?), then at least substantially.

As Stacy Wolf has noted, girl fans of many types of music have been dismissed by critics for decades as lacking taste or discernment, as mindless.<sup>6</sup> While Wolf focused especially on the gendered implications of this dismissal (a topic I return to in chapter five), I want to focus here on the child audience member both as an intended recipient (or consumer) of musical comedy, and as an active shaper and participant (or producer) of musical comedy. The type of repetitive interaction with musical comedies that is characteristic of the fans Wolf describes and of children's behavior in general adjusts a musical's structure, alters its impact—reduces its laughter, in Bakhtinian terms, to make of a musical something quite different from what a cast album or a performance review might suggest. This repetitive interaction produces (and reproduces) the intimate relationship that develops over the course of rehearsing a musical comedy; indeed it is itself a form of rehearsal, of learning to

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<sup>4</sup> My elision of childhood and adolescence is not so much a claim that they are interchangeable as it is a tacit recognition of the fact that, for many queer children, the self-discovery and move toward adulthood that is associated with adolescence is fiercely contained and postponed.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter seven of her *Changed for Good*, on girl fans of *Wicked*, 219-237.

ingrain the structure and substance of the musical comedy (or novel, film, picture book, etc.) into the body and consciousness of the child subject.

This chapter explores a few of the ways that children and teens, through such repetition, break out of the strict commercial model in which musical comedies are usually created for them, as well as elaborating to some degree on how that model functions. I begin with a leap backward in time to the land of Oz, a serial children's property that has been deeply concerned with musical comedy since long before the 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz*. Oz illuminates many of the literary traits that mark all musicals as somehow intended for children, as well as the commercial interests that keep them so aimed, a century and more after L. Frank Baum's book. Clicking my heels together, I fly quite rapidly through a series of children's film musicals to land in New York City for *An American Tail* and its sequel, a pair of films that clearly demonstrates many of the specific features of children's musical comedies I enumerate in my Oz discussion. Following *American Tail's* complicated balancing of light-hearted comedy, maudlin sentimentality, and historical pedagogy, I explore the ways that animated musicals speak both to and at children, entertaining and educating in ways that may or may not be the intent of the musicals' creators, but that reflect off of and refract through children's repetitive receptive practices.

Moving farther away from musical comedies' producers, I then turn to the ways that children consume and reproduce their products, by looking at cast-album singalongs and school productions. No longer focusing on whole shows, I examine more directly interactions between children and musicals, and the intricate interplay among the producers, like Baum, who want children to buy more, and the consumers, who are sometimes content to simply re-consume the object already purchased (a film or soundtrack) again, and again, and again. I end up back on stage in an imagined production of *South Pacific* like the one that began the chapter, in that space somewhere between Oz and reality that characterizes so much of children's literature, and of musical comedy. In

returning to *South Pacific*, a musical not designed with children in mind, I demonstrate how the modes of interaction that mark the children's musical are extended to all musicals involving children, and how those modes adjust and nuance their meanings. Or, to put it more simply (perhaps simplistically), I show that Oz and Kansas, Little Rock and Bali Ha'i, are one and the same.

Now, ride the cyclone with me to a time before Dorothy Gale was Judy Garland, before the Wicked Witch had her own name or childhood (or musical), a time when Lyman Frank Baum was writing his tales of a *Marvelous Land* (1904) ruled first by a *Wonderful Wizard* (1900) and then by *Ozma of Oz* (1907). As Joel Chaston notes in his "Baum, Bakhtin, and Broadway: a Centennial Look at the Carnival of Oz," the Oz books have long been dismissed by literary scholars and critics for

decidedly formalistic concerns...The books "ramble and preach"; they lack "quick movement" and "fresh suspense...They dawdle along like a class prophecy." Several critics cite this lack of unity and rambling structure as the lamentable result of Baum's fascination with the theater, especially the "musical extravaganza," the form in which he dramatized several Oz books. [Many critics have] argued that elements of the musical extravaganza found their way into Baum's Oz books and are manifest in their lack of structure.<sup>7</sup>

Chaston answers these critical complaints with an appeal to Bakhtin's dialogical and polyphonic texts, his carnival, and his seriocomic works that "possess a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality."<sup>8</sup> However, rather than simply repeat his rehabilitation of Baum's novels, I want here to focus on the serial nature of both his fourteen Oz novels, and of Baum's musicals, of which there were many. Chaston specifically notes four of them, including his 1881 melodrama *The Maid of Arran* and three twentieth-century Oz-related musicals: *The Wizard of Oz* (1902), *The Woggle-Bug* (1905), and *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz* (1913)—as well as a silent film, *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1914), that Baum initially intended to be a staged musical.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway," 129. His quotations are from James Thurber's "The Wizard of Chittenango."

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 107, quoted in Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway," 130.

<sup>9</sup> Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway," 134.

These musicalizations of Baum's novels (or, in some cases, musical precursors of later novels)<sup>10</sup> share with the novels a disregard for formalist considerations, a haphazard structure that marks them as somehow deficient, unworthy of scholarly attention. Falling far earlier in Broadway's history than *Show Boat* (1927, often lauded as the beginning of Broadway's Golden Age), they are part of the musical's pre-history, remembered now mostly as stepping stones on the way to modern musical comedy. Raymond Knapp points out that extravaganzas "support the 'evolution' model of development" for the musical (even as he critiques the common evolutionary model),<sup>11</sup> noting that the 1874 extravaganza *Evangeline* marked the first appearance of the descriptor "musical comedy" that is central to my discussion, and that extravaganzas "involve[d] a fairly free mix of [music, comedy, and] other theatrical types in a...hybridization of...genre."<sup>12</sup> The narrative that so often governs histories of the musical, then, casts these musicals as the childhood of a form that had yet to grow up, to be serious. Despite the intended adult audience of Baum's musicals, both their association with his children's novels and, decades later, their historical moment in what is now seen as the Golden Age musical's childhood mark them as immature, as somehow less than the more "integrated," moralizing musicals of, for example, Rodgers and Hammerstein.<sup>13</sup>

While information on the specific content of Baum's extravaganzas is limited, as most of them seem to have changed rather dramatically from performance to performance,<sup>14</sup> they (and their

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<sup>10</sup> See below for my discussion of the complicated history of *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz*; Baum's *His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz* was a 1914 silent film later adapted into the ninth Oz novel, *The Scarecrow of Oz* (1915). See Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway," 134.

<sup>11</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, 59. See also 47-48 for his critique of the evolutionary model.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, these grown-up musicals provide the bulk of the musicals now performed by children, as they include far less obviously adult material than pre- or post-Golden Age shows. Chapman notes seven Golden Age musicals and three post-Golden Age musicals among the ten most popular for high school productions. The earliest of these ten is *Oklahoma!* (1943).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Evan Swartz's *Oz Before the Rainbow* tracks the performance life of Baum's first Oz musical, in its various incarnations. The musical that most concerns me here, *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz*, wound its way toward performance over

novel counterparts) point toward future children's musical comedies in a number of illustrative ways. First, they are elaborate carnivals, moving rapidly from one scene, song, or situation to the next, rarely lingering for very long in one place. Second, they have less interest in a romantic couple at the center of the narrative than more conventional adult musicals. This is sometimes because of a lack of narrative entirely, as the carnival nature of the musical threatens frequently to overtake any strictures of plot, and sometimes because the romance, however present, fails to reproduce the marriage trope that Knapp identifies as central to many, many adult musicals.<sup>15</sup> Third, and perhaps most importantly for my argument, they are a series of sequels, a common feature of children's entertainment—and of lowbrow adult entertainment—that marks them as derivative and commercial, as lacking the artistic uniqueness that marks a work as worthy of critical consideration.<sup>16</sup> It is this sequentiality that more than any other trait distinguishes the children's musical comedy from its adult counterpart,<sup>17</sup> as it reproduces a tendency toward repetition that is inherent in children's interactions with entertainment, a tendency that registers in their musicals on several levels. In allowing his novels to be shaped by the children who read them,<sup>18</sup> L. Frank Baum

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several years, changing its title, composer, characters, and pretty much everything else in the process. See Bruce Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business*, discussed in chapter one, for a more thorough dissection of this kind of adaptive process.

<sup>15</sup> See Knapp's *National Identity*, 9. The phrase "adult musical" here should not be taken in Elizabeth Wollman's sense (see her *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City*), but rather in its most literal sense as a musical aimed primarily at an adult audience. Knapp's "divorce trope" is perhaps more applicable, wherein the protagonist must divorce herself from an anti-musical community instead of harmonizing within a musical one (See Knapp, "Getting off the Trolley," 168), but in the case of *Tik-Tok*, even this relationship between protagonist and community is attenuated.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Lloyd Webber's sequel to the wildly successful *Phantom of the Opera*, *Love Never Dies*, has been roundly mocked by critics and fans alike. Musicologist Arreanna Rostosky attended a screening of *Love Never Dies* and attested that neither the show nor the audience was certain to what degree they were there to see *Phantom of the Opera*. All involved seem to have been frustrated and disappointed (personal communication).

<sup>17</sup> See Daniel R. Anderson's various studies of repetition in children's television, reviewed in Kirkorian et al., "Media and Young Children's Learning," *The Future of Children*, Vol. 18 No. 1, Children and Electronic Media, Spring 2008, 39-61.

<sup>18</sup> See M. David Westbrook's "Readers of Oz: Young and Old, Old and New Historicist" in *L. Frank Baum's World of Oz: A Classic Series at 100*. Westbrook notes Baum's acknowledgement of readers' ideas in various Oz prefaces (see page 78). (A note of caution in reading Westbrook's article seems in order: in one of his more high-falutin' analyses of the illustrations on the copyright notices in Oz books, he bases his argument on a portrait of the Tin Soldier, whom he

embraced this tendency, eventually tying nearly all of his fairy tales into the Oz universe to meet the demands of readers who wanted more and more of the same.<sup>19</sup>

One troubling aspect of the sequel (and of its relatives, the prequel, midquel, and spin-off) is its obvious attempt to capitalize on an existing property, an attempt that defies high art expectations of originality. Richard Flynn's "Imitation Oz: the Sequel as Commodity" details the capitalist underpinnings of Baum's desire to keep recreating Oz as a new consumable item. Not only the novels that Flynn describes—both by Baum and by his successors—but also Baum's musicals, can be read simply as chances to make more money off of a profitable commodity. The proliferation of sequels and spin-offs from the original *Wonderful Wizard* in 1900 all the way through *Wicked* (1995 novel, 2003 musical) and beyond<sup>20</sup> capitalize on consumers' familiarity with and affection for the childhood experiences associated with Oz. Flynn juxtaposes this proliferation of spin-offs against children's natural tendency to reread, and he quotes Roland Barthes who noted that

rereading [is] an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us "throw away" the story once it has been consumed ("devoured"), so that we can move on to another story, buy another book, and [it] is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors).<sup>21</sup>

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identifies as the Tin Woodman. This error raises questions, for me, about his knowledge of the works he is examining so authoritatively.)

<sup>19</sup> In *The Road to Oz* (1909), about which more later, Baum gathers characters from his non-Oz books *The Magical Monarch of Mo* (1896), *Dot and Tot of Merryland* (1901), *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus* (1902), *Queen Zixi of Ix* (1904), and *John Dough and the Cherub* (1906). In *The Scarecrow of Oz* (1915), Baum introduced to Oz the protagonists from his abortive two-volume series *The Sea Fairies* (1911) and *Sky Island* (1912). *The Enchanted Island of Yew* (1903) was Baum's only non-Oz fairyland story that was not retroactively annexed to the Oz series.

<sup>20</sup> The 1985 film *Return to Oz* combined *Marvelous Land* and *Ozma* into an adventure film, and itself inspired the 2004 song of the same name by the queer pop band Scissor Sisters. At the West Village Musical Theater Festival in 2010, I witnessed a hopelessly confused fifteen-minute musical set in a dystopian Oz. This venture, known as "Between the Bricks," was at the time the latest new property to come out of Oz, but it has been supplanted by the prequel film *Oz: The Great and Powerful* in 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, 14-15, quoted in Flynn, "Imitation Oz," 125. For more on the marginalized readers Barthes identifies as "professors," see chapters four and five.

The sequel, according to Flynn, “condition[s] the marginalized desire for...rereading into the more acceptable desire for...the sequel.”<sup>22</sup> However, in the case of children, this tendency toward rereading is tolerated, according to Barthes. That tolerance allows breathing room between the capitalist impulses that Flynn catalogs (and bemoans) in the creators of Oz, and the practices of reception that characterize children’s interaction with all forms of media, from book to stage to film.

While children may be targeted as potential consumers of goods, and while they may be quite susceptible to such targeting, it is adults who generally hold financial decision-making power. This straightforward economic fact leads to an important modification to the interactions between children and media that I am describing: the media must target adults as well as children. Producers are aware of this, and the myriad adult jokes that pervade children’s media attest to this; children’s author Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* provides a dazzling example of addressing two age groups simultaneously. In addition, because children are rarely in charge of their own financial decisions, they can maintain a blissful ignorance of Flynn’s detested underlying economic imperatives: as audiences, they can be quite content to re-read rather than read, to re-view rather than view.

This desire for repetition, largely independent of the capitalist forces of marketing, is not merely an artistic choice, taking pleasure in the familiar cadences of a beloved story, but becomes also a child-initiated pedagogical technique. In consuming and re-consuming the fantastical stories that populate the world of young children, or even of older children, we internalize the various and polyphonic messages that those stories convey.<sup>23</sup> The Oz books may “ramble and preach,” as James

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<sup>22</sup> Flynn, “Imitation Oz,” 125.

<sup>23</sup> See A. M. Crawley et al., “Effects of Repeated Exposures to a single episode of the Television Program *Blue’s Clues* on the Viewing Behaviors and Comprehension of Preschool Children.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 91 (1999), 630-637. Experiments found that young children would watch the same episode of *Blue’s Clues* five times in five days with no drop in attention, but with significant increase in comprehension and participation. The study is summarized and reviewed in Kirkorian et al., “Media and Young Children’s Learning,” 51.

Thurber accused them of doing, but that preaching is both part of and beside the point of the novels. Young readers take in Baum's sometimes didactic morals,<sup>24</sup> even if not after the first reading, and as they grow with the novels, they learn to assess those morals and accept or reject them. Alongside Baum's intended messages, too, they can read the implicit messages that enter from other sources, like the affection for the screwball comedy of actors David C. Montgomery and Fred A. Stone that informed the characters of Tin Woodman and Scarecrow in later novels.<sup>25</sup> Through repetition and re-reading, children can move from one target audience to the other, can negotiate what it is to become an adult by teaching themselves to read, watch, and rehearse the moments of adult comprehension that arise from the dual audiences necessitated by capitalist production.

This notion of re-reading as pedagogy is not very far from the standard practice by which an actor or a musician learns to do what ze does best, what we call re-hearsing. Just as the child reading *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* for the umpteenth time may understand something ze missed the first dozen times,<sup>26</sup> so too the (child or adult) actor who has finally memorized hir lines may at long last realize their meaning. Parents and teachers of young musicians encourage their charges to "practice," a word I dreaded when I was eight and learning to play the cello, but a word I proclaim loudly and often as a cello teacher. It is only through repetition that the muscles learn how the cello works; music lessons require the same sort of rote learning that children instinctively impose upon themselves through their insatiable desire to hear or read their favorite stories again and again. In

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<sup>24</sup> And later Ruth Plumly Thompson's, Jack Snow's, John R. Neill's, Rachel Cosgrove's, Eloise Jarvis McGraw and Lauren McGraw Warner's, Roger S. Baum's, Donald Abbot's, and eventually Gregory Maguire's...

<sup>25</sup> See Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway," 133. See also Daniel P. Mannix's "The Perfect Scarecrow: Fred A. Stone" in *L. Frank Baum's World of Oz: A Classic Series at 100*, edited by Suzanne Rahn. Mannix's abiding love for Stone leads him to claim Stone as the model also for Baum's Patchwork Girl, the Scarecrow's comic foil and suggested romantic partner in later novels.

<sup>26</sup> In my case, the troubling implications of the Patchwork Girl's color supposedly determining her social station. In light of her creator's assertion that once brought to life "she will find herself to be of so many unpopular colors that she'll never dare be rebellious or impudent," Scraps' immediate rebellion smacks of a rather surprising stance against racially determined servitude.



producing sequel after sequel to *The Wonderful Wizard*, Baum was doing more than making money, however compromised his intentions may have been—he was teaching children, in the most childlike way, to rehearse Ozian values, to practice the carnival.

As an example of the sequel as rereading and as pedagogy, and also of the interpenetration of musical comedy and children's novel that marked Baum's writing, consider the books *Ozma of Oz*, *The Road to Oz*, and *Tik-Tok of Oz* and the musical that links them, *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz*. According to Chaston, *Ozma* (published in 1907) was adapted into the 1913 musical, *Tik-Tok Man*, but required so many changes for the stage that Baum immediately turned the musical back into a novel, which he published as *Tik-Tok of Oz* in 1914.<sup>27</sup> The novels are understandably similar, with the identical antagonist (The Nome King),<sup>28</sup> very similar plots, and nearly interchangeable protagonists (Dorothy again, and Betsy, another Midwestern farm girl who arrives via shipwreck, accompanied this time by a mule). As Chaston points out, *Tik-Tok* features popular theatrical plot devices, “music-hall puns,” stock figures of the musical extravaganza, and chorus girls, because of its theatrical origins.<sup>29</sup> What Chaston fails to note is that *The Tik-Tok Man* also incorporates principal characters from the series' fifth volume, *The Road to Oz*, published in 1909, making both the musical and the novel based upon it hybrids of two earlier novels rather than simply an adaptation of *Ozma*.<sup>30</sup>

*Ozma*, the earliest in this self-referential sequence of Oz works, itself functions as a sequel-imitation-rereading of the original *Wonderful Wizard*. Dorothy returns to Oz, carried not by a cyclone but by a storm at sea, which dumps her and a hen named Bill (whom Dorothy immediately renames

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<sup>27</sup> See Chaston, “Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway,” 134 and 138.

<sup>28</sup> Baum's spelling. Later authors substituted the more standard “gnome” for Baum's “nome.”

<sup>29</sup> See Chaston, “Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway,” 140.

<sup>30</sup> According to Baum, he initially based the *Tik-Tok Man* story on a combination of *Ozma*, *Road*, and his sixth Oz book, *The Emerald City of Oz* (1910). Which elements of *Tik-Tok Man* came from *Emerald City* I have been unable to determine. See Grace Kingsley's “Investigating Tik-Tok To See How He Was Made” in the *Los Angeles Times* of 3 April 1913.

Billina, to avoid gender confusion) on the shore of a neighboring fairyland, Ev. Taking the place of the Tin Woodman and Scarecrow, at first, is the copper mechanical man, Tik-Tok,<sup>31</sup> who accompanies Dorothy (and Billina) on her quest to conquer not the Witch of the West, but the Nome King (although the Tin Woodman, Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion join them later). This quest, like the journey to the Witch's castle in *Wizard*, is provided for her by the ruler of Oz, now the benevolent fairy princess Ozma in place of the humbug Wizard. In the end, Dorothy returns to Uncle Henry, through the magical intervention of *Glinda ex machina*. In addition to these structural adaptations of *Wonderful Wizard*, the novel departs from a merely formulaic repetition of the events of *Wizard* to incorporate a new plot line about the rescue of the Royal Family of Ev from said Nome King (a plot later adapted for the 1985 film *Return to Oz*), and to add elements to assist in translating it into an eventual stage musical—a chorus, palace plots, roles designed for popular comedians.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Tik Tok is sometimes considered to be the first humanoid robot, an eventual staple of science fiction. For more on the relationship between science fiction and musical comedy, see chapter four. For more on Tik Tok as original robot, see Raylyn Moore's *Wonderful Wizard, Marvelous Land*, 144 and Anthony Ralston's *Encyclopedia of Computer Science*, 706.

<sup>32</sup> In what may be a coincidence, chapter sixteen of the carnivalesque *Ozma* is entitled "Purple, Green, and Gold," the traditional colors associated with Mardi Gras. This reference to carnival emphasizes the novel-cum-musical's topsy-turvy upending of authority figures and hierarchies, as the chapter details the overthrow of the Nome King's powerful enchantments by Billina the common hen.



Figure 1: Dorothy in *Ozma of Oz* and her “clone” Betsy in *Tik-Tok of Oz*, drawn by John R. Neill and colored in by Susan T. Dworkin. Tik-Tok is in the background, colored in with the “copper” crayon because Baum described him as made of copper, and the colorist insisted on accuracy.

The novel *Tik-Tok of Oz*, an adaptation of an adaptation of two sequels, unsurprisingly reprises many of these elements—and it is here that description becomes complicated. My own familiarity with these novels dates back to my childhood (see Figure 1, illustrations from my family’s copies of *Ozma* and *Tik-Tok* purchased second-hand by my great-grandfather, Sam Glauber, for my grandmother, Ruth Dworkin, and illustrated by my mother, then Susan Dworkin), and I acknowledge that the following dizzying array of characters with similar names and structural functions can seem unhelpful for one who never belonged to the official Oz fan club, as I did from quite a young age.<sup>33</sup> By way of illustration, both of the particular details and of the repetitive

<sup>33</sup> My own brief Oz fan fiction was published in the monthly newsletter of The Royal Club of Oz, *The Emerald City Mirror*, when I was eight (June 1992, issue 7).

elements I want to highlight, I have included the following *Dramatis Personae* of *Wizard*, *Ozma*, *Road*, and *Tik-Tok*, the novels, and *Wizard* and *Tik-Tok* the musicals:

Role	<i>Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i>	<i>Wizard of Oz</i>	<i>Ozma of Oz</i>	<i>Road to Oz</i>	<i>Tik-Tok of Oz</i>	<i>The Tik-Tok Man of Oz</i>
Protagonist	Dorothy	Dorothy Gale	Dorothy Gale	Dorothy Gale	Betsy Bobbin	Betsy Baker/Bobbin
Animal sidekick	Toto the dog, Cowardly Lion	Imogen the cow	Billina the hen	Toto the dog	Hank the mule	Hank the mule, (Baden-Baden the hen)
Humanoid sidekick(s)	Scarecrow, Tin Woodman	Scarecrow, Tin Woodman	Tik-Tok, assorted	Shaggy Man, Polychrome, Button-Bright	Shaggy Man, Polychrome, Tik-Tok	Shaggy Man, Polychrome, Tik-Tok
Minor villain	Wizard of Oz	Sir Wiley Gyle	Princess Langwidere	Queen of the Soodlers	Queen Ann of Oogaboo	Queen Ann of Oogaboo
Major villain	Wicked Witch of the West	Pastoria II, King of Oz	The Nome King	(none)	The Nome King	The Nome King
Magical Ruler	Wizard	Wizard	Ozma of Oz	Ozma of Oz	Tititi-Hoochoo, Ozga of Roseland	Ozma of Roseland
Quest	Kill the witch, go home	Go home	Free the royal family of Ev	Go to Ozma's birthday party	Free Shaggy Man's brother	Free Shaggy Man's brother
Male chorus	Munchkins	Munchkins, Cooks	Army of Oz, Nomes	Soodlers, Foxes, Donkeys, Santa Claus's attendants	Army of Oogaboo, Nomes	Army of Oogaboo, Nomes
Female chorus	Poppies, field mice	Munchkins, Poppies, Waitresses	The many heads of Princess Langwidere	Foxes, Donkeys, "a thousand young girls"	Roses, Ladies of Light	Flowers, Rainbow's daughters, Clockwork chorus, Nomes
<i>Dea ex machina</i>	Glinda	Witch of the North	Glinda	Ozma	Ozma	Polychrome

Now, on to *Tik-Tok* the novel. Betsy Bobbin (Betsy Baker in early scripts of the musical), an orphan girl from Oklahoma, is cast onto the shores of an Oz-adjacent fairyland by a ship caught in a

storm. Her companion is not a dog or a hen (or Imogen, the cow who accompanied Dorothy in the stage version of *Wizard*, or Eureka, her kitten from *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz*, or Jim, the horse that accompanied Dorothy's cousin Zeb in the same novel), but a mule named Hank, as Baum apparently continued working his way through the barnyard. Betsy's first humanoid companion is the Shaggy Man, Dorothy's traveling companion from *The Road to Oz*, who provides her with the quest that will occupy much of the novel, his search for his lost brother, who has been kidnapped by the same Nome King. Tik-Tok, as one might expect from the title, reappears as another companion for Betsy on this journey; Tik-Tok and Shaggy together function as the vaudeville comedy team the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman provided in the *Wizard* musical.

In place of minor villain Princess Langwidere who threatens Dorothy early in *Ozma*, *Tik-Tok* features minor villain Queen Ann of Oogaboo,<sup>34</sup> whose back story occupies the opening chapters of the novel, and who attempts to conquer the small party of traveling companions as part of her plan for world conquest, though she and her army join the party in short order and become allies. In heading the buffoonish army that provides both a male chorus and comic relief, Ann also plays part of the role Ozma played in her eponymous novel; the other, more benevolent half of Ozma's role as beautiful fairy whose sweetness instantly wins friends is played by the Rainbow's daughter, Polychrome, another character borrowed from *The Road to Oz*. While Polychrome and the Shaggy Man meet and travel together in *Road*, they seem not to know one another when they first meet in *Tik-Tok*, a continuity error arising from the later novel's basis in the musical and that musical's basis in both *Ozma* and *Road* (see Figure 2, wherein one young colorist has attempted to correct continuity errors).

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<sup>34</sup> Despite the sound of the name, and despite Baum's comfort with racist stereotyping in *The Woggle-Bug Book* (1905), among other places, Oogaboo seems not to have carried any racial overtones in *Tik-Tok*, either the novel or the musical.

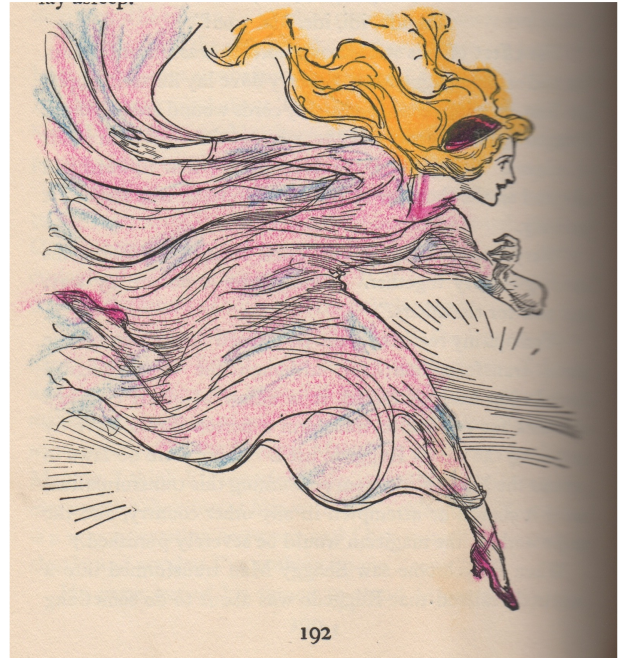


Figure 2: Polychrome in *The Road to Oz* and *Tik-Tok of Oz*, drawn by John R. Neill and colored in by Susan T. Dworkin. Note that her collar, missing in the righthand drawing, has been added in crayon to correct her inconsistent costuming. Nothing could be done about her inconsistent memory.

This type of continuity error is common in Baum's sequels, evidence perhaps of a certain cavalier attitude toward detail, but this attitude provides Baum an opportunity to correct inconvenient details from novel to novel, adjusting Oz "from magical fairyland to social Utopia,"<sup>35</sup> in Chaston's words. Playing fast and loose with details, rather than abiding by the rules set out at the start of the series, emphasizes the series' nature not as a sequence of books that follow a linear timeline, but rather a collection of books that can be (and are) read out of order. Each Oz book

<sup>35</sup> Chaston, "Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway," 138.

begins again, sets up a new quest and cast, and the reader is free to ignore rules set up within other books.<sup>36</sup> The sequel doesn't come after the original; it comes again.

*Tik-Tok* is the perfect sequel, with a story adapted not from any new idea or other source, but rather from the earlier novel. Some characters are changed (Dorothy becomes Betsy; Ozma becomes Ozga; the army of 26 Officers and one Private becomes a different army of only 16 Officers to one Private), but some reappear, with knowledge of the events of the previous novel, but almost entirely lacking the hindsight to learn from those events. Baum revisits situations and characters with apparently no thought for any kind of high-minded artistic creativity; whether because of his commercial enterprise or his writing specifically for children, he seems to have eagerly acknowledged the derivative qualities of *Tik-Tok*, inserting familiar points of reference for his audience of children. Indeed, the final chapters of the novel, after the plot has successfully concluded, focus mainly on introducing the new characters to the old, allowing readers to reacquaint themselves with Dorothy and Toto, Ozma and the Wizard. Betsy, who has functioned as “a Dorothy-clone,” as Chaston describes her,<sup>37</sup> finally meets the original Dorothy, who, readers are now told, has been longing for a playmate her own age—while the character replaced Dorothy in the musical, in the new novel, she complements her, introducing a new object of identification and affection for Baum's primary audience of young girls.

Similarly, the Army of Oogaboo at first functions just as the Army of Oz functioned in the earlier novel, but toward the end experiences a sort of group character development that distinguishes them from the larger Army: when they are lost in the Nome King's caverns, tearing

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<sup>36</sup> The most dramatic departure from the rules of other Oz books came when illustrator John R. Neill took over writing the series in the 1940s. In Neill's acid-trip vision of Oz, buildings suddenly became characters in their own right and the inhabitants of Oz's various quadrants were themselves blue, red, yellow, and purple rather than simply adorning themselves in those colors.

<sup>37</sup> Chaston, “Baum, Bakhtin, Broadway,” 139.

their uniforms and flesh on jagged rocks, they learn courage, humility, and Dorothy's own lesson from the MGM film—there's no place like home. Ozma's army, in contrast, functions entirely as a comic chorus throughout. The basis of the later novel in musical theater (and the aim of the earlier one towards it) is structurally visible in the existence of both Armies, each a Gilbertian (and Sullivanian) male chorus if ever there was one, with a single, comically pompous group persona.<sup>38</sup> They are balanced in *Tik-Tok* the novel by the female chorus of Roses in chapter five, and the "Lovely Ladies of Light" in chapter twelve, each group similarly functioning as single characters despite their multiplicity. When the Army disappears into a pit in the Nome Kingdom, they are replaced in their choral function by the all-male Nomes, recalling *The Pirates of Penzance*, wherein the pirate chorus, at first a mix of tenors and basses, becomes an all-tenor ensemble upon the appearance of the all-bass policemen. The Roses and Ladies of Light could easily be played on stage by one group of women, while the Nomes and the Army could easily be played by one group of men.

*Tik-Tok* the musical does not balance quite this way, however. As an early twentieth century extravaganza rather than a late nineteenth century operetta, it emphasizes the female chorus over the male chorus to an astonishing degree; Baum notes explicitly in an early draft of the script that the Nomes are all to be played by women, as is an additional chorus of clocks that Baum wisely dropped for the novel. These clocks adorn the covers of the sheet music published from the show; a dozen or so faces of pretty white girls set into clock faces back up a glittering Tik-Tok and a comical Hank, while Betsy, Polychrome, Ann, and the Shaggy Man—not to mention Betsy's hen, Baden-Baden—

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<sup>38</sup> See the chorus of cowardly policemen in *Pirates of Penzance*, or the chorus of preening Peers in *Iolanthe* for possible inspirations for Baum's Armies. *Tik-Tok Man's* "The Army of Oogaboo" directly parallels the "Entrance and March of the Peers" in *Iolanthe*, introducing the chorus with an instrumental march followed by a declarative "who are we" song in military style. See also the chorus of Heavy Dragoons in *Patience*, whose entrance song, "If you want a receipt for that popular mystery," channels the pomposity of Baum's Armies into an effeminate "list song" (see chapter four) touting their manly virtues. The historical paragons of manliness they embody culminate, rather inexplicably, in Madame Tussaud.



are nowhere to be found.<sup>39</sup> The aim of *Tik-Tok Man* was an audience not of young children, mostly girls, but of adults, mostly men (much like *The Perils of Pauline* and similar damsel in distress serials), and its marketing straightforwardly demonstrated that shifted target.

The songs of *Tik-Tok Man* are all that survives of the show, apart from the very early (1909) draft of the script I used to fill in my chart above, a draft with the wrong title (*Ozma of Oz*) and composer (Manuel Klein).<sup>40</sup> I have traced changes made to the show during its national tour through reviews of the production from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles again, where the show returned after forgoing Broadway.<sup>41</sup> Billina the hen's stage counterpart, Baden-Baden, was dropped before rehearsals began in Los Angeles, moving the musical farther away from a retelling of *Ozma*. Other changes, whether from book to script or from one version of the show to another, similarly distinguished the musical from its literary models—such as the complete absence of Oz, the location, anywhere in the musical. Whereas in *Ozma, Road*, and in the eventual *Tik-Tok* novel, all the characters wind up happily ever aftering in the Emerald City, in *Tik-Tok Man*, there is no trip to that eponymous fairyland, a fact noted by the *San Francisco Chronicle's* theater reviewer.<sup>42</sup>

However, despite these stage-driven changes that prevent a reading of *Tik-Tok Man* as just another retelling of the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* novel, other changes emphasize *Tik-Tok Man's* status as a retelling of the *Wizard of Oz* play. Hank the mule was portrayed, to universal critical acclaim, by

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<sup>39</sup> For the handful of songs interpolated into the show by producer Oliver Morosco and music director Victor Scherzinger, an alternate cover depicted the faces of the clock chorus and Tik-Tok, as well as a completely shag-free Shaggy Man, clean shaven and with heavily tweezed eyebrows.

<sup>40</sup> The script is held in the New York Public Library, and was published online as an entry in Digital Curator for the Performing Arts Doug Reside's *Musical of the Month* blog: <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2011/12/27/musical-month-ozma-oz>.

<sup>41</sup> A sneering review of the Chicago production in *Variety* indicates that perhaps Broadway was not an option; the author credits the show's success in Chicago merely to a lack of any other musicals on stage at the time. He closes with the succinct "The 'Tik-Tok' show cannot hope for success in New York in its present state, nor could it be expected to go over in Chicago under normal conditions." (May 28, 1913 review in *Variety*, 20.)

<sup>42</sup> See "The Tik-Tok Man of Oz is Gay Winner" by Waldemar Young in that paper's April 22, 1913 edition, 10.

Fred Woodward, who had played the Cowardly Lion in the original *Wizard* production. As noted above, Tik-Tok and Shaggy functioned as a comic vaudeville team, and were played by such a team (James C. Morton and Frank Moore), though they were compared unfavorably to the vaudeville team that had portrayed the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman (Montgomery and Stone, irrespectively). Reviewing the show's premiere in Chicago, *Variety* noted that it was "hardly more than a revised edition of 'The Wizard of Oz,'" which "lacks the novelty and the originality."<sup>43</sup> The *Chicago Tribune*, in a more favorable review, also made explicit some of the structural similarities I have noted in my chart, especially Dorothy and Betsy, Hank and Imogen, the poppies and the other flowers. Whatever reviewers thought about the show's merits, they all recognized its debt to *Wizard* and its sequel status, despite no characters reappearing from one musical to the next; only in the novels did characters like Dorothy and Tik-Tok have repeat appearances.

All of these impacts, direct and indirect, of novels on musicals and musicals on novels, serve to entangle not only the works as works, but also the audiences of the respective versions of this story. While the novels are unabashedly aimed at children, the musicals were intended for a largely adult audience.<sup>44</sup> The confusion of audiences, as well as media, leads to such inexplicable situations as the utterly superfluous romance between Private Jo Files and Ozga in the novel, which has absolutely no impact on the novel's plot, but merely serves to eliminate both characters from active participation, as after their first romantic connection, they simply murmur sweet nothings to one another while everyone else gets on with conquering the villain. Similarly, jokes about greedy American bankers seem ill suited to an audience of children, who likely had very little experience with such characters—although they are delivered in the novel by Betsy, the archetypal such child.

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<sup>43</sup> *Variety* review, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Upon the musical's return to Los Angeles at the beginning of 1914, however, reviewer Gardner Bradford chastised producer Oliver Morosco for making changes that made "a wonderful child's show unfit for children. And that is harmful, to say the least." (*Los Angeles Times* review of January 19, 1914, III-4).

These holdovers from the stage add to the novel's polyphonic nature, and to its ability to reward re-reading with varying messages and foci depending on the reader's interest or age.



Figure 3: Dedication page from *Tik-Tok of Oz*. The dedication is to Louis F. Gottschalk, composer of *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz*, illustrated by John R. Neill, colored in (and monogrammed) by Susan T. Dworkin, my mother and one of the dedicatees of this dissertation.

I read both *Ozma* and *Tik-Tok* many, many times during my childhood, long before discovering that they originated from the same source. To me, these incongruities arising from the adult musical did not mar my experience of reading; rather, what literary critics consider inconsistencies and weaknesses functioned as puzzles to figure out only gradually, if at all, upon repeated rereading. The jokes I didn't get, if they really seemed important, were taken to my mother, the previous owner of my copies of the novels, who would explain them to the best of her ability. As I grew up with the stories, the incomprehensible moments diminished in number, though some certainly remained—why, for example, did The Shaggy Man's brother call him "Shaggy?" Shouldn't he know his name? The mild humor of conspicuously avoiding naming the character (who had been introduced in the fifth book without a name) was, to me, a puzzlement<sup>45</sup> rather than a joke.

Upon the umpteenth reading of the familiar story, when the plot was firmly embedded in my head, I had space between the events to think through such puzzles. Indeed, apparently aware that readers were worrying at these problems in the series, Baum used *Tik-Tok* to solve one such inconsistency—the fact that Dorothy's dog, Toto, alone of all of the animals in Oz, did not speak. In the final chapter, he explained to his readers—by means of the wise *deus ex machina* Ozma speaking directly to their personification, Dorothy—that Toto simply hadn't wanted to speak yet, and he could whenever he felt like taking the trouble. The act of readers puzzling out jokes rather than laughing at them is a direct expression of Bakhtin's reduced laughter—and, perhaps, a partial explanation of why *Tik-Tok Man* had a very short life on stage. Reduced laughter, as I explained in chapter one, works primarily through repetition and familiarity; in a show that ran for only a few weeks at a time in any given city, there was no opportunity for audiences, child or adult, to develop the ongoing relationship with the show that allows for appreciation of humor on repeat

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<sup>45</sup> "A Puzzlement" is the signature number of the King in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* (1951).

engagements.<sup>46</sup> Absent physical laughter, a musical comedy extravaganza of the early twentieth century was not going to succeed on the Broadway stage.

*Return with me now to a familiar scene. It is springtime once more, and with the harbingers of that season—melting snow, the first robin, crocuses, tax day—comes the inevitable school musical. This is your second trip into that cramped room that the principal so optimistically terms an auditorium, and last year’s South Pacific seems still to linger in the room in the odor of sweaty near-pubescent actors drenched in far too much cologne and adrenaline. Wrinkling your nose, you suffer through an opening number that has been choreographed within an inch of its life, watching false-bearded children twirl and stagger, wondering what on earth they are singing about when the choreography points their backs toward the audience and their mouths toward the impassive rear wall upstage. The lone violinist perched precariously atop the flimsy set seems just as interested in the lyrics; as she strains down toward the stage, her shoulder rest more firmly attached to her fibrous plastic beard than the beard is to her chin, you hope fervently that she won’t plummet into the crowd of classmates below her, underscoring the dangerous titular simile that Teyve, formerly Lieutenant Cable, has just crowed: “our lives would be as shaky as a Fiddler on the Roof!”*

*As the crowd dissipates into the wings, a handful of zaftig mamas and papas shed their bulky shtetl costumes to reveal the basic black of stagehands who have been pressed into service as warm bodies by that overzealous choreographer. They push a small plywood house onto the stage, and a whirl of daughters envelops Teyve, daughters all currently taller than he is, except for little Bielke, who appears to be someone’s five-year-old sister. The family just as quickly disappears in all directions, while three daughters remain to sing about their future husbands: Bloody Mary (Tzeitel), Nellie Forbush (Hodel), and one you haven’t seen before, a twelve-year-old little bird, little Chavaleh. Upon the triumphant conclusion of their trio, the three vanish, slowly, behind the familiar orange curtain, heroically operated*

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<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, on top of the inherently repetitive, cyclic nature of the Oz novels, several of them appeared as serials in local newspapers after Baum’s death. This posthumous serialization capitalized on broad familiarity with the Oz stories and characters that already existed among USAmerican children, and cultivated a similar familiarity among the newspaper-reading audience.

*by the familiar stagehand, still panting from her uncharacteristic onstage exertion in the opening number, and still sporting the navy babushka that covered her head in accordance with "Tradition."*

Later children's musicals frequently reproduce many of the aforementioned features of the Oz novels and musicals, sometimes duplicating their serial nature even absent the repeating characters or setting that generally mark works as a series. *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971), for example, is a carnival of animated suits of armor, anthropomorphic cartoon animals, children teaching lessons to adults, real witches and phony magicians, and similar topsy-turvydom. It contains only six songs, making rote memorization and re-consumption of those songs simple for younger viewers. The developing romance between Emelius Brown and Eglantine Price is tertiary to both the "defeat the invading Nazis" plot and the "children force Miss Price to relax" plot. While *Bedknobs* is not strictly a sequel, it was based on a two-book series by Mary Norton, and it functioned in many ways as a sequel to Disney's earlier live-action musical *Mary Poppins* (1964), a similar tale of a magical woman who takes neglected English children on cartoon adventures and teaches David Tomlinson to love them.

Tomlinson played George Banks in *Poppins* and Emelius Brown in *Bedknobs*, and was one of several contributors to both films; composers Richard and Robert Sherman also wrote both scores, including one song that was cut from *Poppins* and inserted into *Bedknobs*, "The Beautiful Briny." *Poppins* was also based on a series of children's books, this time a trilogy-plus-extra-stories by P. L. Travers. *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), a children's musical that fell chronologically between *Poppins* and *Bedknobs*, easily reads as part of that series, as it shares a carnival plot and a songwriting team with both films, and a star with *Poppins* in Dick Van Dyke. According to Richard Stirling's gossipy biography of Julie Andrews, she was offered the part of Truly Scrumptious, opposite Van Dyke's

Caractacus Potts, but turned it down.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, this pseudo-series both supports and undermines Flynn's point about sequels. *Chitty* was not produced by Disney, while *Poppins* and *Bedknobs* were. Certainly, commercial success motivated the continuation of this series to some extent, but the success accrued not to the writers, producers, or directors, who changed film to film, but to the stars and the composers.

While this series takes some effort to recognize as such, there are many examples of children's musical comedies that require no such effort. The Disney corporation has long since noticed the tendency of children to devour sequels to familiar stories, and have answered that need with musical sequels to, among others, *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pocahontas*, *The Lion King*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *101 Dalmatians*,<sup>48</sup> *Mulan*, and *Peter Pan*.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the Oz series, these sequels often did not follow immediately upon the success of the first film, with some delayed nearly forty years. The exhaustive attempt to squeeze every last dollar from a commodity that characterizes Disney's business model (and Baum's) is a clear motivator of this overwhelming sequel production, but admitting that fact, and the sequels' often obviously derivative nature, does not make these musicals less worthy of study. Indeed, the existence of sequels necessarily adjusts the meanings of their originals, at least for those audience members who have experienced the sequels. Once the characters and settings have been developed in sequels, prequels, midquels, and episodic collections of various -quels, any analysis of Aladdin's actions and motivations in *Aladdin* can

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<sup>47</sup> The part was then offered to (and accepted by) Sally Ann Howes, who had been Andrews' replacement on Broadway as Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, making her something of a personal sequel to Andrews.

<sup>48</sup> The sequel to *101 Dalmatians*, *101 Dalmatians 2: Patch's London Adventure*, provided the test material for a 2006 study on the effects of repeat viewing on children's comprehension—though the children in the study had not seen the original film. See H. Skouteris and L. Kelly, "Repeated-viewing and co-viewing of an animated video: an examination of factors that impact on young children's comprehension of video content," *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 31 (2006), 22-30.

<sup>49</sup> In addition to these full length films, Disney also produced serials that ran on the *Mickey Mouse Club* program. For more on television, repetition, and musical comedy, see chapter one.

productively compare them to his actions and motivations in *The Return of Jafar* and *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* (not to mention his short-lived television series), while analyses of Belle's singing in *Beauty and the Beast* can be inflected by knowledge of her singing in *Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas* and *Belle's Magical World* (as well as the stage version of *Beauty and the Beast*).

Keeping this fact in mind, I move now to examine *An American Tail*, a non-Disney animated musical comedy released in 1986. *American Tail* has three sequels (so far): *Fievel Goes West*, *The Treasure of Manhattan Island*, and *The Mystery of the Night Monster*, as well as a television series, *Fievel's American Tails*, although my own childhood experience included only the original film and its 1991 sequel, *Fievel Goes West*. I own the original VHS release of *American Tail*, and as a child I watched it more times than I can count, after first seeing it in the theater when I was three years old; I saw *Fievel Goes West* twice. While the first film obviously had a much greater impact on me, the second nevertheless retroactively influenced my experience of the first, particularly through my experience of the flamingly effeminate Persian cat Tiger (voiced by Dom DeLuise), a character who plays a far greater role in the second film (and in my memory) than in the first.

Right from its opening scene, *An American Tail* announces itself as something other than a light-hearted comedy aimed purely at children. For those members of my generation who remember the film primarily for "Somewhere Out There" or "There are no Cats in America," the pogrom that interrupts Chanukah in the small Russian Jewish *shtetl* of Shostka comes as a shock, upon re-viewing the film. The Cossacks are frightening, but not nearly as frightening as their feline companions, whose slathering jaws and gleaming eyes are only slightly moderated by their bizarrely bouncing fur hats and their hapless inability to capture the Mousekewitz family. That name, of course, in addition to the film's animated-ness and the various jokes in the opening scene (Fievel's overlarge hat; the kitchen canisters labeled "Bread Crumbs," "Bread Crumbs," and "Even More Bread Crumbs"), keeps *Tail* within the realm of children's film and of comedy, despite the darkness of the situation,



and tempers the tragedy of the destruction of the Mousekewitzes' home with humor, for both adult and child audiences.

This blending of tragedy and comedy is characteristic of the American Jewish immigrant humor produced by the generation *Tail* is depicting in mouse form. In his survey of American Jewish humor in *Comedy: A geographic and historical guide*, James D. Bloom cites a century of Jewish humorists from Henri Bergson to Madeline Kahn asserting in various ways the close relationship between laughter and pain.<sup>50</sup> Sarah Blacher Cohen, in her "The Varieties of Jewish Humor," describes nineteenth-century Eastern European Jews thus:

The butt of a cruel joke, they found that God had singled them out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence. Powerful in interpreting the vast complexities of sacred texts, they were powerless in their dealings with brainless peasants. Priding themselves on the cohesiveness of their private world, they felt isolated from the world at large. To cope with the anxiety produced by these incongruities, they created a humor in which laughter and trembling were inextricably intermingled.<sup>51</sup>

While the children who watch *Tail* may not be versed in the complexities of life as a Jew in Russia in 1885, they can certainly learn to digest the blend of humor and tragedy that marks the Mousewitzes' lives both in Shostka and in New York. Re-watching *Tail* solidifies this frame through which to understand their own lives, whether as a descendant of the very people the mice represent, as I did, or simply as a child who experiences tragedy and threat.<sup>52</sup> Comedy, in both its lightness and its open-endedness, keeps the threat at bay, keeps the cats' jaws from closing; so too does repetition.<sup>53</sup> For the immigrants depicted in *Tail* and for their rapt young audience, this function is essential.

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<sup>50</sup> Bloom, "American Jewish Humor," 93.

<sup>51</sup> Cohen, "The Varieties of Jewish Humor," 2.

<sup>52</sup> For more on the connection between musical comedy and Jewish immigrant humor, see Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway musical*.

<sup>53</sup> For more on the open-ended nature of comedy, see chapter one.

One of the most striking realizations I had while re-watching the film as an adult was that, of all of the writing on the screen in *Tail*, only the Moskowitz/Mousekewitz pun and the later “Giant Mouse of Minsk” printed on the side of that fantastic creature had remained in my mind. The kitchen canisters, the barrels on the immigrant ship labeled “Breakfast Herring,” “Lunch Herring,” and “Dinner Herring,” the on-screen titles that announced various locations and dates—none of them registered despite the many, many times I watched the film as a child. Perhaps these moments passed too quickly for my young eyes to take in, or perhaps they were simply dull, but whatever the reason, those pieces of information and jokes were not part of my experience of the film as a child.

One such entertaining moment, which combines a written joke with a musical one, comes after Fievel has been separated from his family and is wandering around New York looking for them. As he gazes at the moon reflected in a puddle on the street, the camera pans past a torn piece of sheet music lying in that puddle. At the top of the page, the quick reader can make out part of the title, “Poor Wandering O...,” and below that the words “Words by W. S. Gilbert,” and “Mabel and Girls.” As these words come into view, the song that begins playing over a montage of Fievel wandering is indeed Gilbert and Sullivan’s “Poor Wand’ring One” from *The Pirates of Penzance*, sung in that operetta by Mabel and her sisters.<sup>54</sup> The moment is brief, and the song fades into Hans Zimmer’s original score in under a minute, but it nevertheless underscores the fact that the film speaks to adults not only through its somewhat grim historical setting but also through jokes as lighthearted as the ones aimed at children, but not possible for those children to perceive. The musical comedy works to remain a musical comedy, whether viewed by children or adults, and even for the viewer who has long since left childhood behind, *Tail* supplies new revelations and

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<sup>54</sup> See chapter four for my discussion of attention to very small details in Gilbert and Sullivan performance and reception, and why this misspelled title might raise hackles among the “inner brotherhood” of G&S fans. Interestingly, the film’s setting in New York in 1886 makes this quotation and the existence of the sheet music historically quite appropriate; *Pirates* had premiered in New York on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1879.

humorous moments, rewarding repetition with more to comprehend, continuing the pedagogical process into adulthood.

The brevity of this musical moment is characteristic of the fast-paced movement of *An American Tail*, which clocks in at a mere 75 minutes. When Fievel meets the Italian immigrant mouse Tony, or the aforementioned Tiger, they are instantly his best friends. When Tony meets Irish immigrant mouse Bridget, they immediately fall in love and form a substitute nuclear family for Fievel. Their relationships and actions are shorthand for the more complicated development an older audience expects. In the context of these rapid-fire events, the temporal rupture of each song stands out sharply; it takes far longer for Fievel and Tiger to sing “A Duo” than it did for them to move from prisoner and jailer to best of friends. Because of this temporal imbalance, the book of *American Tail* often reads like a framework to hang songs on, even more than in an adult musical comedy. Despite this weighting of song over dialogue, the rapid pace of the film keeps the score to a mere four original songs: “There are no Cats in America,” “Never Say Never,” “Somewhere Out There,” and “A Duo.”

“There are no Cats in America” provides an overlapping example both of how the film works pedagogically and of how it speaks to adults. The song is a litany of exaggerated ethnic stereotypes, with each of the three verses highlighting a different nation: Russia, Italy, and Ireland. In between the heavily ethnically marked verses comes the unmarked “American” chorus, in which all the mice can join, no matter their nation of origin. For the children watching this song again and again, it carefully teaches them, rather unfortunately, how to expect Jews, Sicilians, and Irishmen to behave (respectively: high-strung and resigned, blustering but emotional, and overwrought and tragic). It also teaches how their music should sound, with klezmer riffs from clarinet and accordion decorating the Jewish verse, a mandolin-spangled operatic tarantella for the Sicilian verse, and a slow, solo tenor with flute counterpoint as the Irish verse. When the full mouse chorus joins in for

the refrain, their dancing highlights not ethnic difference, but ethnic similarity, as the folk-dance-esque movements of all of the various families combine into a Broadway-style production number with round dances and line dances transforming gradually into a cheerleader pyramid flanked by rows of choristers all cheating out toward the camera. The message of the song both musically and visually is in tune with its hopeful lyrics, as the refugees from various cat-ridden nations dream of a perfect United States that will erase any intra-mouse tensions, as well as freeing them from the feline menace.

For the adult watching the movie, who has already been “carefully taught” how to assess other races and ethnicities, the overblown ethnic stereotypes are more amusing than educational, but the song’s relentlessly cheerful chorus is bittersweet; the adult knows not only that there are indeed cats in America, but also that these tensions will not disappear upon reaching the new world. With the song’s optimism thus undermined, the grimness of the verses has the potential to overwhelm the choruses, as they recount the grisly murders of Papa Mousekewitz’s parents, the Sicilian mouse’s brother and mother, and the Irish mouse’s “true love fair.” In this context, the ridiculousness of the hairy-chested and mustachioed Sicilian, the red-haired and weepy Irishmouse, and Papa Mousekewitz’s mild reaction to being orphaned (“Oy vey”) helps to maintain the comic tone of the scene for the knowledgeable viewer, whether adult or child. One of the consequences of repeat viewing, for the child, is learning that the mice are wrong—I can still recall my mother asking me if the mice were right, and my solemn acknowledgement that they weren’t.

This knowledge, however, is tempered by my first associations with the song, which were overwhelming joy. While the immigrant mice’s optimism may be unfounded and, yes, childish, the song’s triumphant major-key, full-throated, climactic resolution places it, for me, squarely in the category of fond childhood memory, rather than somber lesson about my heritage. While I became more aware of the film’s narrative progression as I watched and re-watched it, and as I aged, that

knowledge did not replace my initial emotional reaction to the song, but rather tempered it, allowed it to register on two very different emotional levels simultaneously. This emotional lesson, more than the historical lesson, was a crucial part of my education; the song teaches nuance, conflicted feelings, and how to, perhaps too easily, accept cognitive dissonance.

The child who watches *Tail* can gleefully crow about the absence of cats in America, can throw himself into the song with wild abandon, all the while knowing that America will be just as plagued with them as was the old country, and as ze cycles back from the end to the beginning of the film, the child can celebrate the escape from American cat oppression with the same joyous tune that celebrated the escape from European cat oppression—whatever adult oppressions those cats might stand for, it has been vanquished, and it will be vanquished again and again and again. The Russian Cossacks, the Sicilian Mafiosi, the undefined Irish aggressors (Protestants? Catholics? The English?), and the gangs of New York are all but a hazy memory next to the infectious tune that carries the child along. The brief reprise of the chorus from “No Cats” that the mice sing on the pier as they watch the cats depart New York on a slow boat to China<sup>55</sup> cements the triumph of American optimism over old world melancholia, the triumph of childish naiveté over adult wisdom, and even the triumph of cyclic repetition over linear time. As mice who certainly were not on the immigrant ship earlier—established New Yorkers Gussie Mouseheimer and Honest John—join in the singing and dancing, the reprise erases the hardships that have interpolated themselves between the two iterations of the song, and we are back in the hold of the ship, back in the hopeful ignorance that makes the *Tail* so very *American*, and back at the beginning/end of the film, ready to hit rewind and start over. Bakhtin seasonal cycle of birth-in-death continues unabated.

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<sup>55</sup> Actually, the slow boat is headed for Hong Kong, but the Orientalist musical cue that plays as the name “Star of Hong Kong” is revealed on the ship makes it easy to elide the two. The phrase “slow boat to China” comes to me from Frank Loesser’s “(I’d Like to Get You on a) Slow Boat to China,” a showless show tune released in 1947.

This cycle is interrupted, or at least continued in a markedly different way, by the film's first sequel. For *Fievel Goes West*, composer James Horner and lyricist Will Jennings wrote a song that very obviously tried to be itself a sequel to "No Cats," sung on a cross-country train instead of a transatlantic ship but similarly featuring mice of various backgrounds and accents imagining a perfect destination that will soon disappoint them, "Way Out West." "West," like much of *Fievel Goes West*, is a disappointment when compared to its predecessor. In place of the careful, clever matching of music, image, and historical message that marks "No Cats," "West" gives the viewer a much larger assortment of mouse characters of both specific ethnicities and indeterminate American backgrounds, none of whom seem able to sing on pitch. The song is mostly spoken rather than sung, with no character having more than two lines. A jumble of images accompany the mice's vague hopes that the West will be better than New York, and each voice actor plays multiple mice with very little vocal effort to distinguish the Wagnerian soprano (in horned helmet and metal brassiere) from the poor housewife. Instead of a visual focus on the community being built in the hold of the ship, images of various North American landscapes and climates accompany the chorus, rapidly shifting to indicate travel. This visual decision allows the song to move the plot forward, which "No Cats" decidedly doesn't, but by embedding the song within the time line, it weakens the song's impact as a moment of musical carnival.

This is characteristic of *Fievel Goes West's* attitude toward being a musical, which is decidedly less comfortable than *American Tail*. Despite the aforementioned paucity of songs in the first film, the film is certainly a musical, where characters sometimes sing their feelings, thoughts, and statements instead of speaking them. *Fievel Goes West* opens with a brief reprise of "Somewhere Out There," capitalizing on its association with the first film and attempting to continue the endless loop that the child viewer of *Tail* has presumably entered into, but instead of a heartfelt duet between the separated Mousekewitz siblings longing to be together again, this time the song is a diegetic

performance by Tanya Mousekewitz, who wants to be a singer. For the rest of the film, Tanya, now voiced by adult actor Cathy Cavadini, provides nearly all of the music through diegetic performance, with the exception of “West” and a brief animation of The Blues Brothers’ rendition of “Rawhide.” This reluctance to indulge in musical comedy as a mode of emotional expression, and the reliance on an adult simulating a professional performance rather than a child simply singing to herself, severely curtails identification between audience and character.<sup>56</sup> Children who would see (and sing) themselves in *Fievel Goes West* must rely on associations built up during *American Tail*, not on emotional resonances created in the sequel itself, though perhaps the new emphasis on Tanya over Fievel provides an object for young girls to identify with, despite her less-than-childish voice and older appearance.

Whatever the film’s shortcomings as a musical comedy, for its audience of children, *West* nevertheless slides into the repeating loop of re-viewing, slotting itself into the groove left by *Tail* like Scrooge McDuck pacing around his worry room on *Duck Tales*. Many former children, commenting on YouTube videos of the songs from *Tail*, assert their childhood preference for *West*, claiming to have watched it repeatedly. Perhaps the campy villainousness of John Cleese as Cat R. Waul, the upper-class version of *Tail*’s disguised cat Warren T. Rat, or the outrageous slapstick mishaps of Dom DeLuise as scaredy-cat Tiger was enough to carry the film without relying on the previous film, but they both seem far more engaging when contrasted with their counterparts in the earlier film. Cleese’s pointed inability to fake a folksy frontier accent when he is pretending (via mouse marionette) to be a pioneer giving away train tickets west to the downtrodden New York immigrant community mirrors Warren T. Rat’s (John Finnegan) inability to quote Shakespeare or play the violin; while their class positions are reversed, both cats pretending to be rodents aurally

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<sup>56</sup> For more on young children’s attention to children’s voices in media, see D. R. Anderson et al. “Watching Children Watch Television,” in *Attention and Cognitive Development*, cited in Kirkorian et al., “Media and Young Children’s Learning,” 50.

betray their penchant for subterfuge even before Fievel discovers their deeper treachery.<sup>57</sup> While this may seem too subtle a connection for a child viewer to detect, certainly upon first viewing, the parallel between Cat R. Waul and Warren T. Rat is intentionally obvious, as both villains lead gangs of ravenous cats who terrorize the mouse community. This simple parallel allows the child to begin cataloguing similarities between the two cats upon repeat viewings,<sup>58</sup> and cements the sequel's position as a replacement for the original.

Even more than the strikingly similar villains, the recurring character of Tiger ties the films together. In both films, he is the cat who doesn't fit with other cats, the exception to the law of the jungle—he identifies himself in both films as a vegetarian—whose queerness serves not only as a source of comic relief, but also as a gentle reminder that the rest of the cats merit no sympathy, as they could have chosen to be like him if they wanted to. As I mentioned above, Tiger played a prominent role in my childhood experience of *Tail*, though his role in the film is somewhat limited; his first appearance comes 50 minutes into the 75-minute film, just in time to sing the last musical number, “A Duo,” with Fievel. Perhaps this musical role is what allowed Tiger to loom large in my memory—though perhaps his astounding size helped with that, as he appears to be twice the size of the other cats and infinitely larger than the mice—as he outshines characters with larger speaking roles (Warren T. Rat, Tony Toponi, Gussie Mouseheimer, Honest John) by taking part in this eminently memorizable number. The simple, bouncy melody revolves around several repetitions of the word “duo” and its unlikely rhymes, “two oh,” and “true oh,” always set to descending intervals that land somewhere in the tonic F major triad, keeping the song relentlessly upbeat and cheerful,

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<sup>57</sup> In the words of Gandalf, they “shall not pass.”

<sup>58</sup> Each has a bug sidekick of the opposite class position, the waistcoated accountant cockroach Digit with Warren T. Rat, and the scruffy prospector spider Chula with Cat R. Waul. Each privileges long-term economic arrangements (extortion, real estate schemes) over immediate gratification (eating mice).



offering an emotional corrective to the preceding scene in which Fievel is captured by the recently unmasked Warren T. Rat.

“Duo” is the first song since the maudlin “Somewhere Out There,” thirteen minutes (or approximately 100 years in children’s time) earlier, and its grinning, pink-and-purple fantasy of Tiger and Fievel in a Vaudeville act (complete with a straw boater for Tiger) does a great deal to reorient the film not just as a musical, but also as a comedy. This final musical number by the effeminate feline sidekick to the juvenile lead points out one striking facet of Tiger’s character—his similarity to Bert Lahr’s Cowardly Lion in the MGM *Wizard of Oz*. While Lahr’s character is “just a dandy lion” who longs to “be a lion, not a mouse”<sup>59</sup> and wears a bow in his daintily curled mane, DeLuise’s doesn’t understand the manly card game of poker, is a vegetarian, cries at the drop of a hat, and likes ice cream and butterflies. Both, of course, sing, a prime signifier of queerness.<sup>60</sup> DeLuise also audibly imitates Lahr in his ineffectual growling at Fievel in the scene that precedes “Duo.”

This tenuous masculinity becomes, in *West*, not merely Tiger’s identifying quirk, but also the primary motivator behind the film’s plot. His new lady love, Miss Kitty, leaves him to move west and seek “a cat who’s more like a dog.”<sup>61</sup> Tiger proceeds to demonstrate his complete lack of dogginess by running away from a series of barking dogs, eventually ending up in a desert community of American Indian mice who worship him as a god—*West* doubles down on the offensive ethnic stereotypes of *Tail*—before Fievel finds him and demands he come save the mice from Cat R. Waul’s machinations. In order to fulfill the role of hero and win back Miss Kitty (thereby also fulfilling the role of hetero), Tiger goes through a *Rocky*-esque training montage (over a

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<sup>59</sup> Actually, he longs to “be a lion, not a mowess,” but that’s just to rhyme with “prowess.”

<sup>60</sup> For a fuller discussion of the queerness of musical comedy, see chapter three. See also chapter five, as well as Suzanne Cusick’s “On musical performances of gender and sex.”

<sup>61</sup> This time, the actual word is a Brooklyn-ese “dawg,” rather than “dog.” Miss Kitty, like Tiger, is native to New York, and has no immigrant narrative attached to her.

Copland-esque underscore, because this is the American West, after all) wherein the tired old dog sheriff Wylie Burp (Jimmy Stewart) teaches him the essential skills of physical fitness, sharpshooting, intimidating barking and growling, and fetch. While he sings no songs in the film, this montage functions much like one, as it interrupts the rapid flow of events to focus on the character's development through a timeless sequence of sounds and images. That development, indeed, can be directly measured through his progress from singing of his love for Fievel in *Tail* to exercising his love for Miss Kitty in *West*, both numbers functioning as lead-ins to the action-packed finales of the films.

*West*'s Tiger-focused plot further emphasizes his importance in *Tail*, when the two films are viewed together. With only a handful of actors reprising their roles in the second film, DeLuise's presence retroactively increases his character's significance within the franchise, even as Tiger's unique status as a mouse-loving cat is called into question by the sudden existence, totally unmentioned upon by the mice, of Miss Kitty, who coaches Tanya Mousekewitz in her nascent singing career. Like Tanya, Tiger becomes an alternative point of identification for the child viewer, a native-born American with the twin privileges of strength and comfort (he can recline at will on his own fluffy, prehensile tail) who nevertheless chooses to be a hero to the immigrant mice. For at least one queer child who watched the films (i.e., me), pre-montage Tiger provided an essential model for adulthood, one learned through endless meditation on "A Duo." The Tiger at the end of *West*, the lop-eared dog version, faded away, for me, leaving only the singing, dancing, lavender Tiger.

*Spring is here; in the words of Tom Lehrer, life is skittles, and life is beer. Eschewing the pleasures of the loveliest time of the year, you settle into a dilapidated seat in the high school auditorium, wincing as the aging springs do their best to emerge from that seat and puncture your own. Just as you glance at the folded sheet of paper handed to you at the entrance by an eager mother, noting a few names familiar from South Pacific or Fiddler, the house lights*

*dim and the stage lights erupt into a blaze of yellow. The curtain (a sober navy that feels like a relief after the middle school's eye-twisting orange, despite its regular alternation of dark creases and faded folds) moves fairly smoothly off into the wings, toward that selfsame stagehand, still in black, still visible, despite her improving hauling abilities and her status as a newly minted high school freshman.*

*As the curtain recedes, the lights illuminate a pair of painted flats approximating a small house of a shade of yellow that manages to clash hideously with the yellow lights. In front of the house, though not obscuring its yellowness quite enough, sits a wide-eyed teenager, clearly completely blinded by the lights (or perhaps by the clash of yellows), who seems to be drowning in a blue canvas dress far too large for her, and who clings with a drowning woman's desperation to the wooden handle of what might charitably be called a butter churn, but only by someone who had never seen one. Her eyes suddenly snap toward the wings, off stage left, and you crane forward to see or hear what has caused her focus to shift so dramatically. As you strain, a few notes find their way to your ears, notes so faint as to be completely unidentifiable, other than that they sound like they might be a human voice.*

*And then, with a clunk and a shriek that seem strangely familiar to you, on comes the microphone, and you bear an unseen teenage boy proclaim that he's "as high as a elephant's eye." This is what you came for—this is Oklahoma!, perhaps the most beloved and best known work in the history of the musical. The boy who now emerges from the wings, nearly tripping over the catatonic stagehand, is not Alfred Drake, or Hugh Jackman, or Gordon MacRae, nor is the girl at the churn Betty Garde, Maureen Lipman, or Charlotte Greenwood<sup>62</sup>—and she certainly doesn't seem old enough to be his aunt-in-law by the play's end. As he enters the blaze of yellow light, still singing his heart out a hair too close to that troublesome microphone, it is clear that, in fact, Curly's a couple of years older than Aunt Eller—who is known to you and to her adoring fans and classmates as Tzeitel, or as Bloody Mary. This is the big time, the high school musical, and the seniors get the biggest parts.*

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<sup>62</sup> Greenwood, funnily enough, not only played Aunt Eller in the film version of *Oklahoma!*, but also played Queen Ann of Oogaboo during *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz*'s return engagement in Los Angeles in 1914. Her addition to the cast received rave reviews from the Los Angeles press.

I am dragging you back to this fantasy school stage to return to a focus I have alluded to but not yet dealt with. All of the preceding material in this chapter deals with children as an audience for musical comedies—an engaged, interested audience, but an audience nonetheless. Now I turn to children as performers of musical comedies, to begin demonstrating that the separation between those two categories is far less dramatic than it might initially appear to be. Whether children are performing on stage or under it or behind it, in public or in the depths of their bedrooms with nobody around, their singing and dancing (and talking and miming and mugging and whistling and playing...) remain informed by the same repetitive interactions that characterize their reading and listening. I begin offstage, with the private sort of performance that D. A. Miller captured memorably in the first chapter of *Place for Us*, “In the Basement.” While “In the Basement” focuses especially on young boys who will grow into gay men (Miller’s own subject position and mine), I extend his argument here beyond that category to children more generally.

Miller’s titular “Us” is, in this chapter,

the kind of boy who...descended into his parents’ basement to...pass a tentative hand into the recesses of a small chest...[T]o the strident storm thus raised, he would utterly abandon himself, now tapping furiously away (while in his stocking feet), now belting out a vocal accompaniment (albeit only mouthing the words), now breaking down into sobs (so moved he was by the bravery of his refusal to do so).<sup>63</sup>

These boys, “destined, as it was said, to be *musical*,”<sup>64</sup> are Miller *en masse*. Reading all gay men as versions of himself, Miller claims for “us” a unique relationship to the Broadway musical that I elaborate upon at length in chapter three, but here his depiction of childhood ritual rings true not only for gay boys and musicals, but for children and media more generally. The Oz books I read and re-read as a child were my uncle’s before me, my mother’s before him, and my grandmother’s before her, purchased second-hand by my great grandfather; none of those relatives are or were gay men.

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<sup>63</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 2-3.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 11 (caption for figure on preceding page).

Two of them, my mother and grandmother, were also the primary introducers of musical comedy into my childhood and adolescence, through soundtrack albums, videos, community theater performances in the park in the summer, and occasionally, eventually, real Broadway shows. For the young Miller in the 1950s, the Broadway musical was a private thing, a source of shame and a consolation for that shame; for my young self in the 1980s and 1990s, it was joy and delight and fascination.

For both of us, though, it was repetition. Miller: “I once [had] a tape of *South Pacific*... [that] reproduced all the surface noise of the LP, in my possession since childhood, from which I had recorded it... the noise became most distracting during ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ (on account of my juvenile concentration on that particular band).”<sup>65</sup> My own repetition of *American Tail*, noted above, was but one example. I can still recall the weight of the double-cassette VHS tapes from the public library of *Sound of Music* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, having held them more times than I can count. I sang “If I Were a Rich Man,” duplicating Topol’s every syllable, long before I knew what he was singing about.<sup>66</sup> I was the King of Siam and Mrs. Anna in *The King and I*, singing Yul Brynner’s part but tut-tutting at his grammar. Miller’s cast albums in the basement became my movies in the TV room, free from shame and secret ritual, but nevertheless faithful companions.

When I got to see a show live, it was a one-time special occasion, but the repetition did not cease. *The Fantasticks*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, all introduced to me by free productions in the local park, became treasured cast albums. *The Fantasticks* was a cassette we bought. *Annie Get Your Gun* was later, so Mom bought a CD. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, one of my father’s favorites, was a cassette that my mother, ever the family archivist, had long since taped off of his LP

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Perhaps it was this rehearsal alongside adult singers that led my elementary school chorus teacher to insist that I was “imitating [my] father” and singing too low for a ten-year-old. She claimed I needed speech therapy; my parents knew that I had been singing in a tenor range or lower since I was eight. And that my father was tone-deaf.

to preserve it before the LP got too scratched. I listened and remembered and listened and sang and listened and devoured everything about these shows. If I know the New Testament at all, it is from that last tape (and that production). When I think about the show, I can still remember the light pole that blocked a good chunk of the stage from my view—and Caiaphas’ hat, which blocked everything upstage of him. The soundtrack kept the performances fresh for me until they had been burned into my brain indelibly, the visuals from the community theater performances blending with the vocals from the original off-Broadway cast of the *Fantasticks*, the 1966 Broadway revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and the original concept album of *JCS*.

Miller claims a related pedagogical effect of cast albums upon their rapt listeners, though a troubled pedagogy:

However persistently his original cast albums had tutored him in the concept of the so-called integrated show, not all his ingrained docility could prevent him from laying claim to a counter-knowledge as defiant as any first act finale...What he consequently sought in the Broadway musical was...not the integration of drama and music found on the thematic surface, but a so much deeper formal discontinuity between the two that no makeshift for reconciling them could ever manage to make the transition from one to the other less abrupt, or more plausible.<sup>67</sup>

In his reading of the cast album, it teaches the repeat listener the “integrated show,” while simultaneously encouraging him to defy that integration. He acknowledges the teacher/student relationship between album and listener even as he points out that the student does not simply absorb what the teacher says. While Miller’s specific example is not my concern here, his point is well taken: these albums, and the shows they both represent and reproduce, are as polyphonic as the Oz books, both literally and in a Bakhtinian sense. The repeat listener and singer-along may focus on one “voice” or another, on the careful integration of song into story or just on the booming bass of

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<sup>67</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 3.

Victor Brox as Caiaphas. I was Caiaphas first and foremost, then Pontius Pilate next, and Herod last. Jesus and Judas were too high for me, even as a child.

Miller and I are not the only one who sang along with cast albums, of course. When I was in high school, singing along with *Rent* was common.<sup>68</sup> Sometimes the singing along lost its “along” and became a direct recreation of the cast album *sans* album. While I will return to the sing-along phenomenon at length in chapter three, it serves here as an important bridge between the categories of audience and performer. The (queer and straight) kids who sang along with *Rent* in my high school were the same kids who performed in *South Pacific*; *Hello, Dolly!*; *Once Upon a Mattress*; and *Man of La Mancha*. A (straight) friend who grew up far from Broadway (in Wisconsin) nevertheless memorized musical comedy parodies by Tom Lehrer and Alan Sherman on her parents’ record player and listened to *My Fair Lady* on car trips—we met in college, where we both performed and stage crewed for the college’s Gilbert and Sullivan troupe.<sup>69</sup> For those children with less shame about their musical interests than Miller, singing along can be something of a gateway drug to performance in a more formalized sense, whether as actor or crewperson.<sup>70</sup>

It is in this context that repetition, re-listening and re-viewing become rehearsing. The memorization of lines and notes that musical comedy performance requires arises from the same repetition that marks children’s media consumption. What irritates parents and interrupts the

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<sup>68</sup> I entered high school in September 1997; Savran notes (citing the published script) that the cast album of *Rent* had gone gold by the previous December, debuting in August 1996 at 19 on the Billboard Top 200 album chart (Savran, *Queer Sort of Materialism*, 35). Clearly my friends and I were not the only ones singing along.

<sup>69</sup> This same friend shared the following anecdote with me when I asked her for stories of her musical theater experience before college: “My high school had a choice of three public speaking style classes, and in one of the ones that I did not take because it was more performance-oriented, one of the things that they had to do was to memorize the nightmare song from *Iolanthe*. Except that the really weird thing was that they didn’t memorize the actual nightmare part. They memorized up to ‘You’d very much better be waking’ and then cut to ‘You’re a regular wreck.’ I knew the whole thing through by that point, and one day, a group of people from the class were doing it together, and they got very confused when I joined in and starting doing this whole other part they’d never heard of. I was like, ‘But that’s the nightmare part.’” (Malka Key, personal communication, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012) See chapter four for my discussion of Gilbert and Sullivan fandom.

<sup>70</sup> See again Wolf’s *Wicked* case study in *Changed For Good*, especially pages 232-234.

capitalist aims of producers simultaneously trains children not just how to understand the particular show, as the psychologists cited above have recognized, or how to identify racial and ethnic others, as *Tail* carefully teaches them, but also how to convey that show's messages to others. Repeated viewing transforms the children who are "destined, as it was said, to be *musical*," from audience to performer, emboldens them to take the stage and to emerge from Miller's basement into the limelight of the school auditorium.

This repetition is not, of course, unique to musical comedy. As a cello teacher, I insist that my students practice their scales not solely out of a sadistic desire to torture them, as most of them assume, but as a way to teach their fingers where to go and how to get there. It is the physical repetition that makes the scale work; knowledge of the notes in a scale will only get you so far. Elisabeth Le Guin points out a version of this rehearsal built into Luigi Boccherini's cello repertoire, a "reiteration of [transitional] material that...seem[s] almost accidental. And yet one notices [it], playing the sonatas." Le Guin connects this repetition to Boccherini's hand, which "makes music rather differently than a conscious intellect...The stakes are different; ease, familiarity, pleasure are paramount. Left to their own devices, hands will tend to reiterate certain familiar patterns many, many times."<sup>71</sup> Any student of music or of drama, no matter his age, must rehearse, must repeat, must build into his hands and feet and mouth and lungs the intimate knowledge that only repetition can produce. This behavior that we call practicing is revered by music and drama teachers, demanded by conductors and directors, encouraged by eager parents—even as its receptive counterpart enjoys none of these social sanctions.

*I promised you that I would return to the South Pacific where I began the chapter. What would this chapter be without repetition, without return to the same song that began it? While the productions I have described*

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<sup>71</sup> Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body*, 130-131.



*herein are imaginary, composites of my own performances and others' in elementary school, middle school, and high school, it is true that I performed South Pacific twice, once in junior high and once in high school, the first time as Commander Harbison and the second as Luther Billis. And so, let me hurl you once more down the rabbit hole into the auditorium of that fantasy high school, years later, where another Lieutenant Joe Cable is talking to another Emile De Becque. This time you need no description of the seats, the curtains, the lights—they are the same as they have been for the last three years; you know them by now. Instead, let's focus on the people on stage, on Cable who is about to sing, on Emile whose palpable anguish comes not from stage fright but from his racist rejection by Ensign Nellie Forbush, and on a familiar face and figure off stage left, clad all in black.*

*This isn't the same Cable you saw four years ago at the middle school, the one who played Teyye. That Cable is the heartbroken French planter now, having grown into a baritone voice that, while it lacks the operatic basso boom of Ezio Pinza, nevertheless has the volume and stamina to prepare him for the song that nearly will be his. This Cable was in the chorus last time, a Seabee who assured you that there was nothing like a dame even as you knew that his as-yet-unspoken desires lay elsewhere. His voice, too, has changed, from a thin soprano to a thinner tenor, incapable of projecting beyond the proscenium, but nevertheless capable of hitting the required notes to sing "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught." Those notes are amplified just enough by a newly purchased body microphone—one that lacks the unlamented tendency toward wailing feedback of its predecessor—to carry over the orchestra to your proud parental ears.*

*As your boy, the reason you've been sitting in these uncomfortable seats every spring for at least the last five years, sings his angry little heart out, and as you beam at his efforts and nascent anti-racist politics, his nominal girlfriend watches from the wings. She is waiting for her best friend to finish with his moment in the spotlight and rejoin her backstage, where a chaste hug will both congratulate him and, unbeknownst to the two of them, reveal to the adults backstage their complete absence of sexual attraction. That absence gives the lie to their romantic relationship while confirming the depth of their friendship; they have learned the signs and behaviors of heterosexuality, from South*

Pacific, Fiddler, and Oklahoma!, among other sources, be on the stage and she behind it, and they will play it out until they can both finally leave the high school stage in a more metaphorical sense.<sup>72</sup>

*M. De Becque, as confident in his heterosexuality as he has recently become in his singing and acting ability, also watches your Cable. He knows the song, sang it years ago, sang it over and over until he had it down; it is all he can do to keep from mouthing along with his friend in silent support. As you glance at him during the few seconds between verses, you can see his lips and eyebrows working, the pain of the character merging with the actor's forced restraint into a grimace of effort. This grimace lasts throughout the rest of the short song, until his impassioned introduction to "This Nearly Was Mine" splits the grimace into the too-open mouth of a person who has just started taking voice lessons.*

*All of these children are on their way to not being children anymore. They have rehearsed being grownups through these adult shows, just as they earlier rehearsed being children while watching their animated movies. While they may not grow up to be Lieutenants—and while there seems little chance any of them will grow up to be French—they have gleaned some details of growing up in general from their rehearsals. As a parent in their audience, you hope they've carefully taught themselves the lessons you would have them learn, but you don't really know. After all, the high school musical is still just a rehearsal for adulthood; to find out what they've made, you'll have to see the performance.*

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<sup>72</sup> Miller isn't wrong about the attraction of the musical comedy for queer children; see my next chapter. See also Jennifer Chapman's dissertation, "Heteronormativity and High School Theatre."

## Chapter Three

### Inventing “Tradition”: queer musical comedy sings along

#### **We’re here, we’re queer, we’re used to it**

The next audience I discuss seems at first glance to need no such discussion; the intimate relationship between gay white men and the twentieth-century musical comedy is well established in literature both scholarly and popular. From books like John Clum’s *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* and D. A. Miller’s *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* to television shows like *Will and Grace* and *Glee*, to explicit acknowledgement within musical comedies themselves like *Avenue Q* and *The Book of Mormon*, USAmericans<sup>1</sup> seem these days to agree that musicals are gay, and that gay men love musicals.<sup>2</sup> Performers of musicals are gay (Nathan Lane, Neil Patrick Harris); directors of musicals are gay (Jerome Robbins, Joe Mantello); composers of musicals are gay (Cole Porter, Elton John); choreographers of anything are gay (Michael Bennett, Casey Nicholaw). Most importantly for this study, audiences of musicals are gay (me). This pervasive gayness isn’t a new idea now, and it hasn’t been a new idea since at least the 1910s, when a “gay enclave had quietly developed in Times Square...because the theater...attracted large numbers of gay men who worked as chorus boys, actors, stagehands, costume designers and publicity people”<sup>3</sup> or later, in the closeted

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<sup>1</sup> See notes 1 and 83 in chapter one for explanations of my usage of the nationality USAmerican and the gender-neutral pronouns ze and hir.

<sup>2</sup> Though it’s worth noting that lesbian actor Jane Lynch, as Sue Sylvester on *Glee*, informs the young, gay character Kurt (gay actor Chris Colfer) that “Loving musical theater doesn’t make you gay. It just makes you awful.”

<sup>3</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 301-302.

1930s, when the arrested proprietors of gay bars asserted in their morality trials that their clients weren't gay, just "theatrical."<sup>4</sup>

My goal in this chapter is not to rehash what has already been hashed so admirably and so thoroughly. While there is work yet to be done un-closeting the musical comedy's creators and plots, the authors mentioned above have laid the groundwork with regard to gay men as have Richard Dyer and David Savran, while Stacy Wolf has done the same for lesbian women.<sup>5</sup> My emphasis, rather, is not on demonstrating that musical comedy is gay, but that it is, in several senses of the word, queer. The particular iterations of musical comedy I am examining in this chapter are unusual, inverted, and, yes, marked by difference of gender and/or sexuality—all of which descriptions have been read as definitions of what it is to be queer. Eve Sedgwick, in "Queer and Now," enumerates many of the possible ways to use the word:

"[Q]ueer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically...[and/or] same-sex sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of definitional lines...[and/or] the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses...A word so fraught as "queer"...never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force...is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself.<sup>6</sup>

These intersecting definitions form only a part of the many possible readings of queerness. As Sedgwick herself notes, "Queer" seems to hinge...explicitly on a person's undertaking particular,

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 345. For a further investigation of the persistent gaiety of 20<sup>th</sup> century US American theater, see pages 58-68 of David Savran's "The Queerest Art" in his *A Queer Sort of Materialism*.

<sup>5</sup> See, among other works, Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies*, Savran's *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (especially his "Middlebrow Anxiety," which investigates the queerness of musical comedy's cultural and economic class positioning), and Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria*. The imbalance between Clum, Dyer, Miller, and Savran on the one hand and Wolf alone on the other is addressed, a bit, later in this chapter and in chapter five.

<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8-9.

performative acts of experimental self-perception.”<sup>7</sup> This inherently first-person reading of queerness prevents any universalizing and easy definition of the word—much as the musical comedy practices I describe in this chapter actively deconstruct any universalizing and easy interpretation of musicals.<sup>8</sup>

The queer audiences I am considering in this chapter can be described in the same terms as the queer performances, as they (the audiences and the performances) overlap to a degree not seen in professional or even amateur performance of staged musical comedy. These queer musical comedies are all created and recreated by those audiences’ musical participation, by a performance that attenuates the accepted meaning of the word performance by merging performer and spectator in an act that I call participatory reception. To put it simply, I’m talking here about singing along.

In opening out from queering the shows to queering the audiences to queering the performance-reception interaction itself,<sup>9</sup> the material I consider here builds on the solid gay foundation of Broadway and Hollywood to construct an edifice that contains also the misfit children I described in chapter two, the oddball collectors I will describe in chapter four, and any other fans of the musical comedy who feel themselves to be outside of a place they both desire and despise. My focus here will remain on audiences dominated by those who are queer in the sense of their gender identity or sexual orientation, but the broader and shifting definitions of the word remain operative throughout. As Sedgwick points out within one of the ellipses I inserted earlier, queer encompasses

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Savran enumerates various scholars’ issues with the “utopian fantasy” of queerness that Sedgwick posits in his “The Queerest Art,” including Jill Dolan’s, Wendy Brown’s, and his own. As he notes, however, “‘queer’ remains a provocative way for thinking about the intersection between certain theatrical forms and certain sexual subjects” (Savran, *Queer Sort of Materialism*, 58).

<sup>9</sup> For an explosive reading of the various meanings of queer as a verb, see Wayne Koestenbaum’s “Queering the Pitch: A Posy of Definitions and Impersonations” in *Queering the pitch: the new gay and lesbian musicology*. My own usage will be articulated through Wolf and Jenkins, below.

not only those who are marked by specific stigmata of gender and sexuality, but also “people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.”<sup>10</sup>

The phenomenon that I have labeled participatory reception, which covers forms of musical creation as different as *Rocky Horror Picture Show* sing-alongs and many Protestant church services, is not uniquely queer, but it holds an important position in queer communities, who likewise hold an equally important position in sustaining the kinds of participatory reception most centrally focused on musical comedy. These types of musical events are interesting to me not merely because I have participated in them enthusiastically and often, but also because they have received little scholarly attention from musical comedy scholars, regardless of scholars’ disciplines. This chapter’s discussion covers a variety of different participatory practices, from a weekly bar night to an annual sing-along film screening, from an exercise class to a community chorus, and investigates them from a number of critical angles, bursting through that gap in the literature with quivering jazz hands and an enthusiastic grin.

One area in which these practices have been recognized as culturally significant is in the burgeoning scholarly literature surrounding science fiction and fantasy fan communities. As Henry Jenkins points out in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, “[*Star Trek*] fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness,”<sup>11</sup> a description that can apply just as well to queer audiences, whether of musical comedy or of *Star Trek*. These super-fans, to whom I will return in more detail in chapter four, become his titular textual poachers, creating their own elaborate world of meanings above and beyond and around the supposedly central text that provides the focal point of that world. The text—in this case comprising the books, plots, songs, characters, and performers of musical comedies—is important, but queer audiences “must actively struggle with

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<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 26.

and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials,”<sup>12</sup> for despite the important work of Clum, Miller, and Wolf, literalist readings of musical comedy plots largely do not allow for queer fans to recognize ourselves in these texts. The readings that these authors perform are themselves consciously queer, deliberately reading against the grain of the text—“seeing and hearing in nonconventional ways...consciously accounting for the importance of spectators’ identifications and desires,” in Wolf’s words<sup>13</sup>—to find meanings not supported by the easiest possible interpretations of, for example, *Company* (see Miller), *Wicked* (see Wolf), or *Gypsy* (see all three). Jenkins’ definition of fan culture is deeply entangled with queer theory’s explanation of how marginalized people make use of cultural works.

This reading against the grain that Jenkins and Wolf describe has a long history not only in queer reception but also in queer performance of both musical and non-musical comedy. Both David Román and Clum have examined the role that drag performance plays in the creation not merely of queer cultural events but also of queer history and community. According to Clum’s reading, the diva star of a Broadway musical and the drag queen impersonating her are involved in a relationship where each constructs the other. This is true both in a literal sense in which divas like Mae West or Bette Midler based their performances on drag performers and were subsequently imitated by drag queens, and in a more theoretical sense in which Ethel Merman or Carol Channing could not exist as cultural icons without their inherent dragginess, for “the great roles of the Broadway divas are themselves, like drag queens’ personae, distillations and exaggerations of certain feminine traits.”<sup>14</sup> The campy homage-and-mockery inherent in drag mimicry goes beyond the

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Wolf, *Problem Like Maria*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 140. See also the rest of his fourth chapter, “‘Here she is, boys!’: on divas, drag, and immortality.”

subtler interpenetration of fan and star explored in detail by Dyer in *Heavenly Bodies*,<sup>15</sup> simultaneously making the fan into a version of the star and critiquing the star's performances. Charles Pierce as Bette Davis as Margo Channing delivering a regretful monologue on the romantic trials of being a woman with a successful career—a monologue written by a man, Joseph Manciewicz—says something about Davis, as well as about the community of gay men who so worship her, and that something is not exclusively laudatory.<sup>16</sup>

These multivalent meanings of drag are not simply the multiple lenses through which any individual reads all cultural creation. Drag is camp, and as such is concerned with holding these conflicting meanings in productive tension throughout. To return to the comic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, camp plays both sides of the carnivalesque, both the subversive upending of “the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of...life”<sup>17</sup> and the reinscription of those relationships. As camp performers, drag queens play on stereotypical femininities to both point out their artificiality and lay claim to them as their own. In reading the carnival as both subversive and resolutely not, camp stakes out a territory for its queer practitioners (performers, writers, fans) within the mainstream.<sup>18</sup> Román points out that Charles Pierce described himself not as a female impersonator, but as a male actress;<sup>19</sup> his insistence on naturalizing what is so clearly performed artifice points up the desire of many gay comedians<sup>20</sup> to use camp to gain access to the socio-hierarchical privileges denied them because of their queer sexual status.

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<sup>15</sup> See especially his chapter on Judy Garland (137-193), but also his opening discussion of Joan Crawford (1-16).

<sup>16</sup> See Román's discussion of Charles Pierce in *Performance in America*, 158-165, for a fuller context on his performance as Davis.

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> See also my discussion of camp in chapter one.

<sup>19</sup> Román, *Performance*, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Pierce was also a stand-up comic before he became a male actress.



This tension between artifice and nature, between becoming “normal” and remaining outrageous, also informs camp humor’s reliance on nostalgia. C. Nadia Seremetakis, tracing the Greek etymology of nostalgia, declares that it is not merely “trivializing romantic sensibility,” but rather “the desire or longing with burning pain to journey...it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of...exile to the notion of maturation and ripening.”<sup>21</sup> This is a less comic formulation of nostalgia’s pull than may be apparent in camp drag performance, but the sense of desire for what one no longer can have (or perhaps never could have), of “the past as unreconciled historical experience”<sup>22</sup> informs drag and other camp humor’s delight in the culture of a mid-twentieth century historical period that was, in many ways, hostile to the queer performers who are recreating it in their own image. In looking to the past for performative inspiration, denying the inevitable march of progress of Whig history, drag performers create their own historical frame, one I call, if you will pardon (or relish) the pun, Wig history.

Svetlana Boym points out that nostalgia “undermines...a linear conception of progress...the nostalgic directs his gaze not only backward but sideways.”<sup>23</sup> This somewhat lighter description of Seremetakis’ unreconciled historical experience “expresses [itself] in...ironic fragments...remains unsystematic and unsynthesizable; it seduces rather than convinces.”<sup>24</sup> Non-linear nostalgia informs practices of queer participatory reception not only through drag’s reliance on nostalgic reimagining of the past as a queer utopia, but also through the non-linear, fragmented, seductive experience of the ritual gathering. Every practice I examine in this chapter relies on repetition to gradually accrete meaning. It is only through this cyclic repetition, a hallmark of both ritual and Bakhtinian carnival

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<sup>21</sup> Seremetakis, “The Memory of the Senses, Part I,” 4.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 13

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

laughter, that the “ironic fragments,” in this case the musical comedy scenes and songs and films that form the nostalgic kernel of participatory reception, can gain something of the emotional weight that allows Boym to pair them with “elegiac poems” as Romantic expressions of nostalgia.<sup>25</sup> This version of nostalgia has shaped the structure of this chapter, which relies heavily on fragments of theoretical writings, repeated cyclically, as a tool of seduction. If queer theory pioneers Eve Sedgwick and D. A. Miller can’t make you believe me, even after the umpteenth quotation, I am afraid I will have to turn to a different Miller.

### **Sing ~~Out~~ Along, Louise<sup>26</sup>**

The camp nostalgia of the sing-along points directly back to the early 1960s and a popular television show called *Sing Along with Mitch*. Mitch Miller, the host and star of *Sing Along with Mitch*, pioneered the sing-along subtitle that participatory films rely on to help audiences follow the lyrics, though not the bouncing ball that indicates when to sing them.<sup>27</sup> *Sing Along with Mitch* reads like over-the-top camp today, with its straight lines of clean-cut chorus boys and Miller’s energetic conducting directly into the camera, but even when it was on television, to younger viewers it already stood for the corny, passé entertainment of their parents.<sup>28</sup>

Miller’s success as a record producer in the preceding decade had relied on an aesthetic of making music acceptable and accessible to a “pop” audience—“creating the musical equivalent of

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* See my analysis of D. A. Miller’s *Place for Us* below for a return to these ideas of repetition, ritual, and nostalgia.

<sup>26</sup> “Sing out, Louise” is the first line spoken by Momma Rose in Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Jule Styne’s *Gypsy* (1959), later mockingly repeated by June in the song “If Momma Was Married.”

<sup>27</sup> In a 2004 interview for the Archive of Television History, Miller explained that people must have mis-remembered the bouncing ball from *Looney Tunes* sing-alongs and from sing-alongs in theaters as a part of his show.

<sup>28</sup> When Miller died, NPR’s *Talk of the Nation* took comments from listeners about *Sing Along With Mitch*. One such listener recounted a tale of fleeing from Miller whenever his parents watched the show.

Automat cuisine.”<sup>29</sup> This white-bread artistic aim, similar perhaps to the goals of many Broadway and Hollywood producers today, leaves a great deal of room for fans to make what they will of the music; inviting them to sing along simultaneously encourages further personalization and fits that personalization into a homogenous framework.<sup>30</sup> In that dual move, *Sing Along with Mitch* encapsulates the community formation that participatory reception enables.

Just as Wolf’s queer reading of *Wicked* relies on reading the show by winking through the lens of mid-twentieth-century coupling conventions of musical comedy,<sup>31</sup> much of the humor in, for example, the high camp musicals *Little Shop of Horrors* and “Once More, With Feeling” arises from familiarity with the historical conventions that they gently ridicule.<sup>32</sup> Even musical comedies that do not center nostalgia as deliberate camp can quickly open themselves to camp readings—the film version of *Grease* has become a popular sing-along vehicle in recent years, perhaps because of its now doubled nostalgia for the 1950s of its setting and for the 1970s of its release (and its stars’ peak popularity), with all of the queer sing-along trappings that I will explore in this chapter. All of these entanglements between camp’s affectionate subversion and nostalgia’s pained celebration of past mass culture recall the multivalent comedy of the Bakhtinian carnival, laughter both reduced and enlarged by its interpenetration with pain, as well as the typical double meaning of musical comedies, and especially of drag performance.

Through the commentary that drag provides on cultural icons, as well as through the simple sharing of diva worship that Clum explores, queer fans establish a community of shared knowledge

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<sup>29</sup> See Elijah Wald’s *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 161.

<sup>30</sup> As the great musical comedienne Anna Russell once said of Gilbert and Sullivan opening choruses, “I know a lot of people are going to say, ‘that isn’t homogenous, that’s homogeneous.’ But...I mean homogenous, as in milk.”

<sup>31</sup> See chapter six of Wolf’s *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*.

<sup>32</sup> See particularly the numbers “Somewhere That’s Green” from *Little Shop* and “I’ll Never Tell” from *Once More*, which gently mock 1950s sitcoms and 1960s film musicals, respectively. For more on affectionate mockery, see chapters one and five.

and practices that Román labels an archive of performance.<sup>33</sup> This performed archive contests an idea of history without commentary, a flat reading of performance that takes meaning at face value. Drag queers the famous roles and biographies of the divas it recreates even as it provides a venue for performers who are themselves queer. This self-consciously queer form of performance underlies all the types of participatory reception that I discuss here, providing both a historical precedent for—a neat reversal or continuation of Román’s thesis—and a constituent piece of each practice. Where drag performance differs most from these participatory practices is not in its self-identified queerness, but in its status as self-identified performance; participatory reception blurs the line between performance and reception more than even the most worshipful drag imitation.

When speaking of drag, of musical comedy, of nostalgia, and of sexual queerness in general, it is necessary to mention, at least briefly, the ubiquitous *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. *Rocky Horror* has staked out a claim as the original sing-along—and shout-along—musical film, as the cult hit that informs all subsequent participatory film viewings, and as such its investment in all of these various registers of performance grafts them onto other audience participation films even when they appear not to be as central to those films as they are to *Rocky Horror*. Raymond Knapp points out that the audience participation at *Rocky Horror* allows an audience member to “ambiguously either [express] one’s ‘true self’ or [step] outside oneself to assume an entirely different persona,”<sup>34</sup> connecting that participation to the film’s themes of sexual (and gender) experimentation, excess, and fluidity.<sup>35</sup> This cinematic gender fluidity is reflected in the longstanding tradition of seemingly gender-blind casting

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<sup>33</sup> See all of chapter four of Román’s *Performance in America*.

<sup>34</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 243.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 252.

within the perform-along companies that reproduce *Rocky Horror* at weekly midnight showings around the country.<sup>36</sup>

However, despite the seemingly perfect fit between *Rocky Horror* and the categories of participatory reception I am examining here, I want to draw an important distinction between *Rocky Horror* and his less explicitly performing siblings. There is, of course, an element of public performance in all audience participation, but it is foregrounded both in *Rocky Horror* and in Knapp's discussion of the *Rocky Horror* phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> At the events I discuss in this chapter, there is enthusiastic participation, but there is less deliberate (or at least less ubiquitous) performance for other audience members. Participatory reception centers every audience member in a way that *Rocky Horror* shadow casts do not. As I will discuss below with regard to Musical Mondays, a weekly event at a West Hollywood gay bar, explicit performance attenuates the community focus of participatory reception. *Rocky Horror* certainly has the capacity to become an instance of the latter. Shadow casts may blend into audiences and audiences may focus not on live performers but on their own interactions with the static film performances, but in deference to *Rocky Horror*'s unique performance tradition, I won't shoehorn it into an analytical framework that works at cross purposes to that tradition.

Just as many musical comedies' stories revolve around the coalescence of community around outcasts or the reconnection of said outcasts to a pre-existing community,<sup>38</sup> the extra-theatrical experiences of musical comedy that I am examining read both with and against that grain simultaneously to draw audience outcasts into another community, whether they want to belong or

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<sup>36</sup> See Sarah Ellis' discussion of *Rocky Horror* in her forthcoming dissertation chapter, "Let's Do 'The Time Warp Again'"

<sup>37</sup> See also Elizabeth Wollman's *The Theater Will Rock*, 218, for her discussion of the Broadway revival of *The Rocky Horror Show* in 2000; Wollman describes a blurring of "the lines between spectator and performer" that involves focusing on individual audience members as performers, not centering the audience as a community of participators.

<sup>38</sup> See Knapp's "*Assassins, Oklahoma!* and the 'shifting fringe of dark around the camp-fire'" for a full discussion of this common theme in musical comedies (and non-comedies).

not. Participatory reception can read either as liberating construction of community, as I have heretofore read it, or as constricting insistence on unity, depending on the perspective of the participator; both of these emotional experiences can resonate with the queer audience member's own story outside of musical comedy. The combination of drawing the audience member into a community, intertwining the subversive and the resolutely normal, and combining blissful appreciation with witty commentary marks participatory reception as inextricably tied to the musical comedy with all of its queer implications, even when, as I will demonstrate, the object that provides a pretext for the experience in which audiences participate may cease being either musical or comic, while having all along denied its queerness.

Camp's reliance on a kind of winking nostalgia as a source of humor reflects one of the primary purposes of participatory reception: to create a sense of group remembrance, to establish for the community of participants a relationship to a shared cultural past (Román's archive of performance). Eric Hobsbawm calls this an invented tradition,

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual and symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.<sup>39</sup>

This concept proves especially useful in a queer community that is constituted not necessarily by family groups but by chosen families, where traditions that are passed down generationally are necessarily invented rather than inherited. By immersing himself in the rituals of participatory reception, the queer fan can learn the musical traditions that have marked a great deal of queer history in this country, and can infer the associated "values and norms of behavior" that adhere to those traditions—though, as Hobsbawm points out,

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<sup>39</sup> Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 1. See also Sedgwick's "Nationalisms and sexualities: as opposed to what?" in her *Tendencies* for an eloquent and specific exploration of the intersection between queer studies and the scholarly study of nationalism, the field most frequently associated with Hobsbawm.

old [traditions] were specific and strongly binding social practices [but invented traditions] tended to be quite unspecific and vague as to the natures of the values, rights and obligations of the group membership they inculcate.<sup>40</sup>

The relative vagueness of an invented tradition lends itself to a more flexible sense of values than is implied by a rigid, inherited tradition; this adaptability and room for individual interpretation further connects invented tradition to participatory reception, as each participant in a cultural event has substantial room for interpreting the event with regard to his own values.

The instability of meaning implied by such individualized reaction ties invented tradition to both camp and musical comedy in general, each of which relies on appealing to audiences with wildly varying codes of morality. Likewise, Bakhtin's reduced laughter, never clearly defined in his writings on laughter, celebrates this instability; laughter can be reduced into irony's wry grin or the quiet smile that greets a familiar memory of jokes past. The breadth of practices and emotional states covered by both "invented tradition" and "reduced laughter" is not a bug, but rather a feature, of concepts articulated specifically to capture a sort of *vox populi*. It is important to realize, however, that even when an invented tradition's specific values are malleable and open to interpretation, it establishes "emotionally and symbolically charged signs of club membership... [whose] significance lies precisely in their undefined universality."<sup>41</sup> Who has the right, as master of the house, to have the final word at home, and who must raise a family and run that home? While *Fiddler on the Roof* provides an audience with very clear answers to these questions in its opening number, "Tradition," it then spends the rest of the show questioning those answers.<sup>42</sup> The carefully prescribed roles for family members in a proper, kosher home—inherited traditions—have no room for difference. Invented traditions allow for Tzeitel, Hodel, and Chava each to coexist with the faceless The

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<sup>40</sup> Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," 10.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> See Knapp, *National Identity*, 221-222 for his analysis of how "Tradition" already questions its own answers.

Daughter, all individuals who can participate in the tradition in their own way, sing their own songs (or, in Chava's case, dance their own dances).

### **A Little List**<sup>43</sup>

Having cobbled together a somewhat haphazard raft of interdisciplinary theories—one might call it, following Boym, an “unsynthesized” mass of “ironic fragments”—upon which to launch my analyses of some moments of participatory reception, I suppose it would behoove me to tell my readers more about what these moments are. I find myself having difficulty isolating these things that I have variously called moments, events, instances, and occasions. As I indicated in chapter one, I read musical comedy, following Bakhtin and Bruce Kirle,<sup>44</sup> as essentially unfinished and open ended, and this type is especially so, as each object is less an object than a process, a recurring ritual that gains meaning only through cyclic repetition. This comic instability interferes with precise descriptive language, with careful argumentative structure, and with coherent narrative. That interference is precisely the opening through which queer meanings escape, the hermeneutic window that the Lord opens when he closes a door, through which Louisa can climb with a whole jar of spiders in her hand.

The primary instance of participatory reception that I will use to explore the ideas outlined above is, as the preceding sentence suggests, the Sing-A-Long<sup>45</sup> *Sound of Music* at the Hollywood

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<sup>43</sup> The Lord High Executioner, Ko-Ko, in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* introduced himself in the number “As some day it may happen,” the refrain of which is “I've got a little list.” The list in question is his enumeration of “society offenders” who “never would be missed” if he someday were forced to ply his trade.

<sup>44</sup> See the first chapter of Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business*, and my discussion of the same in my own first chapter, as well as my discussion in that chapter of Bakhtin's theories of comedy.

<sup>45</sup> Yes, that extra hyphen is part of the name. No, I don't know why. Perhaps the newly parsed “sing a long” replacing “sing along” refers to the length of the evening after factoring in traffic, parking, and the endless lines of people waiting for ticket scans, bag checks, or the bathrooms.



Bowl, an annual event I have attended several times. Each of the individual events discussed here is an event in which I have been an enthusiastic participant more than once, from the weekly bar night known as Musical Mondays at the bar Eleven in West Hollywood to the exercise class known as Show Tune Cycle. I also look briefly at queer and queer-adjacent community choruses as expressions of another intermediary between performance and participatory reception, an intermediary which I have not participated in, though I have sung in many non-queer-identified (but certainly queer-friendly) community choruses. Each of these practices, as indicated above, takes part in a redefinition of what falls under the label of musical comedy, broadening it to include a great deal of amateur non-performance (to complement the amateur school performance discussed in chapter two) that has not yet been examined with the attention given to professional performance.

Perhaps the only semi-scholarly look at this type of musical comedy experience is D. A. Miller's "At the Bar" chapter of *Place for Us*. The essay is the center of his memoir-cum-analysis of gay musical theater fandom, providing an intermediary between the extreme privacy of "In the Basement" and the public performance of "On Broadway."<sup>46</sup> My examples of participatory reception attempt to extend this trajectory even further, to insert steps in between Bar and Broadway and then continue out beyond to the (Hollywood) Bowl, larger than any Broadway theater.

### **Open bar: cycles and celebrations**

In "At the Bar," Miller carefully dissects every minute interaction that takes place in a New York gay piano bar when a man or several rise to sing a favorite show tune. His account, relentlessly

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<sup>46</sup> See chapter two for a brief discussion of his "In the Basement" chapter.

personal and uncomfortably intimate, delights in moving among the various registers of meaning that are contained in the participatory experience, lingering longest on the use of participation to describe a community's members, a realization of Hobsbawm's invented traditions.<sup>47</sup> Miller begins with the supporting rituals that surround musical participation, the cigarettes and cocktails, sumptuous clothing, exaggerated facial expressions and visibly decaying bodies that clearly label those who belong to the group, in the space—the middle-aged gay men of New York City.

In his detailed portrait of “him,” the anonymous gay musical theater aficionado who is a barely concealed stand-in for Miller himself, Miller writes the walls of the bar, keeping out those who cannot recognize him, welcoming in those who can. The conspicuously performative writing of *Place for Us* reproduces the conspicuously performative drinking, smoking, talking, and (eventually) singing that mark the piano bar,<sup>48</sup> and in doing so it mimics the tradition it depicts; the interminable sentences and exhaustive description require rituals of attentive reading no less restrictive than the ritual smoking procedures of the bar:

As he inhales the intoxicating bitterness of adult life through the tobacco, or imbibes it in the alcohol, whose prodigal consumption starting from the moment he gets past the door only the eagerness of his intemperance persuades us is not a formal condition of admission, like the removal of one's shoes in a Japanese foyer, he is celebrating not so much how far he has journeyed from a place—his mythically straitlaced home or home town—as his distance from a time, that of his childhood, when he couldn't abide either of these acrid tastes... Well versed in the manual of sophisticated smoking, for instance, he pinches the cigarette tensely between thumb and forefinger, as though held with any less rigidity it would be in danger of slipping from his grasp, or even of disintegrating, while his remaining fingers, left to fend for themselves by the motor exertions this vise requires, fly ungovernably into the air.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Miller's attention to detail bears a strong family resemblance to Koestenbaum's microscopic analysis of Harpo Marx in *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, cited in chapter one, as well as to the collectors I discuss in chapter four.

<sup>48</sup> I use the word “performative” here in Judith Butler's sense, as both Miller's writing and his subjects' socializing function as discourses that construct and constitute what they describe. See Butler's *Gender Trouble* for her theorization of the performative with regard to gender.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 28-29.

These gestures and anxieties together perform the invented traditions of the piano bar just as much as the singing that is a more tangible and accessible tradition for non-initiates. Without the extramusical moments, the singing along loses its cultural and communal force, its ability to delineate a group who are in the know and a group outside of it. It is the ritual context and the tradition that lend force (following Boym's nostalgic "seduction") to Miller's later deliberate gay misreadings of song lyrics, misreadings that gain relevance from their association with a tradition not limited to the bars Miller describes here (Marie's Crisis and J.J.'s) but common to piano bars in many gayborhoods around the country, of songs "releas[ing], thus rubbed, a gay genie who had always been lying cramped inside it, but [who] now wafts vaporously, to more or less mischievous effect, over every line."<sup>50</sup>

Stepping lightly from ritual gesture to lyrical incantation to emotional revelation, Miller notes that this gaying up of lyrics is not a wholly celebratory practice. In deriving new meaning from existing meaning, in investing emotional weight in what "can only know itself as derivative and deviant,"<sup>51</sup> this gay community sets itself up to continue occupying the margins of even a genre that is founded upon the creative output of the selfsame community. In Miller's reading, this invented tradition must always feel itself derived from and inferior to an inherited tradition, even when he lauds it as itself the heart of the "real" meanings of show tune lyrics. Further descending into pathos, Miller examines the patron of the bar who refuses participation in the ultimate ritual, singing along at the piano,

the lost soul who, despite the fact that he has spent his entire visit wishing to take his place with the others at the piano, must bitterly reprove himself afterwards for at no point having overcome sufficient shame to do so: not at the start of the evening, when the paucity of witnesses ought to have given him confidence, nor at the height of it, when his inadequacies would have been concealed in the collective swell, nor

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, 36.

even—most unaccountably—just before closing when, in the general sloppiness bred of drink and the hour, everything was lawful, vocally speaking. He is right to be depressed, for no one who has not sung along really understands what a piano bar is, or does; and by not singing, he has only made what it is and what it does more loathsome—and needful—to himself than ever. Which is also to say, to ourselves, that no account of the place—not the ethnographic description of a symbolic practice, the psychological portrait of a human type, or the political rehabilitation of an unrecognized activism—is better than worthless unless, by recourse to autobiography or the novel, it finds a way to join the type in his practice for a few old favorites.<sup>52</sup>

This bleak portrait of the non-participant is worth quoting at length (and what length his sentences have!) not merely for the elegantly bitter prose, but also because it displays the coercive side of the queer sing-along, the way in which even a constructed community can envelop and stifle those who do not quite fit into its invented traditions. The sing-along is proof of membership in the community, and its absence marks the most pathetic and marginalized of this self-consciously and deliberately pathetic and marginalized group. Here Miller's deep investment in shame as a central tenet of gay identification with musical theater comes to the fore, as this "lost soul" merges with his narrator for the remainder of the chapter, weaving a melancholy story of the inevitable destruction of this insular community by the twin devastations of AIDS and *Les Misérables*.

Importantly, the non-singer is assumed to be a shameful figure, one who wishes to sing but cannot bring himself to do so. Miller leaves no room for the community member who participates in any other way, who is part of a sing-along without singing (tapping feet or fingers, clapping, watching) or without explicitly performing for others. While he asserts that singing along is every gay man's (internal) desire, his description nevertheless focuses on the (external) reactions of others to his singing. This singing along is performance even as it is also self-constitutive, desperate longing for attention even inside this supposed sanctum of gay male expression. That tension between comfort and shame governs all of "At the Bar."

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, 43-44.

The beautifully, almost ecstatically gloomy atmosphere Miller describes differs strikingly from that of Musical Mondays, a technologically enhanced version of the piano bar sing-along with an abundance of video screens playing clips from musical comedies for several hours preceding a (brief) live show. The event originated, as one might expect, in New York, at the gay bar Splash, but it was imported to West Hollywood's Eleven in 2009 by co-hosts Ryan LaConnor (né O'Connor) and Scott Nevins. While the impetus for a Monday night musical celebration (Broadway shows are closed, so the talent is available to perform at Musical Mondays) is largely missing in LA,<sup>53</sup> the event has gained a loyal following and looks likely to continue. Together with its spin-off, the Wednesday night cycling class called Show Tune Cycle, Musical Mondays provides an excellent example of the type of queer participatory reception that I have been describing—and here I turn again to the broader terms “queer” and “musical comedy” in place of “gay” and “musical theater,” as this space is much less intensely guarded on both sexual and generic fronts than Miller's intimate moments in the piano bar chorus.

This letting down of one's guard generates all of the significant differences between the piano bar and Musical Mondays. The atmosphere at MuMo (as it is affectionately abbreviated) is deliberately celebratory, often nostalgic but never veering into melancholy, welcoming to newcomers and irregular attendees, and above all, enthusiastic. From the elaborately prepared groups of singers-along who bring props and costume pieces to augment their choreography to the quieter patrons who simply sit at the bar and drink in the music with their chardonnay, all of the MuMo attendees seem wholly invested in the transitory community they create at this weekly ritual. When I attended

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<sup>53</sup> While it is true that theatrical shows in Los Angeles also largely close on Mondays, theater is much less at the center of LA's musical comedy culture than it is in NY. The availability of talent for the live show certainly relies still on this quirk of scheduling, but in my reading of MuMo, the live show is not as important as the events that precede it.

in January of 2012,<sup>54</sup> I was warmly greeted not only by George the bartender, but also by the regular patrons who clearly all knew each other; they introduced themselves and, upon discovering my occupation, asked me to identify movies that were playing on the screen above the bar.<sup>55</sup> The movies highlight an important distinction between MuMo and the older piano bar tradition, the acceptance of filmic sources of musical comedy material. This acceptance, which is of course a necessity at an event built around a sequence of video clips,<sup>56</sup> changes the tenor of the audience, weakening the hold of what Addison DeWitt would call “we theatre folk” on the evening, opening up a space for the non-performers, those who don’t sing along or who do so only under their breath, those who don’t need “a tube of greasepaint and a follow spot.”<sup>57</sup>

In broadening the audience base beyond the theatrical community, MuMo also broadens it beyond the middle-aged, white, gay men Miller describes in *Place for Us*. While that population is certainly not underrepresented in the crowd, there are many, many attendees who don’t fit into one or more of those demographic categories. Young gay men abound, of various racial descriptions, and there are a few women as well, of unknown (to me) orientations (though I have personally accompanied lesbian- straight- and queer-identified women). The variations of age, race, gender, and

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<sup>54</sup> I first attended Musical Mondays in my official capacity as a researcher on January 23, 2012, and took copious notes. All observations about specific videos and reactions are from that evening unless otherwise noted. I have also attended at various points from 2011 to 2013.

<sup>55</sup> The three debated videos were, in order of appearance, “Get Me to the Church on Time” from *My Fair Lady*, “The Deadwood Stage” from *Calamity Jane*, and “Good Mornin’” from *Singin’ in the Rain*. All of these films, perhaps coincidentally, can easily be read as queer romances between Higgins and Pickering, Calam and Katie, and Don and Cosmo, respectively. See Knapp’s *Personal Identity* for queer readings of *Singin’ in the Rain* and *My Fair Lady*.

<sup>56</sup> While the centrality of film to MuMo seems to mark it as particularly Angeleno, the New York Musical Mondays also features a mixture of film and theater sources as its sing-along vehicles. The emphasis that I am choosing to place on the films over the live show, however, perhaps marks me as particularly Angeleno.

<sup>57</sup> These references to *All About Eve* and “Broadway Baby” from Stephen Sondheim’s *Follies*, respectively, mark my own participation in the invented traditions of gay male camp culture, by way of a film about the theater and a nostalgic musical about older musicals. Miller’s *Place for Us* is an unbroken string of such references, completely without attribution or quotation marks, thereby further delineating his membership in a community. For more on this phenomenon, see chapters one and four; I have attempted to open the closed community *à la* Musical Mondays by providing attributions for my quotations and allusions.

orientation are reflected in the video choices (usually selected by a straight male VJ from his own collection) and in the reactions to them from the audience—while *Oklahoma!*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Guys and Dolls* all feature in the lineup, more noticeable reactions are generated by *Dreamgirls*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, and *Sister Act*.<sup>58</sup> Without question the largest audible participation, however, occurred during a clip of Elaine Stritch performing “Ladies Who Lunch” at the Kennedy Center: what sounded like the entire bar roared, along with Stritch, “and one for Mahler!” The only participatory moment that rivaled this many-throated salute (more to Stritch and booze than to Gustav, one may assume)<sup>59</sup> occurred during the clip of “Ring Them Bells” from *Liẓa with a “Z,”* when dozens of people suddenly produced bells (and, in some cases, keys) to ring.<sup>60</sup>

These types of audience contributions are characteristic of participatory reception. Most audience members are not performing whole numbers, not standing on a stage and drawing attention to themselves—they are indulging in Boym’s “ironic fragments,” not in a wholesale performance of “self” à la Knapp’s reading of one way for an audience member to make use of *Rocky Horror*. The point of the evening is not theatrical performance, but the invention and reinforcement of group traditions, to declare a commonality with the rest of the MuMo fans instead of setting oneself apart from them. Interestingly, there is a group of young people at MuMo who know every video intimately and who perform alongside the videos as a *Rocky-Horror*-esque shadow cast, but there are no soloists who demanded attention. These participants are interesting, and obviously both extremely talented and versed in musical comedy, but for much of the evening, they

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<sup>58</sup> This *Sister Act* was the Whoopi Goldberg film, not the Patina Miller musical of the same name based on the film.

<sup>59</sup> A fascinating alternative hypothesis that centers Mahler rather than Stritch was provided by a friend of mine who sang in one of the choruses I will examine later in this chapter. See below for her insights.

<sup>60</sup> Eleven provides bells to patrons when this video plays; ritual repetition is not limited merely to musical comedy as a genre, but also to specific numbers.

perform for nobody but themselves, ignored by the rest of the bar.<sup>61</sup> I could analyze their performances here, investigate their queer attention to detail that left one of them (a Latino man) tied to a chair and gagged during “Run, Freedom, Run” from *Urinetown* in silent imitation of the white, female character Hope Cladwell, bound to a chair upstage during the number and largely uninvolved, but that would be beside the point when focusing on participatory reception—the most performance-oriented participants merit no more academic scrutiny than the middle-aged white men who sat next to me discussing Audra McDonald during a clip from the 1999 remake of *Annie*, or the young black man across the bar from me who was the only other person there lip-synching along with *Rocky Horror*, or the bearded and muscular white bartender who sang most of the roles in the *Dreamgirls* scene that led into “And I Am Telling You.”<sup>62</sup> All of these characters combine to reinvent the traditions that governed Miller’s piano bars, opening them up to broader varieties of participation and broader queer communities.

Despite the differences between these two versions of participatory reception, they share some key features that manifest across all the examples of participatory reception that I have come across. Crucially, they are both repeating rituals, able to function as Hobsbawmian invented tradition, Romanian performance archive, and Bakhtinian reduced-laughter-generating carnivals simultaneously. This ritual repetition leaves them perpetually open-ended even when the individual songs end, operating without a perfect authentic cadence to leave the event, the experience, the act of participatory reception comically inconclusive throughout. Many of the videos, in fact, cut off any literal final cadence in order to move seamlessly into the next.<sup>63</sup> Despite Miller’s nod to tragedy, entirely necessary in a 1990s gay narrative, the queer camp sing-along of the twenty-first century

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<sup>61</sup> Except, of course, the vigilant scholar dutifully taking notes on everything that happened around him.

<sup>62</sup> That said, see chapter five for my brief analysis of these performers.

<sup>63</sup> See my discussion, in chapter one, of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* and the comedy of missing cadences.



remains strongly comic. This generation gap of sorts becomes even more noticeable two days later, every Wednesday at Show Tune Cycle.

Just as MuMo challenges the theater centrality and white gay male centrality of older queer musical comedy histories, its spin off, Show Tune Cycle, further challenges the corresponding *Gesamtkunstwerk* centrality of most musical comedy analyses. A weekly spinning class run by LaConnor and his husband Graham (né LaBass), Show Tune Cycle (also called Sweating to the Show Tunes) deliberately repurposes musical comedy songs as motivators for energetic exercise, taking them out of their settings within shows and, often, altering their dramatic function quite, well, dramatically. Songs that have a specific dramatic purpose within a narrative become mere combinations of tempos, beats, and volumes, all basically stagnant throughout the number and all amped up beyond where they might normally rest. Thus, “Defying Gravity” loses its softer, slower interludes and charges directly ahead to the triumphant finale, becoming a sort of show tune *gestalt*, a reduction or expansion of the specific to the general. These remixes of familiar songs point out the malleability of participatory reception, the way it forcibly queers a song even when not misreading its lyrics *à la* Miller. By taking the songs out of their familiar contexts but nevertheless relying on the audience’s familiarity with them, Show Tune Cycle invites new meanings, contested readings of songs’ emotional force that center audience use, not composers’ intent.

At my first Show Tune Cycle, almost all the show tunes played came from recent musicals. Nostalgia here was directed not at the imagined utopic version of the 1950s that marks much camp culture, or even the imagined utopic version of the 1970s that has gained force among younger queer audiences (both encapsulated in *Grease*), but rather the imagined utopic versions of the mostly youthful participants’ own childhoods that these musicals reminded us of. This nostalgia for the entertainment of our youth led to the enthusiastic singing along with *Rent* (original 1998, film version 2005) and *Nunsies* (original 1992, stage version 2011) that left us even more out of breath

than the spinning alone left us. Simple upper-body choreography (lean left, lean right, lean forward, sit up) enhanced the participatory experience, even, perhaps especially, when the class' tempo seemed to unintentionally queer the tempo of the accompanying number.

The aforementioned generation gap between Miller's gay audiences and my queer ones comes to the fore even more in Show Tune Cycle's incorporation of songs that push hard at the edges of what counts as a show tune. Mirroring the decade-old trend of jukebox musicals that have been ubiquitous on Broadway since the success of *Mamma Mia!* and the recent popularity of *Glee*, Show Tune Cycle includes songs from *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and other pop covers of songs from musicals. These marginal show tunes form a bridge between the pop music generally heard in gyms and the nostalgic older numbers, welcoming into the community people who don't yet know the traditions, easing them gently into musical comedy and into the class. However unintentional this welcoming gesture may be, it does serve to blur the line between insider and outsider, to normalize both musical comedy and queerness so that participants who identify more strongly with one or the other of these labels can slip into the other and take it for a spin.<sup>64</sup>

At the class that immediately preceded the premiere of the television show *Smash*, a musical drama about the creation of a new Broadway musical, instructor Graham LaConnor played a song that would feature on that show as a show tune, but that began its life as a pop song, Christina Aguilera's "Beautiful." This gesture re-focused the class on its connection to Broadway traditions, by referring to a television show about Broadway that the class attendees were expected to know about simply by virtue of their being Show Tune Cycle participants. Simultaneously, however, it focused the class even farther outside of Broadway, by playing a song that, at that time, had no real

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<sup>64</sup> It is safe for you to assume, at this point, that all puns contained herein are intended.

connection to the world of staged musical comedy. By explaining that connection, Graham LaConnor made explicit the aforementioned welcoming gesture.

What “Beautiful” did have already, however, was a connection to queer diva worship. This phenomenon, remarked on often in the context of musicals and operas,<sup>65</sup> extends far beyond the proscenium into the world of popular music, from disco to hip-hop to rock to pop. Mitchell Morris, in his “It’s Raining Men: the Weather Girls, Gay Subjectivity, and the Erotics of Insatiability,” explicitly extends operatic diva worship to disco divas Martha Wash and Izora Armstead, noting that “they could have been seen as repositories for all that is marginal...[but t]heir refusal to be humiliated gave them the ability to be spectacularly audible, spectacularly visible, spectacularly unruly,”<sup>66</sup> connecting this spectacular marginality to Bakhtin’s carnival and modern Gay Pride celebrations. Pop diva figures like Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Britney (Spears, but divas don’t need last names!) have provided organizing themes to *Glee* episodes and costume ideas to countless gay men on Halloween and at other carnivalesque spectacles.

What Show Tune Cycle (and *Smash*, for that matter) is making explicit by including pop divas’ hit tunes is the constant interpenetration of musical comedy and popular music. While authors like Mark N. Grant have decried the fall of the show tune from the pinnacle of the pop charts,<sup>67</sup> and authors like Clum and D. A. Miller have, to a much lesser degree, decried the fall of the show tune from the pinnacle of gay self-identification, the cross-genre continuity of the queer diva figure demonstrates a point that they are missing. Musical comedy is not a special, isolated category of music that provides a unique experience to marginalized listeners; it is part of a vibrant system of

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<sup>65</sup> See Clum’s “Here she is boys: on divas, drag, and immortality” in his *Something for the Boys* for musical theater diva worship, Dyer’s *Heavenly Bodies* for musical (and non-musical) film diva worship, and Wayne Koestenbaum’s *The Queen’s Throat* for operatic diva worship. See also chapter five for my own expansion on this topic.

<sup>66</sup> Morris, “It’s Raining Men,” 226.

<sup>67</sup> See his *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*, especially his screed about the deleterious effects of rock on good’ fashioned foxtrots, 150-165.

musics, from the corn-syrupy sweet pop songs of Mitch Miller to the orgasmic disco moans of Donna Summer, that can each function in the ways that musical comedy has functioned for Grant, Clum, Miller, and myself. At Show Tune Cycle, and indeed at MuMo, queers, usually younger ones, whose divas are Britney and Whitney can participate as enthusiastically as those of us who owe our allegiance to Judy and Liza.<sup>68</sup>

### **And I'll sing once more<sup>69</sup>**

At long last, we have arrived at the centerpiece of participatory reception, the event that helped me come to grips with the concept. This musical comedy experience goes beyond all of the participatorily receptive queerness I have heretofore catalogued; it represents the apotheosis of participatory reception in all its queer glory. From the intensely personal atmosphere of Miller's piano bar to the intimate community of MuMo and Show Tune Cycle, all situated somewhere between the private space of the home and the public space of daily life, allow me to explode outward into the public sphere as I move to the Hollywood Bowl, an 18,000-seat outdoor venue that hosts the annual Sing-A-Long *Sound of Music* (*SASOM*) each September. Suddenly the personal flaws that Miller points out are exposed rather than concealed by the cashmere sweater and the vocal solo, the individuality of the *Rocky Horror* shadow-casters or the MuMo regulars who know every video, all disappear into the wash of thousands of compatriots, a late summer twilight, and a haze of alcohol and marijuana fumes that drifts (hopefully) just out of reach of the noses of many, many small

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<sup>68</sup> I have not, it is true, heard Britney Spears at either of these events, but I have no doubt that she will one day make an appearance through her *Glee* covers. In case it isn't clear, the other divas listed are Whitney Houston, Judy Garland, and Liza Minnelli.

<sup>69</sup> The title song from *The Sound of Music* ends with this hopeful expectation of more songs to come, an expectation borne out by the rest of the show.

children. Even more than at MuMo, individuals here matter less than the group experience, the collective invention of traditions, unless of course the individual has a laser pointer.<sup>70</sup>

This hyperpublic arena for participatory reception, like MuMo, is far from the lights of Broadway and the fetishization of its stage that marks so much of the discourse surrounding musical comedy. This is the anti-Broadway, a wholesale celebration of the musical film that can be anything from a shoddy imitation of its reified stage counterpart<sup>71</sup> to an entirely non-musical pretender to the name it bears,<sup>72</sup> but which is always already inferior to live theater. This venue, under the iconic Hollywood sign, stands in for Los Angeles, a city who constantly aspires to be New York (except when ze wants to be San Francisco), who vociferously denies New York's claim to cultural centrality while bawling to hir therapist about the truth of that very claim, where stage actors move when they're old or retired or just broke and in need of a steady paycheck. Here in the city that celebrates artifice and the unnatural, that provides us with so much of the raw material for our camp carnivals, we gather to give voice to a ridiculously romanticized fantasy of Austria in the 1930s,<sup>73</sup> singing nonsensical lines about "strength [lying] in nights of peaceful slumbers" along with a newly formed but also annually reconstituted community that echoes *Rocky Horror*—but with sunny smiles and children in Lederhosen replacing seductive leers and adults in fishnets.

The very Los Angeles-ness of the evening matters not only because it isn't New York, but also because Los Angeles creates and represents the mass cultural objects—films, television shows,

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<sup>70</sup> Laser pointers are used by intrepid *SASOM*-goers to identify the Nazis, especially Rolf. They provide perhaps the only way for an individual to make himself known to the entire Bowl during the film, and I have heard many attendees express irritation at the pointers' insistence on doing so. Interestingly, at the 2012 *SASOM*, there was only one brief instance of Nazi-limning, perhaps demonstrating the community's coercive force in reigning in members whose deviances are out of line with accepted group traditions.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, the introduction to Geoffrey Block's *Enchanted Evenings*, wherein he follows Kim Kowalke in labeling most musical films "generic deformation." (xxiii-xxiv).

<sup>72</sup> See the barely-musical film versions of *On Your Toes*, and *Pal Joey*.

<sup>73</sup> See Knapp's *National Identity*, 230-239, for his discussion of *The Sound of Music* contra history.

popular music albums—that have the capacity, by virtue of their ubiquitous distribution, not only to reach an incredibly broad community but also to diminish the value of belonging to that community. The film version of *The Sound of Music*, an Academy Award winner and one of the top-grossing films of all time, conveys some meaning to nearly all US Americans and many people not from the United States, but in doing so it loses its specificity, its connection to a live theater tradition that promises a unique experience from every performance.<sup>74</sup> In embracing and relying on both the repeatable nature of film and the ritual nature of invented tradition, *SASOM* becomes a celebration of the comedy of familiarity, a prime candidate for engendering Bakhtin’s reduced laughter, though at the expense of any sense of carnival shock perhaps intended in the film’s story of the uncontrollable Maria disrupting the ordered Von Trapp household. When we all know that the canoe will overturn, we laugh in satisfaction rather than surprise.

And who exactly are we? The children at *SASOM* provide a convenient link from chapter two’s performer-audience to the queer audiences of this chapter. Families fill the Bowl, side by side with groups of tipsy adults, queer and resolutely not, all celebrating an event that seems made just for us. After all, the children in the film are nearly as important as Julie Andrews: queer icon;<sup>75</sup> 2011’s *SASOM* featured a pre-film appearance by all of the actors who played the Von Trapp girls introducing their new scrapbook of photos and memorabilia from their time filming *Sound of Music*—shades of Seremetakis’ nostalgic longing for “unreconciled historical experience”—while 2005’s iteration featured appearances by all seven no-longer-young actors. These grown-up children still recalling their past fame are certainly no Baby Janes<sup>76</sup> (or even Baby Junes),<sup>77</sup> but their presence

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<sup>74</sup> See Savran’s “Middlebrow Anxiety,” 18-19, for his differentiation between theater and mass culture.

<sup>75</sup> A colleague of mine who, by her own admission, hates musicals, nevertheless purchased a *SASOM* ticket because, in her words, “it’s required, as a queer woman, to have a thing for Julie Andrews.” See also the “Julie Andrews” and “Sound of Music” chapters of Wolf’s *Problem Like Maria*.

<sup>76</sup> Bette Davis’ aging child star role in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

lends to the proceedings an aura of frozen youth that in addition to enhancing the nostalgia of the moment, recalls both the wink of plausible deniability so central to both musical comedies aimed at children and discredited narratives of queerness as arrested development.<sup>78</sup>

There are, of course, other sing-alongs in the world, and they share a lot of what makes *SASOM* a celebration of queerness in the musical comedy. Sing-along versions of *Grease*; “Once More, With Feeling;” and *The Little Mermaid* have cropped up in recent years, as well as many other *Sounds of Music* and *Rocky Horrors (Rocky Horror?)*, each one sharing, to varying degrees, the reliance on familiarity that marks sing-alongs as childish and nostalgic, the gender-blurring that inheres in a mixed-gender audience singing along with a single-gender performer, and the insistence upon the creation of musical community that singing together implies. Stacy Wolf, in the Afterword to *Problem Like Maria*, notes that a weekly “*Singalong-a-Sound-of-Music*” in London “revels in its gayness,” as it “invoke[s] visceral responses and call[s] up active engagements;”<sup>79</sup> these practices, as theorized above, amplify the queerness of the sing-along, even more than the lesbian sex scene in “Once More, With Feeling” and Tim Curry’s muscle worship number in *Rocky Horror*. It is the invented traditions that facilitate the creation of community, even of family, that most interests me here, as this is not necessarily restricted to the sexually queer, but is a necessary part of any queer person’s life if that person chooses queerness as an important facet of hir identity.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> The child star of Momma Rose’s Vaudeville act in *Gypsy* who didn’t know her real age and who fled the act to become an adult.

<sup>78</sup> See Wolf’s discussion of Peter Pan as queer figure in *A Problem Like Maria*, 64. See also Sedgwick’s “How to bring your kids up gay: the war on effeminate boys” in her *Tendencies* for a discussion of the pathologizing of effeminacy in psychology and psychiatry.

<sup>79</sup> Wolf, *Problem Like Maria*, 237.

<sup>80</sup> Interestingly, these attitudes are reproduced in *In the Heights* (2008), the plot of which revolves around the constructed family of a Washington Heights Latin@ neighborhood. Vanessa longs to leave the constricting atmosphere of “this block,” as personified by busybody Daniela, while Usnavi learns to love and live for the community embrace personified by Abuela Claudia. Both Daniela and Claudia are, notably, queer figures, single women whose primary relationships are homosocial (Daniela) or intergenerational (Claudia). For more on the role of women in *In the Heights*, see chapter five of

Beyond the general queerness of sing-alongs, *SASOM* also makes use of the queerness inherent in *The Sound of Music*, both in the character of Uncle Max and in the diva status of its heroine and synecdoche, Julie Andrews. While Andrea Most reads Uncle Max as Jewish,<sup>81</sup> it is just as easy, if not easier, to read him as sexually, rather than racially queer.<sup>82</sup> He is a single man who travels around with the Captain and Baroness, apparently harmless to their relationship in a way that Maria certainly isn't, "a flirt/but never a threat," to quote the description of Bobby in *Company* that Miller cites among the reasons for his reading of Bobby as gay.<sup>83</sup> He delights in song and drink and children, serving as an unrelated "uncle." To a queer audience, Max reads as one of us; even when he dismisses the pink lemonade as "too...pink," his raised pinky gives the lie to his disavowal.<sup>84</sup> Andrews herself, of course, bears much of the queer signification that the film-as-film carries; Stacy Wolf has elaborately demonstrated the layers of gendered meaning that accrue to Andrews in general and within this role in particular, from Maria's tomboyish rejection of the nuns' ordered lives to Andrews' star persona that suggests a femme lesbian.<sup>85</sup>

To return from the world of the film itself to the sing-along built around it, I want to examine the ways that specific participatory practices that have developed at *SASOM* further emphasize the queerness of attending the event. Even before the singing begins, the costume parade and contest celebrate difference and boundary crossing both in their recollection of *Rocky Horror*

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Wolf's *Changed for Good*. The term Latin@ has become a popular gender-neutral or gender-inclusive term for Latino and Latina.

<sup>81</sup> Most, *Making Americans*, 186.

<sup>82</sup> The conflation of Jewish and queer identity in Hollywood is, of course, longstanding (see, among other sources, *The Celluloid Closet*). Knapp, in *National Identity*, 231, alludes to Max's surprising status as "the one person who *might* be Jewish (not to mention gay)" in a World War II film.

<sup>83</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 124.

<sup>84</sup> See also Wolf's description of Max and the Baroness as a lesbian/gay male couple in *Problem Like Maria*, 220.

<sup>85</sup> See again *Problem Like Maria*, particularly the "Julie Andrews" and "Sound of Music" chapters.



costume contests (for those who know *Rocky Horror*) and in their proliferation of men dressed as nuns and girls in Lederhosen. While the most popular costume seems to be that of a girl in a white dress with a blue satin sash, worn almost exclusively by young girls, the fantastical and carnival nature of the costume contest (attendees dress as objects from the film,<sup>86</sup> as lyrics,<sup>87</sup> as actors' names,<sup>88</sup> in addition to dressing as characters) pushes the entire experience into the realm at least of transgression even when not explicitly transvestite. The costume contest winners in 2011 were covered head-to-toe in gold spandex, dressed as the Academy Awards the film won. In Sedgwick's parlance, this is queer as an "'across' formulation...multiply transitive. Keenly, it is relational, and strange."<sup>89</sup>

After the parade and contest end and the film proper begins, the number one *SASOM* participatory practice manifests as the crowd lifts its massive voice to proclaim that the Hollywood Hills wherein we are gathered are alive with *The Sound of Music*. This first number precedes the opening credits, which occur during the oddly timed overture, and it importantly introduces not only the thrust of the plot (briefly: music is a panacea) and the main character (Julie Andrews as Maria soon-to-be-Von-Trapp), but also the main activity of the evening: singing along. As subtitle lyrics on the screen announce to the crowd what we are to be singing, we find our sense of all-encompassing community in the sharing of what is one of the most well-known moments of USAmerican cinema, Maria's joyful spinning in a field high above Nonnberg Abbey.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> The pinecone Maria sits on at dinner, for example.

<sup>87</sup> Many, many people dress as the notes of the scale.

<sup>88</sup> Plumbers named Christopher, a delightful twist on Christopher Plummer.

<sup>89</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii.

<sup>90</sup> "Spinning," of course, here refers to her literal movement, not to the use of a stationary bicycle, as it did above in my discussion of Show Tune Cycle. This moment, captured in a still photograph, has recently spawned an internet meme, captioned "LOOK AT ALL THE FUCKS I GIVE."

This mass experience of personal involvement in a central piece of nostalgic Americana (despite its embodiment in a British woman playing an Austrian)<sup>91</sup> seems to belie the queerness I am claiming for *SASOM*, but in the discovery of sudden community in an enormous crowd of strangers one can locate a queer coming-of-age narrative that reflects stories like Samuel Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water*:

what *this* experience said was that there was a population...not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex.<sup>92</sup>

Delany's description of a bathhouse requires some adjustment when applied to *SASOM*, of course, but not nearly as much as one might expect—thousands of queer people gathered tell us that history has, actively and already, created for us at least one institution, good and bad, to accommodate our singing. Beginning with this enthusiastic and ecstatic participatory gesture is essential to the fellow feeling that guides the rest of the performance, as the next moment of universal cooperation occurs at the hissing of Eleanor Parker's name in the credits;<sup>93</sup> such a non-musical and negative expression of communality would be perhaps inappropriate to begin the evening, but coming after the "Sound of Music" sing-along, it registers as a delicious moment of shared approbation greeted with startled chuckles from new attendees and enthusiastic participation from the experienced *SASOM*-goers. In opening with the most inclusive moment of participation, *SASOM* parallels MuMo more than Miller, deliberately lowering defenses to welcome everybody in, to allow every participant to become

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<sup>91</sup> See again Knapp, *National Identity*, 230-239.

<sup>92</sup> Delany, *Motion*, 174, quoted in Joan W. Scott's "The Evidence of Experience."

<sup>93</sup> Baroness Schraeder, as close to a villain as *Sound of Music* comes, despite the ubiquitous presence of Nazis.

queer in the sense of Sedgwick’s “people able to relish, learn from, or identify with [sexually queer people].”<sup>94</sup>

From the credits, which dissolve at the tolling of the abbey bell, the audience moves rather surprisingly to a subtitled-for-sing-along Matins service. Each time I have attended *SASOM*, this moment of participatory religious observance seems to take the crowd by surprise, and the number of singers-along drops dramatically from nearly the full 18,000 in “Sound of Music” to what sounds like approximately five people.<sup>95</sup> The opportunities for cheers, claps, and hisses in the credits seem to generate far more interest than the pseudo-Catholic chant and polyphony that Richard Rodgers so painstakingly constructed.<sup>96</sup> This abstinence from complicated church music can read many ways, from an explicit rejection of the virtuosic singing ability needed for Renaissance-y Latin polyphony in favor of folksy, “natural” English-language melodies;<sup>97</sup> to a simple amnesiac dismissal of the nuns’ singing anything other than “Maria” and “Climb Ev’ry Mountain;” to a queer discomfort with resolutely heterosexual twentieth-century Catholicism and its constricting morality, musicality, and misogyny.<sup>98</sup>

Perhaps I have been misleading you in these last few pages; I don’t intend to walk my readers step by step through *SASOM*, indicating each and every moment of participatory reception or its absence. However, what is most crucial to notice about *SASOM* as contrasted with *Sound of*

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<sup>94</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.

<sup>95</sup> I must admit that I often attend *SASOM* with other musicologists; they usually number among the five who sing along with “Dixit Dominus” and the “Morning Hymn.”

<sup>96</sup> See Rodgers’ autobiography, *Musical Stages*, 301, in which he admits cavalierly inventing the “Western” music of *Oklahoma!* and the “Oriental” music of *The King and I* but feeling unprepared to invent Catholic liturgical music.

<sup>97</sup> Thus reinforcing the film’s message about rural authenticity triumphing over sophisticated prevarication and order; see Dyer’s “The Sound of Music.”

<sup>98</sup> This official face of Catholicism stands in stark contrast to the church’s centuries-old role as a haven for queer men and women in its homosocial cloisters; see Lindsay Johnson’s “Listening and Vocal Embodiment in Private Devotions by Early Seventeenth-Century Italian Nuns” for one example of queer musical eroticism in Catholic convents.

*Music* in its non-participatory state is that when *Sound of Music* ceases being a musical after Maria and Georg's wedding,<sup>99</sup> *SASOM* replaces the moments of musical participation with moments of comic participation that turn the relentlessly tense and dark escape from the Nazis into a joyous celebration of communal enjoyment much closer to the sing-along first act than the film would have its audience recognize. From the aforementioned laser pointers that outline Rolf upon each of his appearances, to the flashlights that appear when the Nazis hunt the Von Trapps in the abbey, to the New Year's Eve confetti poppers that mark the appearance of Nazi firearms,<sup>100</sup> the Hollywood Bowl audience chooses not to recognize that the musical and its pursuit of an engaged, participatory audience has ended, and we enthusiastically continue musicalizing the rather disastrous second act.

In so erasing the boundary between the musical pleasure of Act One and the non-musical terror of Act Two, the *SASOM* audience is collectively queering *Sound of Music*. Our participatory reception removes it from the world of filmic realism and teleological narrative that consistently overtakes film musicals in their second halves and returns it to the extravagant fantasy world that allows "Do Re Mi" to carry Maria and the children all around Salzburg on at least two different days without ever breaking musical continuity. The world of the song has a queer temporality, to use a phrase of Judith Halberstam's;<sup>101</sup> it breaks the grip of a plot that would have us tend inevitably downward until we finally need to climb ev'ry mountain just to get out of Austria,<sup>102</sup> and lets us celebrate what we are doing in the present moment that has nothing to do with a predetermined

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<sup>99</sup> See Knapp, "Getting off the Trolley."

<sup>100</sup> These poppers are provided by the Hollywood Bowl in *Rocky-Horror*-style prop bags that many attendees use to participate in the film. The moments that people choose to use them, however, are varied, with some deciding to mark the potential gunshots of the pursuing Nazis; others electing to mark Maria and Georg's first kiss; and still others simply celebrating their wedding.

<sup>101</sup> I am grateful here, as I so often am, to Sarah Ellis who first brought this concept to my attention in her work on *Rent*.

<sup>102</sup> This is not just a pun; see again page 301 of Rodgers' autobiography, where he notes that "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" was needed to give strength...to the whole family when they were about to cross the Alps."

timeline, whether that timeline is the inevitable Anschluss or the equally inevitable heterosexual marriage plot.<sup>103</sup> In the interstices between plot events, the moments when the action ceases and the music begins, this crushing inevitability lifts and “the world is bright/and all is right/and life is merry and gay,” to quote Andrews in *Camelot*.<sup>104</sup> When the audience at *SASOM* celebrates the instances rather than their progression, the now rather than the eventually, when we lift our flashlights in a campy imitation of the terrifying Nazi searchlights instead of cowering in fear lest they find the Von Trapps (and us), we are defying the gravity of the situation in a characteristically queer manner, regardless of the sexual orientation of any individual audience member.

This lens of camp through which we read—and write—*SASOM* complicates any simple opposition between queerness and straightness, between musical frozen moments and non-musical progressions. After all, the queerly atemporal “Do Re Mi”—where on earth do they get those other clothes, if all they have are uniforms and curtains, and how do they put them on without pausing in their singing?—is in fact both lyrically and musically focused on the inevitable progression of the diatonic major scale, while “My Favorite Things” and “Edelweiss,” despite their relative lack of teleological drive toward a musical conclusion, advance the plot of the film quite clearly in their pivotal roles in bringing Maria and the Von Trapps closer together. It is not enough simply to bracket musical performance within the film as an expression of queerness and dramatic performance as an expression of its lack. Camp sensibility demands that we read everything both ways, see everything as simultaneously queer and straight, comical and serious, musical and dramatic, Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> See Knapp, *National Identity*, 230.

<sup>104</sup> “What do the Simple Folk Do?” features lyrics written by Alan Jay Lerner, delivered onstage by the inimitable Dame Julie. It is worth noting that this number is precisely an attempt at ignoring the inevitable collapse of Camelot.

<sup>105</sup> Savran claims a similar “both/and” attitude toward consumption for all middlebrow culture, which includes especially theater (and especially especially musical theater): “[B]oth high and low at the same time[,] theater has consistently

Just as camp complicates so many supposed binary relationships, *SASOM* as a ritual instance of participatory reception complicates the relationship between novelty and familiarity that is so central to comedy. *The Sound of Music* is a slightly dark film, but it is a musical comedy, whether one defines comedy in a classical theater sense as a play ending with all parties married instead of dead, or quite simply as a work intended to amuse, or, as I discuss in chapter one, as a work which is inherently without conclusion, open-ended. Many comedies of each of these types rely on surprise and novelty as sources of humor, and indeed *The Sound of Music* exploits that source in Maria's unfortunate first dinner at the Von Trapp's mansion when she sits so heavily on that troublesome pinecone, and again in "The Lonely Goatherd" when she inhales the sawdust foam that Marta blows off of the puppet's beer stein—simulating, if only for a moment, the unthinkable state of a slightly drunk Julie Andrews. However, in the context of *SASOM*, the experience relies far more heavily on a comedy of familiarity, on appealing to those who already know the film and will eagerly await Maria's leap out of her chair and her cry of surprise and pain carefully dismissed as rheumatism. This familiar comedy inspires reduced laughter, an appreciative chuckle rather than an uncontrollable guffaw.<sup>106</sup>

This reliance on familiarity is itself overturned when fans of the film first come to *SASOM*, as they learn the participatory practices that mark the event. Their laughter at the hissing of the Baroness' credit is audible laughter of surprise, as is their laughter at the flashlights' appearance. However, the comedic mode is reversed again for repeat attendees, who become as familiar with *SASOM* as we are with *The Sound of Music*. Recalling the nested levels of celebration and mourning (and of musical meaning) in Miller's piano bar, these comedic layers are impossible to tease

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evinced...the promiscuous mixture of commerce and art, entertainment and politics, the banal and the auratic, profane and sacred, spectacular and personal, erotic and intellectual" (Savran, *Queer Sort of Materialism*, 15).

<sup>106</sup> See chapter one for my discussion of Bakhtin's concept of reduced laughter, as well as Arthur Koestler's theory of humor as simultaneous surprise-and-not-surprise.

completely apart, and that is part of the point of *SASOM*. It is many things to many people, just as *The Sound of Music* is, and we do all of those things together, despite our differences. This is queer community formation in the most inclusive sense, inventing a tradition that resonates with reduced laughter, expressing a solidarity of difference that claims that our shared experience of creating *SASOM* matters more than our different versions of what *SASOM* is.

### **Join the chorus**

My final example of participatory reception is something of an outlier. At all of the aforementioned events, the event itself tears down the proscenium arch that separates musical comedy performers from audience members. While this separation has been called into question by scholars of performance for decades—not least by Bakhtin himself, in *Rabelais and his World*—in the world of musical theater and musical film criticism and reception, the proscenium has long remained in place, containing the dangerous carnival within, the seductive and liberating thought that any of us could burst into song at any moment.<sup>107</sup> When *SASOM* allows our voices to cross the barrier between stage and audience in an unexpected direction, it calls into question the existence of performer as a category distinct from participant. My last example, the queer community chorus, seems at first glance to rely heavily on the existence of those categories.

I have chosen the phrase “queer community chorus” with considerable care, and no little alliteration. Community chorus is itself a contentious label, one that causes many semi-professional and amateur singers to bristle at the perceived insult of a focus on social interaction at the expense of musical art. In Karen Ahlquist’s introduction to *Chorus and Community*, she points out that both

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<sup>107</sup> See again chapter one for my discussion of Bakhtin’s carnival and its hostility to this division, and for my review of musicals scholars’ varied relationship to said division.

“community” and “chorus” are unstable concepts, covering a broad range of possible musical and social configurations even before being combined into the sometimes-pejorative community chorus;<sup>108</sup> the discussion of what makes a chorus is somewhat outside the scope of this chapter, but the question of community formation of course occupies center stage, even when I am calling into question the very existence of that stage. Gregory Barz, writing of Tanzanian *kwayas* as sites of musical performance of community, stresses that each of these choirs functions as “a critical means for meeting the needs not only of a greater community but as a community in and of itself.”<sup>109</sup> A similar overlapping community formation in the choruses I am examining has prompted me to use the term community chorus, hopefully stripped of any pejorative residue by the preceding paean to participatory reception that makes up the bulk of this chapter.

What allows these choruses, acknowledged performing groups, to fall under that interpretive umbrella is their role as sustainers of invented tradition, the ritual work that they do in their weekly rehearsals, not the performances that they stage every few months. Examining the queer women’s chorus Vox Femina<sup>110</sup> and its male opposite number, the Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles (hereinafter Vox and GMCLA), from the perspective of a chorister rather than a concert attendee allows me to read them as versions of the piano bar or the sing-along. Like MuMo and Show Tune Cycle, they admix their show tunes with non-show tunes (in the case of Vox Femina, very heavily),

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<sup>108</sup> See Ahlquist’s introduction to *Chorus and Community*, 3 and 7-10. The pejorative overtones of “community chorus” are taken not from her book, but from my own experience in a choir transitioning from non-auditioned community chorus to auditioned semi-professional chorus. The specter of the community chorus was raised occasionally by our conductors when they were dissatisfied with our rehearsals.

<sup>109</sup> Barz, *Performing Religion*, 81. See also the rest of his chapter four.

<sup>110</sup> Vox Femina was founded as an explicitly lesbian chorus in 1997, and while its current mission statement describes the chorus as “diverse in culture, age, race, belief and sexual identity,” it retains a queer identification by means of its continuing association with GMCLA and its predominance of queer members. See <http://www.voxfeminala.org/about.htm> for their mission statement.



but like those events, they nevertheless create queer community through music in a manner directly descended from—and anticipating—Miller’s piano bar.

The ritual nature of community chorus rehearsal is central to reading Vox and GMCLA as participatory reception. In their laudatory study of US American community choruses, Sheila Tobias and Shelah Leader interviewed various choristers from Los Angeles about why they sang:

For [Les] Brockmann, the rehearsals of the amateur Angeles Chorale, the chorus he sings with every week...are “uniquely thrilling.” Pressed for more, he says, “For an isolate, it’s a social experience; for others, about working hard at something you care about and having it succeed.” Liz Lachman...[finds] amateur choral singing...”emotional” and “personal”: “to be part of a group, to have the harmony wash up all around you.”<sup>111</sup>

This focus on singers’ experience of rehearsal, rather than on repertoire or audience, parallels the participatory traditions I have already discussed. While the performance for an audience that marks the end of a (queer) community chorus season certainly matters, the performance for one another that is the rehearsal governs not only the experience of the choristers, but also the small body of academic literature on the topic, nearly all of which is produced by singers or directors of community choruses—that is to say, by participants.<sup>112</sup> For some community choruses, like the Berkeley Community Chorus, even the concert can be a participatory experience, as the audience is sometimes invited to sing along with the final number.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, in many cases the “community” in the name of the chorus implies a continuity between chorus and audience that already marks the goal of the ensemble as participation *in* a broader community rather than performance *for* it.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Tobias and Leader, “*Vox Populi* to Music,” 94.

<sup>112</sup> See Jill Strachan’s “The Voice Empowered: Harmonic Convergence of Music and Politics in the GLBT Choral Movement” in *Chorus and Community*, Casey J. Hayes’ “Community music and the GLBT chorus,” and Cindy L. Bell’s “Toward a definition of a community choir,” both from the first volume of the *International Journal of Community Music*.

<sup>113</sup> Tobias and Leader, “*Vox Populi* to Music,” 93.

<sup>114</sup> See Melinda Russell’s “Putting Decatur on the Map” in *Chorus and Community*.

This connection between choral community and broader community is even more explicit for queer community choruses. GMCLA, in their statement of values on their website, cites three communities they “creat[e] and nurtur[e],” including “our community of artists, the LGBT community, and the Los Angeles community.”<sup>115</sup> Vox, in its mission statement, “gives women voice...and rais[es] awareness about issues that affect [them] as a family of women. Through music, [they] aim to create a world that affirms the worth and dignity of every person.”<sup>116</sup> As Tobias and Leader note, “gay and lesbian choruses are very nurturing of their members...[since] it takes a certain commitment to the movement to join,”<sup>117</sup> and they “generally have political action as a formal part of the mission statement.”<sup>118</sup> While the centrality of this political mission has declined to some degree in the years since Tobias and Leader’s 1999 study, GMCLA and Vox continue to hold in productive tension their status as political movement, community organization, performing ensemble, and loving family.

It is this familial structure, explicit in Vox’s mission statement and implicit in GMCLA’s, that allows them to bridge, to some degree, the generation gap apparent at Show Tune Cycle. In acting as forums for older queer (or gay or lesbian) choristers to interact with younger ones, queer community choruses provide also the chance for the invented traditions of the queer community to be passed down as inherited traditions. Thus, young queer people may learn to love the show tunes that were the soundtrack to their elders’ childhoods, not their own—though they may, just as easily, reject

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<sup>115</sup> GMCLA.org, “GMCLA’s Strategic Vision.”

<sup>116</sup> VoxFeminaLA.org, “About Us.”

<sup>117</sup> Tobias and Leader, *Vox Populi to Music*, 96.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid*, 91.

their elders' music as out of date and comically earnest.<sup>119</sup> In case they do the latter, they can still find a musical home in the chorus, as show tunes make up only a small portion of these choruses' program. GMCLA focused in 2011-2012 to a very large extent on the pop diva repertoire noted above, perhaps in an attempt to more directly reach the younger generation, while Vox's 2011-2012 season was designed, seemingly, to highlight all of the roles I detailed in the previous paragraph, singing programs about political struggle, their own institutional history, and a more traditional choral concert of music of Great Britain.

In between these concerts, both choruses participated in the massive Los Angeles choral community summit that was the LA Philharmonic's performance of Gustav Mahler's eighth symphony, the "Symphony of a Thousand." A colleague of mine who was a member of Vox proposed to me that perhaps the full-throated participation in Elaine Stritch's "Ladies Who Lunch" at MuMo (see above) was a result of the large overlap between the men of GMCLA and the crowd at Eleven on Monday nights—they may have, indeed, raised "one for Mahler!" This overlap between the queer communities involved in the seemingly disparate participatory practices of ostensibly watching videos at a bar and preparing for a semi-professional performance of high art music further emphasizes the community-forming role that participatory reception plays. Simultaneously, it reiterates the interpenetration of show tunes, pop songs, and art music that marks most of twentieth century music history.<sup>120</sup>

It is, perhaps, fitting that this chapter close with a discussion of Mahler, rather than of Merman. As I indicated earlier, the trajectory of this chapter has been, despite its numerous tangents and indulgences of ironic fragments, toward an opening out of the queering gesture that began it.

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<sup>119</sup> When I discussed the issue of singing show tunes with a member of Vox, she was underwhelmed to say the least, and immediately associated the earnest, dramatic, and didactic piece they were then performing (a multimedia work about the struggle for marriage equality) with musicals.

<sup>120</sup> See Savran's discussion of *South Pacific* in "Middlebrow Anxiety," especially 29-33.

Ending outside of musical comedy—far outside of musical comedy—queers the parameters that I have set for myself in this dissertation. In doing so, I hope that this outward trajectory can continue in other musical comedy scholars' work, opening the securely barred doors of the piano bar we have been singing in to include scholars of other types of music, of comedy, of film and theater. They are all invited to participate, in whatever way suits them.

## Chapter Four

“The thin filament that sort of covers the whole thing:” the intimate narratives of musical comedy collectors

Miles Kreuger lives in Hollywood in a “hulking duplex with chipping white paint”<sup>1</sup> that is also The Institute of the American Musical. His home is his place of business, and his “unparalleled” collection of musical comedy materials, “one of the finest collections of its kind anywhere in the world,”<sup>2</sup> surrounds him at his dining room table (covered in correspondence and playbills), in his bedroom (where he keeps the records he sang on or wrote liner notes for), and even in the tiny entrance hallway that holds Anna Held’s upright piano<sup>3</sup> and perhaps a dozen boxes of recently donated books on musical theater. Every inch of wall space above the filing cabinets of sheet music and scripts is covered in personalized signed photographs of musical comedy stars, except for the space where a caricature of Kreuger by the famous cartoonist Al Hirschfeld<sup>4</sup> beams nearly as brightly as Kreuger himself. One wall of the dining room is entirely taken up by a cabinet of original cast albums that cover nearly seventy years of Broadway history, and Kreuger’s hyperactive dog Jenny, named for “Kurt Weill’s Jenny” from either *The Threepenny Opera* or *Lady in the Dark*, takes up all of the space that the collection doesn’t fill. Despite their sunny Hollywood setting, Miles and Jenny are immersed, almost submerged, in the history of New York theater, with a definite emphasis on Broadway musical comedy.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, “Musical Theater Museum.”

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Anna Held was Florenz Ziegfeld’s common-law wife and a performer in his *Follies*.

<sup>4</sup> Hirschfeld, who caricatured many of Broadway’s most famous stars, was honored in 2003 with the rechristening of the Martin Beck Theatre on 45<sup>th</sup> St. as the Al Hirschfeld Theatre on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Kreuger, who has been collecting “treasures” of the musical theater since the 1950s, is perhaps the most impressive living example of the final audience I want to examine, the collectors, though they might variously be termed experts, obsessives, superfans, or, simply, enthusiasts. These are the people who, even if they haven’t amassed the physical collection that Kreuger has, can quote chapter and verse of a show after just a snippet of a song, the ones who will quibble with your pronunciation of Katisha in *The Mikado*,<sup>5</sup> notice the verses reversed in an amateur performance or a revival, and who can tell you—and will, without the slightest provocation—that they were Ethel Agnes Zimmermann and Frances Gumm long before they were Merman and Judy Judy Judy.<sup>6</sup> This type of fan takes knowledge of and affection for the musical theater to heights well beyond the bounds of propriety, becoming a figure of abjection in his devotion to detail. There is significant overlap, of course, between the queer audience discussed in the previous chapter and this one—see, for example, D. A. Miller and Wayne Koestenbaum on gay men getting a cast album fix for their collector’s habit, whether the object of obsession be musical theater or opera.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to realize that these audiences do not overlap entirely; there are many collectors whose social identity may be queered by their obsession, but whose sexual identity is anything but queer.

In this chapter, I argue that musical comedy welcomes and in fact generates these superfans in ways and to a degree that not all forms of cultural creation allow, and to that end I examine several types of musical comedy performances that betray an allegiance within the genre to the collector audience. The categories of performance in question are the revue (Ben Bagley’s *Cole Porter Revisited*), the one-woman show (*Elaine Stritch: At Liberty* and *Bea Arthur on Broadway: Just Between Friends*), and the songbook album (*Ella Fitzgerald sings the Cole Porter Songbook*), all forms of re-

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<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, the first syllable of her name is pronounced like the word “cat.” A Gilbert and Sullivan fan and performer I know pointed this out in his review of the production of *The Mikado* I conducted in college; our actors and director had pronounced it “cot.”

<sup>6</sup> “Judy Judy Judy” was printed in large white letters on the red background of the advertisements for Judy Garland’s famous 1961 Carnegie Hall concert, far larger than any other text on the posters.

<sup>7</sup> Respectively, *Place for Us* and *The Queen’s Throat*.

presenting musical comedy music supposedly outside of any overarching dramatic framework, recontextualizing songs into settings best understood by the collector. These versions of the musical comedy both depend on and encourage an extra-musical familiarity with the composer(s) and/or performer(s) who are being celebrated, a familiarity that substitutes an individualized narrative based on each collector's degree of specialized knowledge for that missing dramatic arch. Bea Arthur, in the opening monologue of her one-woman show *Just Between Friends*, refers to "the thin filament that sort of covers the whole thing," which I find an evocative image for this implied narrative—though Arthur is referring specifically to what she removes from a leg of lamb before cooking it.<sup>8</sup>

I am not claiming that all of these forms of musical and dramatic performance are solely directed at people who are self-proclaimed experts in the artists involved in the performances. Certainly, in the case of Ella Fitzgerald's *Songbook* albums, the audience they reach is far, far broader than any subset of fans so narrow as those who have intensively studied either the career of Fitzgerald herself or the careers of the composers whose work she elevates in those classic recordings. What I am claiming, however, is that these performance formats recognize and react to the existence of the collector in a way that standard in-show presentations of showtunes do not necessarily, and they allow a space for the collecting audience to luxuriate in their socially questionable intimately detailed knowledge of (non-athletic) performance.<sup>9</sup> As Michelle Dvoskin points out in her "Audiences and Critics," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, the animated film *Wall-E*, not itself a musical, depicts a collector who repetitively engages with songs

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<sup>8</sup> It is true that "filament" seems perhaps the wrong word for what she is describing. However, I reproduce it here both as an example of the fidelity to minute detail that characterizes the collector mindset and as a useful substitute for the metaphor of a narrative "thread."

<sup>9</sup> I know that academics reading this may doubt that intimately detailed knowledge is a socially questionable trait, but I assure you that outside of the academy, especially for the children I discussed in chapter two, it is highly suspect to know too much about any one subject that isn't the Chicago Cubs or the NCAA championship. I hear that the latter is some sort of basketball tournament.

from *Hello, Dolly!*; the musical comedy collector is a recognized category of consumer.<sup>10</sup> What's more, each form I am detailing here invites audience members who aren't initiated members of the cult of detail to join, offering them the musico-dramatic equivalent of a free toaster with purchase of membership. I will explore this invitation in some detail below, but for now suffice it to say that these forms employ the characteristic duality of musical comedy to both share inside jokes with initiated members and encourage the non-initiated to laugh at the jokes despite not "getting" them yet. The one-woman show, especially, works to turn physical laughter into Bakhtinian reduced laughter through repeated exposure, replicating for some audience members a childlike self-pedagogy.<sup>11</sup>

The purposes of this chapter are threefold. First, I want to acknowledge an audience that has been central to the continued proliferation of musical comedy many long years past its supposed decline but that has not been examined in any detail, apart from mentions within a specifically queer context (for an operatic example, see Terrence McNally's brilliant play *The Lisbon Traviata*) and in one volume on Gilbert and Sullivan, Ian Bradley's *Oh Joy! Oh Rapture!* This lack of acknowledgement is particularly odd in the scholarly community, as this detailed and all-consuming approach to musical material is characteristic of academic research. Second, I want to explore forms of musical comedy that have yet to receive much attention from scholars, most of whom have focused on dramatically complete shows.<sup>12</sup> A focus on these formats draws attention away from the supposed service of songs to a dramatic goal and toward the function of songs for individual performers and audience members, as well as gently nudging out of place a triumphalist narrative of the integrated

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<sup>10</sup> Dvoskin, "Audiences," 368.

<sup>11</sup> See my discussion in chapter one about Bakhtin's concept of reduced laughter and its relationship to musical comedy, and my discussion in chapter two about children's self-pedagogy through musical comedy.

<sup>12</sup> Even Bruce Kirle, whose celebration of musicals' incompleteness I discuss in chapter one, focuses on shows as permeable, fuzzy, but nevertheless coherent objects.



musical. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in this context, I want to show off my own collection. I want you all to see the amazing gems I have found, to delight at these things that delight me, and to appreciate the degree of expertise I have acquired about my treasures. This is, of course, a standard scholarly goal, but it is one that I have not seen admitted to in many academic works with supposedly loftier goals. In light of these multiple aims for the chapter, and in the spirit of the participatory musical comedy that I outlined in chapter three, I have structured this chapter as a revue. There is no clear dramatic arc, no neat marriage plot to tie everything together at the end, just a series of analyses and observations punctuated and held together by stories from Miles Kreuger, stories that act as a thin filament that sort of covers the whole thing.

Let me begin, as many histories of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century musical comedy do, with Gilbert and Sullivan. The fourteen Savoy operas they wrote between 1871 and 1896 constitute a repertoire appreciated not exclusively by audiences of the collector type, but nearly so. As Bradley describes them,

the “inner brotherhood” [are a] company of enthusiasts who border on the obsessive, collect G & S memorabilia, write books on the subject, know every nuance of every recording, and sit in theatres waiting for a wrong word in a patter song or a move which deviates from the D’Oyly Carte norm.<sup>13</sup>

This inner brotherhood (and the genderedness of the term is far from beside the point; see chapter five), whose mode of fandom Bradley points out is characteristic, if intensified, of most Gilbert and Sullivan fans, may serve as something of an extreme example of the collector; they combine the attentions of the fan and the scholar into a seemingly limitless passion and knowledge that resembles more than anything the athletic fandom I alluded to above. Replace a few words in Bradley’s description above—say, “recording” with “game,” and “G & S” with “Yankees”—and you have an accurate portrait of normative USAmerican male behavior. It is this admixture of fandom and

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<sup>13</sup> Bradley, *Oh Joy!*, 95.

scholarship that I call collectordom, and it is telling that Bradley seems not to notice when he speaks in one breath of a “leading North American G & S scholar,” and in the next of “another leading U.S. collector.”<sup>14</sup> For the collector, as Bradley identifies himself, there is an authority, akin to that of the scholar, found merely in the act of collecting.<sup>15</sup>

This collector type of fandom resonates with the teen and pre-teen girl fans of *Wicked* whom Stacy Wolf analyzes in *Changed for Good*, girls whose knowledge of the show extends beyond identifying with a character to selecting favorite actors to have played the role, with detailed explanations as to why.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, outside of a musical comedy context, collecting smacks of childhood; whether baseball cards or bottle caps or the small rubber troll dolls that were so popular in my elementary school, nearly all children collect.<sup>17</sup> Locating in a pre-adolescent audience the same collector’s impulse noted by Koestenbaum, Miller, and McNally in queer male audiences makes this category the logical summation of my two previous chapters’ audiences: the collector bears the twin stigmata of immaturity and of homosexuality regardless of his age and orientation.

Remaining outside my primary musical comedy realm for just a bit longer (how better to build anticipation for the first big musical number?), I want to venture once more into the subcultural universe known as genre fiction: fantasy, sci-fi, and horror. Like musical comedy fandom, genre fiction fandom tends to lend itself to the collector aesthetic of appreciation; a video rental clerk told me in 2008 that he couldn’t stock *Star Trek* videos because they inevitably were stolen for

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Miles Kreuger and I, during our first interview for this chapter, performed a duet version of the trio “I Am So Proud” from *The Mikado* while he made tea. Raymond Knapp had a similar experience visiting Kreuger while writing *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*. Knapp’s and my shared interest in Gilbert and Sullivan granted us access to the inner brotherhood, and thence to Kreuger’s collected treasures; “I Am So Proud” was our “Open, Sesame.”

<sup>16</sup> See Wolf, *Changed for Good*, chapter seven. The fact of one group’s marked and stigmatized gender and age troubles their social status with regard to the other; see chapter five of this story.

<sup>17</sup> Frost and Steketee, *Stuff*, 53.

private collections.<sup>18</sup> Henry Jenkins exhaustively documented the peculiarities of *Star Trek* and other television fans, and his descriptions of both actual fans and the satirized Trekkies who appeared on *Saturday Night Live* fit neatly onto the collectors of musical comedy ephemera this chapter discusses: they “devote their lives to the collection of worthless knowledge [and] place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material,”<sup>19</sup> but also “forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic.”<sup>20</sup> There is substantial overlap between these fandoms in terms of specific fans of both types of cultural creation, as well as in the surprisingly plentiful body of genre musicals.<sup>21</sup> However, most relevant to this discussion is this similarity in mode of fandom: dressing up as favorite characters, idol worship of famous stars, participation in reenactments, and most importantly of all, a culture (some would say cult) of detailed knowledge of minutiae and the display of that knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

My favorite scholarly example of this type of intersectional collectordom comes from Raymond Knapp’s *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, when he parenthetically notes that Buffy the Vampire Slayer performs a feat of strength (kicking open a specific heavy door) during her musical episode, “Once More, With Feeling,” that she deemed impossible in one non-musical episode, five years earlier in the show’s run. This is truly a collector’s take on the moment,

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<sup>18</sup> This was shortly before that video rental store closed and all of *Star Trek* was made available for internet streaming by Netflix.

<sup>19</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 10, in reference to the *SNL* Trekkies.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 23, in reference to actual Trekkers.

<sup>21</sup> To avoid letting this footnote reach Brobdingnagian proportions, I will limit myself to mentioning *Little Shop of Horrors* (scifi); “Once More, With Feeling” (horror); and nearly every movie produced by Walt Disney (fantasy).

<sup>22</sup> See also my discussion of the *Sing-A-Long Sound of Music* in chapter three.

with its intimate knowledge of an event apparently far outside the bounds of the topic of discussion, displayed for the reader in the seemingly casual afterthought of a parenthetical.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most crucial similarity between these fandoms, however, lies in their perceived social status. Genre fiction fans and musical comedy fans alike see themselves as marginalized, as outside the acceptable bounds of appreciation for culture. As Jenkins says,

Those who “naturally” possess appropriate tastes “deserve” a privileged position...and reap the greatest benefits...while the tastes of others are seen as “uncouth” and underdeveloped. Taste distinctions determine not only desirable and undesirable forms of culture but also desirable and undesirable ways of relating to cultural objects, desirable and undesirable strategies of interpretation and styles of consumption.<sup>24</sup>

Like the young and queer audiences I have covered in the two previous chapters, collectors see themselves as distant from the mainstream, having tastes that are deemed by society at large to be inappropriate and undesirable and unnatural. Unlike those audiences, however (perhaps because of the preponderance of straight white male collectors?), they tend to have an elevated sense of their own worth relative to that perceived mainstream, as possessing an almost sacred knowledge that is hidden to mere mortals who don't understand the joy of *Dr. Who* (British science fiction television series) or *The Last Five Years* (American chamber musical). I will explore this rather troublesome social status in chapter five, with particular attention to the complicated role that gender plays in defining and nuancing this status, but it seems to me that we are long overdue for a song.

The first musical number in tonight's revue is itself a revue: Ben Bagley's *Cole Porter Revisited*. The very concept of the *Revisited* series of revue albums that Bagley produced over the second half of the twentieth century is deeply engrained in the collector aesthetic: each revue is a collection of a

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<sup>23</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 201. Knapp has admitted to me that this particular piece of fan knowledge was not his, but his daughters', but the delight with which he shares such a tiny, sparkling gem of an insight further accentuates the collector's attitude. See chapter one for my extension of Knapp's *Buffy* analysis.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 16.

composer's tunes that Bagley seems to have liked, most of which come from failed shows or forgotten films, or were dropped from shows or films before opening night. Similarly, Ken Mandelbaum's popular *Not Since Carrie: 40 years of Broadway musical flops* attempts to catalogue the stories of musicals that didn't do well on Broadway for one reason or another, with frank mockery tempered by a comprehensive knowledge that bespeaks deep affection for these ill-fated shows. This impulse to retrieve and catalogue the might-have-been-forgotten music of (usually) Great Men is reflected not only in Bagley's offbeat revues and Mandelbaum's gleeful skewering, but also in the studio recordings of musicals claiming to be the first "complete" recording of a show's music, such as the 1991 *Brigadoon* recording by English conductor John McGlinn that features all of the incidental music and underscoring left off the original cast album. These recordings are self-consciously identified as collector's items, produced largely for the market of fans who want every scrap of (in this instance) Lerner and Loewe they can get their hands on.<sup>25</sup>

The most popular object of collectors' veneration in the realm of both recordings and revues is unquestionably Stephen Sondheim, whose frequently commercially unsuccessful musicals have spawned the revues *Side by Side by Sondheim* and *Sondheim on Sondheim*, as well the albums *Unsung Sondheim* and, most tellingly, *The Collector's Sondheim*.<sup>26</sup> These Sondheim projects, especially, lay bare and attempt to soothe the affronted dignity of the aficionado whose adored *objets d'art* have been deemed by a larger society (or at least by the Broadway-ticket-buying audience) to be unworthy of attention, let alone affection; in repurposing songs from ignored shows, these albums and concerts prove to the fans of the shows that they were right to like them, and provide those fans with a physical souvenir of their approval, beyond the cast album that they no doubt already possess. All of

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<sup>25</sup> I own that recording of *Brigadoon*, of course.

<sup>26</sup> A 2008 collection, *Stephen Sondheim: The Story So Far*, arranged its numbers chronologically, claiming a narrative cohesion to Sondheim's career and a comprehensive assessment of that career. See note 27, below.

these recordings, books, and performances feed (but never satiate) the collector's hunger for comprehensiveness, allow for the slippage between comprehensiveness and comprehension that, perhaps more than any other characteristic, defines the collector.<sup>27</sup>

Now to show off my collection! Ben Bagley's *Cole Porter Revisited* is a series of five albums comprising some 70 songs from the eponymous composer's oeuvre performed by theater, cabaret, and film luminaries from Helen Gallagher to Kaye Ballard to Katharine Hepburn. Bagley called his efforts in *Cole Porter Revisited*—as well as his revue that was actually staged, *The Decline and Fall of the Entire World as Seen Through the Eyes of Cole Porter*—“Cole-mining,” foregrounding the unearthing-lost-treasure feeling so common to collectors of all types,<sup>28</sup> while also savoring wordplay in a Porter-esque manner, paying tribute to the man in his liner notes as well as the albums themselves.<sup>29</sup> While the mere existence of a revue based on recovering lost treasures bespeaks the collector's impulse to collect, *Cole Porter Revisited* further rewards the knowledgeable fan with tidbits that speak specifically of Porter's subject position as a gay white man of the upper class in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York and of Bagley's as a later incarnation of some of those same identities. The homosexual hints dropped throughout the revue further point up the revue's target audience as one that is in the know, one

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<sup>27</sup> This slippage becomes actively harmful when comprehensive, detailed knowledge is deemed to stand in for any and all interpretation of musical comedy, when detail is in and of itself the goal of scholarship. Kim Kowalke's 2007 review in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* of no fewer than nine volumes on musicals of various kinds searches desperately for a comprehensive book of everything about the musical, and finds every volume lacking, rather than assessing them on their own merits and aims. He delights in pointing out the books' errors, though he declines to cite sources for his corrections, relying instead on his status as expert to protect his assertions. Mitchell Morris points out that “the notion of comprehensiveness exerts a beguiling fascination for scholars,” in his “Narratives and Values” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (14).

<sup>28</sup> See Frost and Steketee, *Stuff*, chapter one.

<sup>29</sup> Bagley repeats this pun in the liner notes to volumes three and four of *Cole Porter Revisited*, mixing the mining metaphor when he claims to “come out of the mine clutching shards of music, sparkling with gold dust,” rather than the diamond dust that might make more sense in a coal mine, rather than a Cole mine. The liner notes on all of his albums are a creative act in and of themselves, with their extravagantly false claims about the numbers and performers, such as “Katharine Hepburn's latest film is LUST SLAVES OF LIMA” (Volume Four).

that has a certain familiarity with the man in question that predates purchase of the albums or attendance at the performances.

This layering on of hidden meanings is characteristic of much of pre-Stonewall camp culture,<sup>30</sup> and as such might seem as if it fits more comfortably in chapter three, but Bagley's revues trade on not just insider knowledge of gay lingo and practices, but also of the theater itself, of the genre of musical comedy. They resonate more, and in very particular ways, the more one knows about the songs', composer's, and performers' histories. Bagley himself began his career as a revue producer by writing directly to composers and asking them for unused songs to use in his revues, and by collecting recordings of forgotten material made and sent to him by frequent collaborator Arthur Siegel, already focused on unearthing the unheard and unremembered even before he began compiling his *Revisited* albums. In the liner notes to *The Decline and Fall*, he claims to have been collecting unknown Cole Porter numbers since age thirteen.

This claim, like all the claims made by Bagley, is of a somewhat dubious nature. He was born, according to a *New York Times* article from 1974 about his life and revues, in Hardwick, Vermont, though he grew up in New Jersey. The event that occasioned his departure was supposedly his accidental blinding of a boy who made fun of his protruding ears. It is a dramatic and tragic tale, and it is reported as fact, despite the title of the article: "Ben Bagley—He Made All His Lies Come True." Bagley freely admits to having invented his degrees and work experience in order to get a job; one wonders why his origin story is presented as fact when the focus of the piece is how often and how wonderfully Bagley lies. Ira Gershwin, according to an earlier article by Eugene Boe in *Cue*, appreciated Bagley's revue album of his forgotten material, but reminded Bagley that, contrary to the album's liner notes, he was not George Gershwin's "lovely wife." All of the lies

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<sup>30</sup> See chapter three for further discussion of camp and of the construction of queer significations.

Bagley told function as secret jokes for insiders just as some of the recorded material did—and the insiders in this case were musical theater collectors, not specifically queer audiences.

One of the numbers on the second volume of *Cole Porter Revisited* directly addresses both the queer and the collector audience in its subject matter: the list song “Pets,” cut from 1941’s *Let’s Face It* and performed on the album by Alice Playten. Ostensibly, “Pets” is sung from the point of view of a woman who obsessively collects animals. However, the pets she collects include not only a cockatoo “who tells dirty jokes/and smokes cigarettes,” “a dinner-jacketed penguin/who gives [her] lessons in poise,” and “a rather *chi-chi* gorilla/who wears negligees/and plays minuets,” not to speak of her “highly endowed young donkey/who’s played several shows/and knows Cliff Odets,” but also a “bevy of Harvard boys.” She also aspires to keep in cages “the Dartmouth team” and “as soon as Winston’s ready...the RAF.” The various pre-Stonewall gay stereotypes embodied in the animals (the deviant, the dandy, the cross-dresser, and of, course, the theatrical performer) provide a not-so-subtle counterpoint to the allusions to male college students and military men, both of which populations were known to frequent New York’s downtown “fairies.”<sup>31</sup> While the character and the singer may both be female, the “girl who pets/all of [her] pets,” clearly has a more ambiguous gender than might be presented to an uninitiated straight, middle-class audience.

Alice Playten, when the album was released in 1972, was perhaps best known to audiences from her “classic Alka-Seltzer commercial,”<sup>32</sup> but a few short years earlier she had performed in the ill-fated *Henry, Sweet Henry* on Broadway, garnering the only Tony nomination in the cast and performing a number on the *Ed Sullivan Show* as Kafritz, whom Clive Barnes in the *New York Times* (October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1967) described as “a poisonous child with...the voice of a ship’s siren...belting out

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<sup>31</sup> See George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, especially chapter two.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps not what one wants to be remembered for in one’s obituary in the *New York Times*, as Playten was; even when appearing on Mike Douglas’ talk show in 1970, while she was performing off Broadway, she was nevertheless introduced as the bad cook from the commercial.



the music like a toy Merman.” Both as Kafritz and as the bad cook in the Alka-Seltzer commercial (not to mention as a replacement Baby Louise in the original Broadway production of *Gypsy*), Playten played women who transgressed expected gender roles, characters whose lack of femininity shades her performance on *Cole Porter Revisited*, further troubling the gender of the singer in “Pets.”<sup>33</sup> For a listener to the 1991 CD re-release of the album, or even for a listener to the original, this knowledge of Playten’s career might not be expected, but it explains in part Bagley’s choice of her for the number. Her voice, of course, with its obvious echoes of famous (and famously gender-bending) belters Merman and Judy Garland, provided another excellent reason to choose her.

Another song cut from *Let’s Face It*, “Make a Date with a Great Psychoanalyst,” is introduced on the third volume of *Cole Porter Revisited* by a relentlessly inaccurate monologue (delivered by Helen Gallagher, in peak comic form) discussing going to see a show about psychoanalysis starring Gertrude Lawrence, a clear reference to Moss Hart, Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin’s *Lady in the Dark*, which actually opened the same year as *Let’s Face It*; the shows shared a questionably gay star in Danny Kaye. The Bagleyan description of the show “produced by the Ringling brothers, and written by a couple of kids called Romberg and Hart,” satirizes the selfsame middle-class audience that would presumably have missed the innuendo in “Pets,” insinuating that the character has missed all of the subtler points of the show, including the points of the song she is about to sing.<sup>34</sup> The monologue is a sort of *tour de force* of inaccuracy; it conflates playwright Moss Hart with lyricist Lorenz Hart and composer Sigmund Romberg with Richard Rodgers, mistakenly attributes *Lady in the Dark* to Rodgers and Hart, and throws in what is most likely a reference to

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<sup>33</sup> For more on Louise’s troubled gender in *Gypsy*, see chapter three, “On Broadway,” in D. A. Miller’s *Place for Us*.

<sup>34</sup> For the science fiction fan, this deliberately false description may recall Slartibartfast’s “relentlessly inaccurate monograph on equatorial fjords” that he plans to spend his retirement writing in Douglas Adams’ *Life, The Universe, and Everything*. My own choice of “relentlessly inaccurate monologue” earlier in this paragraph is in deliberation homage to Adams.

Rodgers and Hart's *Jumbo*, a 1935 circus musical that starred Jimmy Durante (and Big Rosie as the titular elephant) but was produced by Billy Rose, not the Ringling Brothers. The sheer quantity of knowledge necessary to both write and understand this monologue falls squarely within the realm of the collector.

“Psychoanalyst” suggests that the one solution to all of your problems is having sex with a psychiatrist. Some of the problems it solves include, in order, “your love affairs are all involved,” “your son just eloped with your favorite cook,” “you dream about Bert Lahr too much,” “your Peke’s become the mother of poodle pups,” and other issues of sexual excess, culminating in “you just found out that your husband has/every day/with a gay/cutie pie a tryst.” Porter delays the obvious rhyme for just one more line, inserting “I suggest/that it’s best/you should try a tryst” before winding up: “with an active/attractive/psychiatrist/and lie down.” The gradual building up of sexual transgressions, from breaking class boundaries (son/cook), to fantasizing over Bert Lahr (who had, just a year before the song was written, played a pansy in *The Wizard of Oz*), to inter-racial (or inter-breed) miscegenation, and finally to one’s partner having an affair with “a gay cutie pie,” quite easily redirects the song from being about one specific kind of illicit liaison to a menu of various unacceptable liaisons. All of these, of course, tie quite neatly into the queer New York culture of downtown fairies, pansies, and theater folk that had gone underground by 1941, but remained in the memories of gay audience members and composers like Porter, a culture that crossed the alluded-to class and race boundaries with aplomb.<sup>35</sup>

This type of hidden meaning is, of course, not limited to the revue format. However, in unmooring songs from their supposed dramatic contexts in specific shows, *Cole Porter Revisited* and similar revues can foreground the insider meanings that give the collector his authority, can make

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<sup>35</sup> See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, chapters three and four.

public what in pre-Stonewall times was necessarily carefully hidden—though the lack of care with which these two numbers hide their gaiety may partially explain their being cut from the 1941 show they once were intended to grace.<sup>36</sup> There remains some little charm in these numbers when they are read without special insider knowledge, but they gain exponentially in humor and in significance when read with the collector’s (and, in this case, the queer’s) informed eye.

Not coincidentally, both of these numbers are “list songs,” a song type common in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (as well as Porter shows) that seems designed to appeal to those who recognize topical or otherwise external-to-the-show references both musical and lyrical. List songs in twentieth century musical comedies carry not only queer overtones from their Gilbert and Sullivan roots in effeminate little men (the inadequate executioner Ko-Ko in *The Mikado*, the decidedly un-military Major-General Stanley in *Pirates of Penzance*)<sup>37</sup> but also overtones of the collector in their frequent multiplicity of versions. In modern Gilbert and Sullivan performance, these songs are the only acceptable sites of lyric adjustment, as there has long been a tradition of adapting the lists for topical considerations;<sup>38</sup> in Porter’s case, his own recordings of list songs differ quite dramatically from their counterparts on original cast albums, and most of his songs accommodate seemingly endless encores with new lyrics for the collector to learn. Indeed, in a more basic sense, the list song operates as the musical equivalent of a collection: a series of similar objects that gain meaning from their organization and their abundance, in this case similar musical phrases arranged into a pattern usually of increasing volume and lyric tension. For the collector, knowing every possible verse (and

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<sup>36</sup> A similar lack of discretion on Porter’s part led to Ethel Merman’s rejection of the song “Kate the Great” in *Anything Goes* based on its implied lesbian relationship between Kate and her maid, not to mention similar questionably oriented military men to those found in “Pets.” See Knapp, *National Identity*, 91-92. “Kate the Great” is included on the same volume of *Cole Porter Revisited* as “Pets.”

<sup>37</sup> See David Savran’s “‘You’ve got that thing’: Cole Porter, Stephen Sondheim, and the Erotics of the List Song” for a further exploration of the queerness of the list song in twentieth century musical comedy.

<sup>38</sup> See Bradley, *Oh Joy!*, especially chapter six.

encore) of, for example, “Brush up your Shakespeare” demonstrates an expertise in matters Porter quite apart from the hidden knowledge granted by shared sexually queer status.<sup>39</sup>

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Miles Kreuger first met Ben Bagley in 1956, at a performance of Bagley’s prematurely titled *Shoestring ‘57*, a revue that functioned as a sort of sequel to his “astonishing” off-Broadway *Shoestring Revue* of the previous year.<sup>40</sup> Each man knew who the other was, and this meeting of collecting giants of the musical theater led eventually to a collaboration a decade later on Bagley’s *Irving Berlin Revisited*. In Kreuger’s own words:

Ben told me that his next album was going to be called *Irving Berlin Revisited*. He knew I knew Irving Berlin, and wondered if I had any obscure Berlin sheet music for songs that could be included on the album. I invited Ben to visit my apartment and began to play recordings of obscure Berlin songs from the 1920s and ‘30s, and I find that when I play records I feel compelled to sing along with the recording artist, so Ben said, “Oh Miles, I like the way you sing. I want to use you on my new album.” I think it was in that first visit that he decided I would sing “Beautiful Faces” from *Broadway Brevities of 1920*, so I decided I would learn the song and sing it perpetually, walking down the street, taking a shower in the morning, while eating, reading, and doing every human function possible, until “Beautiful Faces” became a part of my character...

One Sunday morning...I got dressed and went down to Bobby Short’s apartment in Carnegie Hall and discovered Norman Paris at the piano, his wife Dorothy Loudon sitting in a chair, along with Blossom Dearie and Bobby. And one by one, Norman asked each of us to stand up, cross the room to the piano, and run through the songs that Ben had chosen for us to sing. I kept thinking to myself, “I have to sing in the presence of these celebrated singers. I’m going to be nervous and terrified. I can’t do it...” But I wasn’t, much to my own astonishment...

Filled with an air of self-confidence and bravado, I strode into the control room thinking, “oh this recording business is easy. I’m never going to be nervous.” I kept thinking of the Jack Haley character in *Wake Up and Live*, the movie in which he plays a successful Vaudeville performer who’s stricken with terrible mike fright when he’s asked to appear on radio, and I thought, “Well Jack Haley may have had that problem, but I don’t have that problem!” I sat down next to Dorothy, and from the loudspeaker I could hear the tape of the engineer announcing the final take. Suddenly, at the thought of hearing my own voice coming out of that speaker, all the terror that I had anticipated came flowing in an effusion

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<sup>39</sup> Nancy Anderson’s “Always True to You” in the 2003 filmed performance of the London production of *Kiss Me Kate* provides a stunning audiovisual example of the humor and effectiveness of the seemingly interminable list song.

<sup>40</sup> For more on sequels and sort-of sequels, see chapter two.

of anxiety and I instinctively reached to Dorothy Loudon's forearm in terror and dug my fingernails into her arm with such fervor that she turned to me and said "Careful, I'm a bleeder."

And she gave me a hug, and the recording went well, and the album was released on MGM records, and like Lauritz Melchior and Hank Williams, I became an MGM recording artist, at least for one band on one LP.<sup>41</sup>

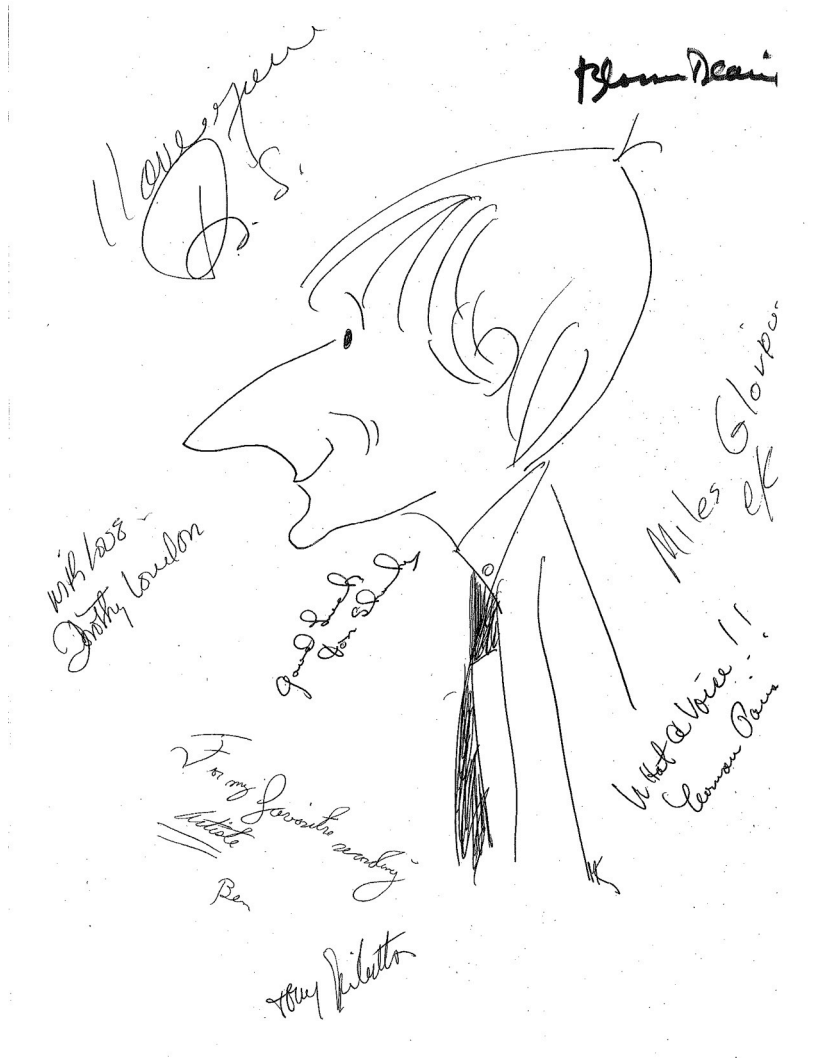


Figure 4: Caricature of Ben Bagley by Miles Kreuger, signed by Blossom Dearie, Dorothy Loudon, Norman Paris, Bobby Short, unidentified musicians, and Bagley.

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<sup>41</sup> Personal communication, 4 October 2011. Note the obsessive repetition that constituted Kreuger's rehearsal process (see chapter two) and the name-dropping of the gems of his personal collection of friends and acquaintances. Note also that I have included the second half of this story solely for the purpose of mentioning Dorothy Loudon in my dissertation.

Pivoting now away from the sexually queer and toward the merely socially queer collector, I want to dive into the sub-genre of the one-woman show. These shows, like the Bagley revues, largely contain pre-existing musical material interwoven with new spoken material—a sort of comedic transplantation of what musicologists consider the vital organs of a show into a new dramatic body, one usually read by reviewers (and publicists) as roughly coterminous with the body of the performer herself. The one-woman show falls somewhere between a loosely structured cabaret act and a full-fledged dramatic presentation, functioning both as a narrative of the life of the performer and, according to David Román, as a living archive of the music it presents and the (usually) men who wrote that music. In *Performance in America*, Román examines Mary Cleere Haran’s one-woman show, *Falling in Love With Love: the Rodgers and Hart Story*, as well as both of the shows that I am comparing here, and he notes that, “Haran reveals herself as a scholar of the American musical. She offers an extended context for each song, serving as the bridge between her audience and the theatrical past.”<sup>42</sup> In these shows, the performer is both collector and collectible, gathering musical material from the past and relying on the audience to have gathered material from her own professional past. Both subject and object, the star of the one-woman show must negotiate between presenting songs and presenting herself; it is the individual variation in this negotiation that leads me to the next musical items on tonight’s program.

The one-woman shows of Bea Arthur and Elaine Stritch seem, at first blush, nearly identical theatrical experiences. Each revolves around an older woman character actor revisiting past performances and adding new ones to the repertoire, baring bits of her body and bits of her soul to an adoring audience, mixing song and anecdote in a *tour de force* that reminds audiences of how they became the doyennes of comedy they are. Even in their historical moment the shows match, both

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<sup>42</sup> Román, *Performance*, 184.

opening on Broadway in mid-February 2002 (within a week of one another) after brief runs elsewhere, and both nominated for the same Tony award for special theatrical event, an award which Stritch won. They even share some similar anecdotes, with both women relating stories of blowing auditions by saying “fuck” at inappropriate times.

However, despite these similarities of timing, personnel, structure, and profanity, the shows—and their stars—contextualize their musical numbers in radically different ways. To oversimplify a complicated situation, Stritch tends to integrate her songs into a life story, using them in the manner musical theater scholars recognize as traditional, as windows into a character’s inner state—though the character in this case is Elaine Stritch herself.<sup>43</sup> Arthur, in nearly direct opposition, presents her songs as miniature dramas in and of themselves, contained moments of acknowledged staginess with rarely any connection to a specific personal emotion or narrative. By so doing, Arthur turns on its head the standard assumption of the function of the show tune and of the one-woman show; she uses her songs not to give her audience insight into a supposed inner core, but to erect yet another wall of pretense between her fragile self and their dangerous attention.

These opposed attitudes toward musical performance and its context demonstrate the different ways that the shows interact with the collecting audience. While Stritch’s show purports to present a complete picture of Stritch herself, and thus bequeath an authoritative comprehensiveness to audience members’ intimate knowledge of the star, Arthur’s show leans more toward the Bagley model of unearthing hidden gems that audience members probably have not heard her perform before, and it makes no pretense toward displaying all of Arthur. One might call Arthur’s model the heavily curated collection—she describes but declines to perform the torch song “Garbage” that she

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<sup>43</sup> Román quotes her script collaborator, John Lahr, telling Stritch to “act a character called ‘Elaine Stritch,’ in a drama based on her life in which musical numbers...would be integrated” (201).

sang in Bagley's *Shoestring Revue*,<sup>44</sup> sings only half of "Bosom Buddies" from *Mame* to introduce her discussion of Angela Lansbury—while Stritch's is more of a supposedly complete archive, with each mention of an important song from her career followed by a performance of that song. Perhaps due to this appearance of comprehensiveness, Stritch's show received more critical acclaim—Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* gushed that it was "the season's one indispensable ticket for fans of musical comedy," while in contrast gently sneering that Arthur "read [her] résumé aloud at a job interview and [had] a chorus of cheers greet every line;"<sup>45</sup> critics, like scholars, are by their natures collectors.

*Elaine Stritch At Liberty* is specifically intended as a narrative of Stritch's life and career. As she indicates in her closing monologue, the purpose of the show is (or, at that point, has been) to reclaim parts of her life for which she was mentally absent due to alcoholism; to this purpose, she spins out a rapid-fire patter that seems to glance at, or off of, every single performance, from summer stock to French film, between her graduation from the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Michigan and her appearance on the stage for *At Liberty*.<sup>46</sup> During those glances, sidelong or lingering, Stritch shares stories and, crucially, songs about her childhood, romances, diabetes, and most importantly, alcoholism. She bares her soul as she bares her legs, appearing on stage in just a button-down white shirt, sheer black tights, and brown Mary Janes to tell the audience about losing

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<sup>44</sup> A positive *New Yorker* review by Wolcott Gibbs of Arthur's performance in *Shoestring* called her "a tall, pale girl whose hollow laughter made my blood run cold...formidable...rather horribly relaxed." Is it any wonder that with these compliments to look forward to, she would hesitate to embrace her audience?

<sup>45</sup> Brantley's reviews of the two shows appeared in the November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002 editions of the *Times*, respectively. The *At Liberty* review was of its Public Theater engagement, not its subsequent Broadway run.

<sup>46</sup> Román notes that Stritch claims theatrical star status in a way that Arthur does not, despite Arthur's more impressive early theatrical career (206), and this litany of professional appearances seems designed to further that claim. I have chosen the Convent of the Sacred Heart as an endpoint because of the reference to such an institution in "They Both Reached for the Gun" from John Kander and Fred Ebb's *Chicago* (1975).



her virginity in her 30s, about drinking her way through 59 years of stage fright, about getting fired and married and widowed and wasted.

Despite these personal moments, there is never any question throughout the show that it is just that: a show. Stritch is accompanied by a small (unseen) orchestra that often underscores her perfectly timed monologues; she constantly gestures and interpolates suggestions of dance steps during or between songs; the thick layer of stage makeup caking her face receives explicit acknowledgement (“I hate it. I need it.”). However, *At Liberty* translates these emblems of theatricality into essential parts of Elaine Stritch herself. She is a performer, and the accoutrements of performance are part of an internal self she is giving to the audience through song and story and catalogue (or collection) of past performances and partners. As Román puts it, *At Liberty* “constitutes an archive of her life in the theatre told through story and song.”<sup>47</sup> Part musical comedy performance, part historical document, the show combines “Elaine Stritch” and Elaine Stritch seamlessly.

As an example, consider her linked performances of “Can You Use Any Money Today?,” a song she never got to perform while standing by for Ethel Merman in Berlin’s *Call Me Madam*, and “Zip,” Stritch’s hit number from the (simultaneous) 1952 revival of Rodgers and Hart’s *Pal Joey*. Neither song gets what one might call a complete performance, as Stritch interrupts both with stories about their shows, first by interweaving her imitation of Merman’s performance of “Money” with an anecdote about the song being interrupted by a drunk audience member and Merman’s method of dealing with him. Switching voices between Merman’s steel cable of a belt, the drunk’s slurred but admiring profanities, her own thoughts in the wings (“where the hell is the house manager!?”), and her narrative voice, Stritch describes with word and gesture Merman’s departure

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<sup>47</sup> Román, *Performance*, 195.

from the stage into the audience and her physical removal of the drunk from the theater onto 45<sup>th</sup> street, all between the penultimate and ultimate words of the number. Stritch herself, in telling the story, intentionally duplicates the pregnant musical pause that Merman unwillingly inserted between “You can have” and “mine.”

In imitating Merman’s remarkable poise and pitch memory—the accompaniment drops away for the implied journey beyond the proscenium, then returns on the triumphant “MINE!” that ends both song and story—Stritch performs the roles of both Mrs. Sally Adams and Miss Ethel Merman in a way she was never able to do fifty years earlier, finally achieving what was denied her for the two years of the show’s run; in imitating the staggering drunk in the audience, she alludes to the alcohol abuse that will become more and more of a focus as *At Liberty* continues. These layers of performance imbue the fragments of the song with a sense of personal importance somewhat foreign to the number in its original context—though Stritch quite clearly explains that original context for any audience members who might not know *Call Me Madam*, indicating that the song is Mrs. Adams’ way of showing her love for the foreign minister of Lichtenburg. In tying *Call Me Madam*’s theme of somewhat misguided romance to the social problems of excessive drinking, Stritch turns this Berlin/Merman standard into a neat summary of what she has chosen to share with the audience about her life thus far.

This story-song leads directly into the story of how Stritch landed a role in *Pal Joey* while remaining a standby in *Call Me Madam*. As she frantically reenacts the harrowing attempt to check in with Merman in New York before traveling to New Haven to sing her song in Act II of *Pal Joey*—during an opening night blizzard, no less—she seemingly slips right back into her panic, not to mention her aggressive drunkenness after a double brandy on the train. As, in the story, she arrives on stage in her understudy’s too-large shoes and the suit she wore on the train, she actually goes into the verse of “Zip,” accompanied by a fanfare from the brass. She sings the whole verse and the first

chorus completely in character as Melba the reporter recounting her interview with Gypsy Rose Lee, again layering various roles onto her own as she rather stiltedly struts around the stage playing the elegant stripper, but when the chorus ends, the accompaniment vanishes and she quickly recounts the trip back to New York and the next day's trip back to New Haven. When she sings the second verse, again with full accompaniment, she interpolates spoken lines about the costume, the audience, and various other recollections from the previous monologue, further intertwining her musical performance and her personal life. As she builds toward the climactic end of both the song and the week in New Haven, with Saturday's matinee and evening performances, she tosses off her last spoken line: "Merman, Merritt [Parkway], New Haven, Shubert [Theater], Shubert, New Haven, Merritt, New York, Merman, Merritt, New Haven, Shubert, Shubert, New Haven, Merritt, New York—and you wonder why I drank!" The juxtaposition of the line and the brassy finale ties musical and dramatic climax inextricably to both alcohol and what one might call (after David Mamet's 1977 play) *A Life in the Theatre*, the main themes of *At Liberty*.

Later in the show, while sticking to these same themes, Stritch takes a more introspective angle on them, as she explicitly compares her dazzling onstage performances to her lackluster offstage romances. In an intricate mash-up of "If Love Were All," "But Not for Me," and spoken monologue, she negotiates the difficulty she had offstage by acknowledging it in a carefully choreographed performance onstage. This tender, rather rough-voiced moment contrasts sharply with the brass and steel and other metallic metaphors of the *Call Me Madam/Pal Joey* segment, seeming to allow the audience inside of what Brantley calls, in his review of Bea Arthur's show, her "comedian's polished armor;" in the recorded version of *At Liberty*, this number is almost entirely shot in a close-up on Stritch's face, further underscoring both the intimacy of the moment and the professional effort pressed into service of that intimacy.

Arthur's style of communicating intimacy to the audience is wildly different from Stritch's, avoiding both personal confessions and, for the most part, choreographed musical vulnerability.<sup>48</sup> As an example, take her performances of two Kurt Weill numbers back to back: *Threepenny Opera's* "Pirate Jenny" and *Knickerbocker Holiday's* "It Never Was You." "Jenny" is a dramatic ballad, teeming with imagined other characters (customers at Jenny's inn, pirates in her employ), and Arthur knocks it out of the park. Her semi-spoken delivery is chilling, pushing occasionally at the edges of melodrama,<sup>49</sup> but when combined with her facial expressions—only twice in the song does she briefly smile, once for the "ribbon in [her] hair" and the raising of the pirate flag, and again when she celebrates the death of her antagonists—and her gradual physical transformation from the defensive barmaid clutching her clothing tight about her to the assertive pirate queen sneering down at her victims, the performance is hair-raising. Dynamic—and dramatic—contrast carries much of the emotional power, with the rough shouts of the men interrupting the cold, quiet musings of Jenny herself, whose voice rarely climbs out of a quiet, conversational speech range, except when describing her ship's guns or her pirate crew's cheers. Even at the peak of the drama, when Jenny decrees that the customers who so mistreated her will be executed immediately, Arthur stage-whispers, "right now!," and gloats, "that'll learn ya!" in a singsong playground taunt that frightens all the more for its childish indifference to death.

This number stands out from the rest of *Just Between Friends* not just in its gruesome subject, but also by virtue of this emotionally heightened performance. For all of the preceding, admittedly more lighthearted numbers ("Fun to be Fooled," "What Can You Get a Nudist for her Birthday?")

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<sup>48</sup> As a rule, *Just Between Friends* has a much clearer separation between song and story than *At Liberty*, though there are some small exceptions.

<sup>49</sup> Pushing at the edges of melodrama could be the title of Arthur's autobiography, had she written one. Throughout her career, her acting style made reference to techniques that predated realism, often making comedic hay out of the melodramatic gestures of, for example, Sarah Bernhardt.

“Isn’t he Adorable?,” “Let’s Face the Music and Dance,” and “Bosom Buddies”), Arthur has performed as a singer, not an actor; introducing “Fun to be Fooled,” she simply turns to pianist Billy Goldenberg and announces “Billy, I’d like to sing a song.” In “Jenny,” for the first time in the show, she seems to be involved in the song, to have a stake in what, in a production of *Threepenny Opera*, one might call the song’s meaning. Oddly, she claims in her introductory monologue to have created *Just Between Friends* to see if she had the courage to “just come out and be [her]self” on stage (a line that draws applause from her audience), and the first moment of what appears to be emotional investment in musical performance occurs in a song sung by a definite character (Jenny the barmaid) imagining a fantasy life in which she commands a crew of pirates—not exactly a biographical parallel to Arthur herself.

This performance calls into question just what Arthur means by “being [her]self.” If Stritch’s show is telling her personal biography and hits its emotional peaks when she combines singing with recounting her real-life struggles with alcoholism and diabetes, Arthur’s is telling strictly her professional biography, and hits emotional peaks when she sings obviously emotional material from shows she has done. Both layer persona on top of persona (Stritch-as-Merman-as-Sally or Stritch-as-Melba-as-Gypsy-Rose *vs.* Arthur-as-Jenny-as-Pirate-Jenny-as-executed-victims), but Arthur’s personas don’t directly interact with her own history as Stritch’s do. In performing material that is so distant from her own persona, Arthur is steadfastly refusing to expose her own private life in public—she shows the audience only “Bea Arthur,” never even much of a facsimile of Bea Arthur.<sup>50</sup> Not once does *Just Between Friends* mention her divorces, her children, or even her friends, unless they were friends made in public on the stage or the screen. She does discuss her insecurity about her weight, in the anecdote that precedes “Jenny,” when she recounts the tale of Lotte Lenya (Kurt

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<sup>50</sup> Román calls her stories “casual if not trivial,” which is quite right (206).

Weill's wife, and Arthur's co-star in *Threepenny Opera* who originated the number) assuring her that "men love a big behind," but the moment passes quickly, and it serves simply to set up Lenya's punch line, not as a chance for Arthur to bare her soul. The audience sees her being emotional, but she denies them—us—the opportunity to play psychoanalyst, to connect her music to her personal biography.

However, despite Arthur's resistance to sharing her vulnerabilities with the audience, we as collectors of Bea Arthur performances cannot help but connect this performance to her biography. This is a one-woman show, after all, a performance set up to seem intimate and personal by virtue of homey scenery (an arm chair, a carpet, an end table), limited personnel (unlike *At Liberty*, just Arthur and her pianist-arranger), informal costuming (Arthur's feet are bare, and she wears a turtleneck and loose black pants), and the aforementioned declaration of revelatory honesty. In this setting, prepared by Arthur's assurance that the show is "a collection of songs and stories that...mean a lot to [her], that [she] would like to share," to perceive an emotional resonance between Bea and Jenny is to recognize something dark and troubling about the comedienne who is entertaining us, and about we who are enjoying it; does Jenny's resentment of the customers say something about how Arthur felt when Lenya said she had a big behind? The performance of the number is, after all, explicitly dedicated to her ("Lenya, this is for you."). In an interview Arthur gave to Lifetime in 2003, she claimed to still feel a searing anger toward Tallulah Bankhead because of the latter's decades-earlier dismissal of her non-stellar "bone structure;" in *Just Between Friends*, she describes "ador[ing]" the "fabulous," "brilliant," Bankhead. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that this onstage adoration and offstage (though on-camera) resentment finds a direct parallel in Jenny's obsequious servitude in the inn and delighted bloodlust upon the pirates' arrival? In light of this connection, the jeering "That'll learn ya!" takes on the kind of personal meaning that we seek in an intimate show, though we must dig through material not contained in the show to find it.

This reliance on extra-musical and extra-theatrical information in order to experience emotional resonance is characteristic of Arthur's career and of the one-woman show genre in general. *Just Between Friends* is, purportedly, a life story like *At Liberty*, but it aims itself, in many cases, at people who already know a great deal of the story. Throughout the show, anecdotes rely for their impact on the audience's pre-existing affection for Arthur and the past co-stars she lauds and laments.<sup>51</sup> Songs rarely convey emotion, but when they do, like "Jenny," that emotion seems out of place without the context the collector brings to the experience. This is not the only way to experience the show, of course; many people in any given audience, whether at the show or listening to the audio recording, are probably unaware of the details of Arthur's life, and the show allows for that, welcomes the uninitiated into the fold. However, its primary audience, as attested by the irrepressible applause that bursts out from time to time in both the video recording<sup>52</sup> and the audio,<sup>53</sup> is the body of fans who come to see Maude Findlay or Dorothy Zbornak live, the fans whose context for the performance is Bea Arthur's (television) career, not *Threepenny Opera* by Brecht and Weill.<sup>54</sup>

It is in this context that the jokes entertain, that the songs move, that the show as a whole connects to its audience. Knowing Arthur, whether before one enters the theater or gradually over the course of the evening, allows an audience member access to the "self" that she claims to be performing. For, like *At Liberty*, *Just Between Friends* is very clearly a performance throughout, presenting a deliberately stagey version of Arthur's emotion, a Bea who conveys her anger only

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<sup>51</sup> Román notes that her stories about her television shows "rely on audience recognition of familiar phrases associated with her characters" (206).

<sup>52</sup> Recorded 12 April 2002, available only in the New York Public Library Theater on Film and Tape archive at Lincoln Center.

<sup>53</sup> A (very) different performance, commercially available on CD.

<sup>54</sup> Findlay and Zbornak were Arthur's Emmy-award-winning characters from the sitcoms *Maude* (1972-78) and *The Golden Girls* (1985-92), respectively.

through “Jenny,” who tells of the death of a dear friend<sup>55</sup> by reading a very funny story he had asked her to read at his memorial, who speaks in the second person not to the audience, whom she spends a lot of time ignoring, but to her accompanist and scene partner, Billy. Each assurance that she will be herself and only herself is undermined by this elaborate performance, by her acknowledgement that this is a show, not actually an intimate evening at home—and that acknowledgement is central to her identity as a performer, the identity that she wants to share. It is in this deliberate distancing of her audience, “her comedian’s polished armor,” that she *is* being herself, a private person who performs in public but who, quite rarely for a diva of her stature, knows and respects a reified difference between those spheres.

The number that follows “Jenny,” “It Never Was You,” seems calculated by Arthur and Goldenberg, the show’s constructors, to continue the revelatory emotional tension. This is a torch song, a tearjerker about unrequited love that could easily be just as moving as “Jenny” was frightening, but, at least in the video recording of the show, it isn’t. The number falls flat right from its introduction, where Arthur simply explains that Kurt Weill wrote another song that she loved and this is it. With that inauspicious start, she moves into a performance that is somehow lacking—whether because *Knickerbocker Holiday* has no personal history for her, or because Arthur’s polished armor has not thus far seemed penetrable, and therefore her performance of its removal lacks the sense of authenticity of Stritch’s performance of the same. It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly doesn’t work about the number, whether it is her positioning in front of the piano without the support of even her minimal scenery that makes the number seem to lack intimacy; the audio recording of the song is, strangely, more affecting (at least for me) than the video. Perhaps it is the vocal control that Arthur demonstrates during the number. Set against a vocal style that frequently

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<sup>55</sup> Famous female impersonator/male actress Charles Pierce (see chapter three).



lapses into speech while singing,<sup>56</sup> this nearly sung-through tune lacks the vocal vulnerability of “Jenny,” or even of her encore, “The Man in the Moon.”<sup>57</sup>

The emotional key this number misses isn’t hit until later, when she follows an amusing anecdote<sup>58</sup> with the completely un-introduced “Where Do You Start?” Perhaps it is the resonance of her unmentioned divorces with the song’s subject matter (the dissolution of a long-term relationship), perhaps her positioning in the set’s armchair instead of in front of the piano, or perhaps simply the time between the emotional center of gravity that “Jenny” provided and the later number (not to mention the intervening lighter tones), but whatever makes the difference, “Where Do You Start?” has an impact that “It Never Was You” doesn’t. In the videotaped performance, she seems about to burst into tears as her voice breaks and quavers on the line “which books are yours?,” but when a verse later she asks herself “do you allow yourself a little time to cry?,” she sounds angry instead, her loud voice and harsh timbre projecting her various characters’ typical fierceness, answering the question with a firm, but elliptical, “no,” despite seeming almost to allow herself that very time only moments earlier. Safely ensconced in her chair, protected by the laughter still audibly ringing in the audience when she begins and by the lack of any personal introduction to the number, Arthur comes as close as she ever does in the show to giving her fans an unmediated self.

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<sup>56</sup> The most unintentionally funny moment in the show comes at the end of the finale, “A Chance to Sing,” when Arthur chooses to speak the very last word. That word is “sing.”

<sup>57</sup> “The Man in the Moon” was Arthur’s only solo number as Vera Charles in Jerry Herman’s *Mame* (1966), a role that won her a Tony award for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical. In a celebration for Herman at the Hollywood Bowl in 1993, Arthur quipped that her first starring role on Broadway was in Herman’s musical *Vera*; in *Just Between Friends*, ten years later, the highest notes in the song are out of her reach.

<sup>58</sup> In the video recording, this song follows the story she read at Pierce’s memorial, a salty tale of a mother discovering her gay son’s sexual orientation through trickery and a gravy ladle. In the performance recorded on the CD, it follows the Tallulah Bankhead anecdote, which also deals with gay men and sex.

Just as the nested role-playing of “Jenny” allows Arthur the freedom to express some kind of emotion, each of the subsequent emotional moments, whether sung or spoken, makes use of some kind of screen between her and the audience, whether it is the physical screen of the armchair, behind which she speaks of her delight at Vermont’s legalization of civil unions for gay couples, or the many vocal screens she throws up by quoting Lenya, Bankhead, playwright Larry Gelbart, and actor Tony Curtis in conversation with her, rather than recounting her own roles in these relationships. Nearly always, in anecdote and song, Arthur tries to make herself disappear into the story she is conveying, to function merely as a conduit between the event and the audience. This is, of course, spectacularly unsuccessful, not to mention misguided in a one-woman show. Arthur is the object that the collectors have come to gather; while she shows off her collection of famous acquaintances, we admire her, not them.

For the collector, one of the major differences between *At Liberty* and *Just Between Friends* comes not from any specific analysis of Stritch’s or Arthur’s performances, but from the traces the shows left behind for collection, traces that have affected not just how they are remembered but also how I am able to analyze them here. *Just Between Friends* exists as a live audio recording that excises much of the material Arthur performed in the show, as well as on an archival tape at the New York Public Library TOFT archive; *At Liberty* exists as a slick DVD of a performance in London, with carefully worked out camera angles and introductory photo-montage of Stritch in various roles. In other words, *At Liberty* itself acts as a collection for Stritch fans, while *Just Between Friends* is a rare gem, imperfectly preserved, to add to a collection for Arthur fans; the physical detritus the shows have left behind mirrors the attitude toward collection that the stars performed. Stritch has defined

herself on her own terms with *At Liberty*, effectively telling fans, “Here I am; collect me.”<sup>59</sup> Arthur never gave of herself so willingly; she requires us to work to unearth her from behind this pile of songs and stories.

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Miles Kreuger both knows Elaine Stritch and knew Bea Arthur. He doesn’t remember how he first met Stritch, but Arthur he met when he stage-managed an avant-garde production of *Hamlet* in 1958 in which she played the off-stage voice of Gertrude, mother to Siobhan McKenna’s Hamlet—McKenna was all of one year Arthur’s junior. He describes Arthur as “feisty, outspoken, and great fun to be with,” though he notes that they were “friendly, but not really close friends...like her character Maude on television, she always seemed blustery and sarcastic but underneath all of that was a gentle, bright, and kindly person whom I liked quite a lot.” Again, the line is blurry between actor and role. The most significant memory of Arthur that he recalls is a visit he paid to her in 1996 during which she broke down in tears and confided that one of her dogs was dying; Kreuger connected her with a vet who specialized in the rare disease her dog had, and the dog survived for another year.

In 2005, backstage after Stephen Sondheim’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at the Hollywood Bowl, Kreuger ran into Stritch, whom he had known “very casually” for a long time. In his words, they

started to chat about the musical revue that put her on the map in 1947, *Angel in the Wings*. It was in that show that she sang her first signature song, “Civilization,” better known as “Bongo Bongo Bongo.” We sang a little bit of it spontaneously but then I asked her if she knew what ever happened to Hank Ladd, a comedian with a little mustache just like Hitler’s or Thomas Dewey’s, and who stopped the show every night with the “Thousand Islands Song.” She said she assumed he was no longer living, which I believe is the case, but spontaneously both of us suddenly burst into

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<sup>59</sup> The distance between her presentation of her biography and an actual chronology of her life is noticeable when Stritch discusses flying out to Los Angeles to audition for *The Golden Girls* prior to becoming involved in *Company*. The latter occurred 15 years before the former.

the “Thousand Islands Song,” singing in the corridor at the top of our lungs, and one by one all of the stars of the Sondheim tribute came out of their dressing rooms and applauded us...and the most astonishing thing is that our voices blended and we both started singing in the same key!<sup>60</sup>

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The last type of collection I want to look at, a very different type of collection indeed, seems perhaps less closely connected to the musical comedy as a genre: the songbook albums of Ella Fitzgerald. These albums provide the perfect link between the study of musicals and the study of jazz, a link that very few scholars on either side of that divide have seemed anxious to explore.<sup>61</sup> They also fit quite neatly into the collection category not merely because they are collectible items themselves, but also because they act as collections of the greatest hits of Golden Age musical theater composers, complements to the Ben Bagley *Revisited* revues that replace the authority of knowing rare obscurities with the authority of intimate familiarity with the best performance of the best songs that the best composers have to offer. This description is, of course, entirely hyperbolic, but hyperbole is the order of the day when discussing Fitzgerald’s songbooks, called by Frank Rich “American classical music, the property and pride of everyone.”<sup>62</sup>

Fitzgerald’s performance in nearly all of her songbook recordings, more than any other performance of this musical material, works to remove any and all plotted, dramatic context from the songs, to detach them from specific significance and generalize their meanings. Indeed, her performance goes beyond this strategy, common to most Great American Songbook performers of the pre-Rodgers and Hammerstein musical theater paradigm, and attempts to remove all verbal

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<sup>60</sup> Personal communication with Miles Kreuger, 21 October 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Knapp and Morris highlight this divide in their “Tin Pan Alley songs on stage and screen before World War II,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, 81.

<sup>62</sup> Rich, “How High the Moon,” in the *New York Times* of June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1996.

meaning and, in Rich's words, "transport us into a realm of pleasure beyond all barriers."<sup>63</sup>

Fitzgerald's performances of these songs surpasses Arthur's detachment from context in that not only does she refrain from setting the pieces in a narrative of her life, as Arthur half-heartedly does, but she also takes out of the pieces any narrative traces they might retain from their shows, turning what musical theater scholars have lauded as dramatically specific moments into purely musical demonstrations of ability. Deena Rosenberg, in her liner notes to *The Rodgers and Hart Songbook*, explicitly compares Fitzgerald to "the tradition of the great jazz instrumentalists," and notes that "her velvety voice projects grace, detachment, and subtlety."

By way of comparison to the performances on Bagley's *Cole Porter Revisited*, I want to focus on Fitzgerald's *Cole Porter Songbook*. While Bagley's recordings luxuriate in the different meanings available to different audiences, celebrating the songs' plethora of contexts, Fitzgerald's performances seem to shut down potential lyrical double meanings in order to set up her own quite distinct musical meanings. These collections are not directed, like Bagley's, Stritch's, and Arthur's, at audiences who already possess an intimate knowledge of at least one context for the numbers. Rather, they attempt to make material available for all to collect, to make mainstream the collector's goals as they made mainstream Fitzgerald's performance style. In Fitzgerald's *Songbooks*, the collector attempted to shed the social limitation of his collector status while the performer attempted to shed the social limitation of her marketability solely to jazz (read: black) audiences.

In Fitzgerald's rendition of "I'm Always True to You in My Fashion," for example, a classically suggestive Porter number from *Kiss Me, Kate*, many of the most explicit sexual innuendos and double entendres are nowhere to be found, whether excised by Fitzgerald herself or one of her

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

collaborators (arranger/conductor Buddy Bregman or producer/manager Norman Granz).<sup>64</sup> In place of these potential sites of productive misreading, Fitzgerald presents a calm, controlled version of being true that seems much more innocent than Lisa Kirk's original; Fitzgerald plays a character whose social engagements with wealthy gentlemen could easily be as platonic as she says. Her famous vocal effortlessness, when set against the muted trumpets of the choruses and the arpeggiating piano under the repeated "always true to you darling" refrain, creates an image of someone far cooler than Kirk's Lois Lane. When Kirk as Lane is playful, teasing, coquettish, Fitzgerald as herself is matter-of-fact, easy, straightforward.<sup>65</sup>

Moments that Kirk takes as opportunities to break melodic confines and permit emotional expression ("Mr. Thorne once cornered corn/and that ain't *hay!*") simply slide by for Fitzgerald (with the notable exception of the "Paris hat" that closes the number). Fitzgerald takes the presentational, in-one style of Kirk's original (done alone on stage after Bill's departure, directed at the audience and therefore highly unlikely to be read as emotional expression) and brings it to its logical extreme, performing it purely as a musical performer rather than as a character. This is not to say that each repetition is identical for Fitzgerald; there is plenty of variation in her rhythmic delivery and vocal timbre, as well as minor ornamentation of the melodic line. However, these variations seem to have little to do with specific words; they instead read like irrepressible Ella trying almost successfully not to improvise on this, her intended crossover album from jazz to pop fandom.

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<sup>64</sup> Verses about "a dazzling diamond clip [that] meant 'let 'er rip!'" and "a madman known as Mack/who is planning to attack," and even a comparatively tame but still sexual verse about "the boss of Boston, Mass." making "a tender pass" all fall by the wayside for Fitzgerald's version. Mr. Fritz, who remains in the song, is no longer full of Schlitz, but merely its inventor. Tex, the oilman, is himself "here to stay," instead of sex.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Anderson's performance as Lois Lane (see note 33 above) falls as far from Lisa Kirk's as Fitzgerald's does, but in the opposite direction, making comedic hay out of exaggerated emotional and vocal swings from obviously false sincerity to obviously sincere infidelity.

Despite this calm restraint, the accompaniment is so bouncy and infectious, and Fitzgerald's voice so rich and gorgeous, that the song retains the charm and joy of the original.

In excising dramatic specificity from her performance, Fitzgerald recreates "Always True to You" as an object to be gathered by everyone, not just the in-the-know collector, as a thing that one can put wherever one wants.<sup>66</sup> Just as in Bagley's revues, and as in Arthur's show, these numbers are mobile and malleable, able to be extracted now not only from their shows, but also from the album she recorded, as in the *Best of the Songbooks* collection that did just that. This broadening of the collector aesthetic to the general public acts as the same sort of welcoming gesture that characterizes the participatory practices I discussed in chapter three. Rather than guarding the sacred secrets of the inner brotherhood, Fitzgerald presents them to the community at large, offers up the fruits of her Cole-mining for all to enjoy. Does this make them less valuable than Bagley's rarities? It certainly makes them less of a challenge to appreciate, and in doing so grants the collector less perceived social prestige among other collectors, but in terms of both musical expressivity and audience appeal, the *Songbooks* at least surpass the *Revisited* series.

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Miles Kreuger doesn't have a story about Ella Fitzgerald, though he does own the complete *Songbooks*. Her collections, in their ubiquity, do not need to be preserved in the Institute for the American Musical; you can hear them all over Los Angeles, from Café Muse in Hollywood, where I wrote this paragraph, to the outdoor shopping mall known as The Grove, where Fitzgerald's disembodied voice drifts eerily out of the potted palms that dot the avenues between the stores. Collecting show tunes, her voice seems to say, is so normal as to be unworthy of comment. This is

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<sup>66</sup> British musical comedienne Anna Russell described her own "How to write your own Gilbert and Sullivan Opera" as "a sort of vitamin pill...and so long as you use this formula, you can put your opera where you like." My own phrasing is an Americanized version of Russell's, though without the oblique reference to birth control.

the unchallenging music of comfort, of calm background noise, of paying no attention to the woman behind the curtain.

Kreuger does, however, have a story about Cole Porter, and it's a story that sort of covers the whole thing. It begins in 1955, when he first met Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Having met two giants of the Broadway stage, Kreuger "decided that it was very important for [him] to meet all the people who wrote the Broadway shows." This is not, I dare say, the first reaction of the casual fan, or even the devoted fan. This impulse to meet every writer of Broadway shows is the collector's impulse writ large—Kreuger wanted to add these live men to his collection like so many of Alice Playten's "Pets." In his words, he "suddenly realized all of them belonged to ASCAP, so I phoned ASCAP and told the telephone operator who I was, and that I had to meet all the people who wrote the Broadway shows." Having somehow found his way from the ASCAP telephone operator to Paul Cunningham, the head of public relations, Kreuger gave him a list of the songwriters he wanted to meet—and Cunningham, somewhat inexplicably, called all of them and asked each one to set up an appointment with the brash young man<sup>67</sup> as "a personal favor to him." In Kreuger's words,

In the case of...Cole Porter, he didn't get on the telephone, but his longtime secretary and assistant Mrs. Smith got on the phone and made a date for me to come to the Waldorf Towers, where he lived. And I arrived one day, in my natty blue suit, was announced in the lobby, took the elevator upstairs, where a butler opened the door, and standing in an archway was a rather frail looking man, trembling on two canes rather like Everett Sloan as Rita Hayworth's husband in *The Lady from Shanghai*. He looked nothing like Cary Grant, dashing and glamorous with only one cane, in the movie *Night and Day*.

Even this moment, so significant in young Miles' life, provides a chance to demonstrate his intimate, slightly irrelevant knowledge of, in this case, Hollywood films. That selfsame predilection

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<sup>67</sup> "The Company Way" from Frank Loesser's 1961 *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, opens with the following introductory verse: "When I joined this firm/as a brash young man/well I said to myself/'Now brash young man,/don't get any ideas./'Well I stuck to that/and I haven't had one in years."



for intimate knowledge endeared him to Porter when, upon being asked his favorite Porter song, he promptly replied, “I don’t know that I have any one favorite, but as I walk down the street I find myself whistling ‘Farming’ more than any other.” Porter’s astonishment at this obscure choice—”Farming” was never the hit that, to pick but one example, “Night and Day” was—became delight when Kreuger sang him the song better than anyone had “since Danny Kaye introduced it in the show,” though Kreuger is quick to point out that nobody had sung the song at all since Danny Kaye introduced it in the show.

This display of Porterian prowess—of Cole-mining, as Bagley would later describe it—led to a series of future meetings in which Porter

would hand me a piece of paper in his childlike block lettering—he wrote new lyrics to Farming based on the conversation that we had had in our previous meeting, and I would have to sing it, and then we would have our tea, and that became a little ritual.

This ritual turns “Farming” into another list song like “Pets” and “Psychoanalyst,” an ever-growing collection of new lyrics that belong only to Miles Kreuger and Cole Porter. In sharing the story with me, Kreuger once again performs the quintessential collector, dusting off his secret, private gems to proudly display them before anyone who will give them the attention they so richly deserve.

## Chapter Five

### “A sailor’s not a sailor”: gendering musical comedy audiences

I have reached the beginning of the end of my story. This is where things wrap up, or don’t, where you choose the lady or the tiger, when Juliet dies or Maria lives,<sup>1</sup> how I explain that all of this has been of a piece, and yet why these fragments can never make a whole. In a joke, this is the punch line; in a musical, the eleven o’ clock number or finale; in a scholarly book, the infernal tying up of assorted essays into some sort of package that publishers—and eventually readers—will figuratively and literally buy. Because this story is and has been about repetition and cycles, rituals and habits, the triumph of the familiar over the un-, the last chapter is also the place where old friends return, where my so-called objects of analysis, such as they are, sing reprises of our favorite songs from Act I. Herein you will meet again the children and their musical sequels from chapter two, the queers and their community singalongs from chapter three, the collectors and their precious gems from chapter four, and even the theorists and television personalities from chapter one—and they will say something different this time, something that, for all its apparent similarity to what they sang before, contains a germ of a new idea. This chapter is a synthesis, or a medley, or both. This chapter is about the underlying links between the other chapters, but it is also about new things. This chapter is about commercial theater, about imagined utopias, about carnival irreverence, but most of all about gender and its discontents.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maria, the Juliet character in the 1957 *Romeo and Juliet* update *West Side Story*, does not die at the end of that musical.

<sup>2</sup> I won’t start another sentence with “this chapter,” at least not for a while. That was just a quick reminder of repetition writ small.

Gender has functioned as “a useful category of historical analysis” at least since Joan W. Scott’s 1986 article of that name,<sup>3</sup> and its theorists and scholars are many and varied.<sup>4</sup> They are, however, neither as many nor as varied as the ways in which gender marks and governs our daily lives. In the *Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, Stacy Wolf points out that “whether or not a musical seems to be ‘about’ gender or ‘about’ sexuality, these axes of identity invariably organize a musical’s message, its ideological work, and its emotional effects.”<sup>5</sup> Wolf’s argument generates the claim that I make here, that the musical comedy audiences I have been examining in previous chapters, the ones who experience the “emotional effects” that Wolf mentions, just as inevitably organize themselves around a common thread of gendered and sexual difference. This difference, theorized as queerness in my third chapter, is not limited to those who label themselves queer, LGBTQ, or any other term of deliberate identity formation. Rather, the children and the collectors of my other chapters, as well as the scholars I have cited throughout, can all be united under the umbrella of gendered difference. The inability, unwillingness, or unreadiness to perform normative gender is the thin filament that sort of covers the whole audience of musical comedy’s most passionate, engaged, and faithful fans.<sup>6</sup>

Gender, for all of the audiences in my story, functions as a Bakhtinian carnival, as a site of his comic sense of the incompleteness and cyclicity of all things. Each of my central audience characters occupies a gender category more “incomplete” than “male” or “female,” most obviously the children, though also the queer singers along, the collectors and the scholars. Not all of them choose this label themselves; for some of them it is applied involuntarily. Nevertheless, this

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<sup>3</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Gender: a useful category of historical analysis.”

<sup>4</sup> For foundational examples of queer gender scholarship, see Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), in addition to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Tendencies*, cited in chapter three, and *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), about which more later.

<sup>5</sup> Wolf, “Gender and Sexuality,” 210.

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of the “thin filament” phrase, see chapter four.

comically open-ended gender is addressed, in one way or another, by the fandom practices that these audiences engage in. It is through musical comedy reception, through the various forms of cyclic, carnival repetition that I have detailed in previous chapters, that these people create and maintain their own gendered identities. I must stop using the third person here—it is through musical comedy reception that *we* create and maintain *our* gendered identities.

The most obvious place to begin my dissection of musical comedy as gender's proving ground is with the audience from chapter three, the queers. After all, I've already spoken at some length about their gender deviations, and about the connection between those deviations and the musical comedy. As Raymond Knapp points out in *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, musical comedy

has proven to be an especially fruitful venue for exploring the dynamic interplay of gender roles and sexuality...For some, it has provided a liberating model, a demonstration of how one might more aggressively control and challenge the boundaries that traditionally circumscribe one's own gendered, sexual self.<sup>7</sup>

For the more traditionally queer audience, those who identify ourselves with one or more of the letters of the LGBTQ acronym, musical comedy invites a deliberate transgression of gender roles and rules. From characters like Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun*, who performs “almost masculine self-assurance”<sup>8</sup> to actors like Ethel Merman whose “strong and masculine body...presented a highly unusual image of femininity,”<sup>9</sup> there always lurks in musical comedy a transgressive potential behind the calm façade of a simple (heterosexual) gender binary that resolves plots and populates popular biographies. Add to that the ability of queer fans of any gender to embody a layered character that incorporates both Oakley and Merman, by singing along with either

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<sup>7</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 205-6.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 209.

<sup>9</sup> Wolf, *Problem Like Maria*, 92.

of her cast recordings of the show, and any sense of a stable gender identity goes out the window. My own childhood experience trying to out-sustain Merman's 1966 recording of "any note you can hold,/I can hold longer"<sup>10</sup> taught me to perform a competitive, combative masculinity that was neither born in me nor bred in me by my largely anti-competitive parents. I learned to butch up my telltale musicality from a straight woman playing a straight woman.

Of course, comedy is as essential to my formulation of queer gender as music. Wayne Koestenbaum, analyzing the appearance of Harpo Marx's buttocks in *Animal Crackers*, detours momentarily into Wittgenstein: "What can't be discussed, as Wittgenstein suggests...should be left unmentioned...and I, contra Wittgenstein, suggest: what can't be discussed should be turned into comedy."<sup>11</sup> Queerness is the gender that dare not speak its name, just as it is also the love that dare not speak its name; comedy, in Koestenbaum's formulation, is embedded in queerness's very inadmissibility, at least in the pre-Stonewall era of *Annie Get Your Gun*, or the pre-pubescent era of my discovering it. "With scissors," Koestenbaum says, "Harpo attacks...seamlessness and capability. He wages war against *continuity*—the arrogance of fabric that has the effrontery to claim uninterruptedness."<sup>12</sup> Harpo's war on normalcy enacts Bakhtinian comic openness, and his mode of doing so—cutting men's clothing off—enacts queer desire even in the absence of any felt desire on Harpo's part. In Koestenbaum's fandom, queerness manifests in Harpo's performance; in my scholarship that cites this fandom, queerness multiplies around all of us.

I said in chapter three that I could, but wouldn't, analyze the performances of the group of Musical Mondays attendees who lip synched alongside the videos that are played throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> From the song "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better."

<sup>11</sup> Koestenbaum, *Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 72.

evening. While that analysis wasn't the point of that chapter, it is related to the point of this chapter, once again through D. A. Miller:

“I may still hear ‘I Feel Pretty’ any Saturday night in the heart of Greenwich Village, at Marie’s Crisis, where as soon as the pianist strikes the opening chords, excitement spreads like a giggling fit among all the men in the room, whose too-bright eyes at once solicit and evade recognition of the former times when we never dreamt of singing this song or would only sing it in private...And yet by the time the song proper begins, its performance has been delegated to one man in particular, some Mary fizzy, and funny, and fine enough to play Maria for all he is worth (in other words, as if she were Violetta).<sup>13</sup>

Miller’s litany of songs sung at the piano bar is varied, but nearly all the songs share a key feature—they are sung by women in their “original” theatrical contexts and by men at the bar. “I Feel Pretty,” sings Maria in *West Side Story*; “If My Friends Could See Me Now,” exclaims the titular *Sweet Charity*; Anna asks “Shall We Dance?,” in a show that positions her as first person subject in its title, *The King and I*; and *Gypsy*’s Momma Rose sneers at the limitations of “Some People.”

There are only two songs that depart from Miller’s men-embodiment-women framework. One is the reviled “Empty Chairs at Empty Tables,” sung by Marius in *Les Misérables*, whose lugubrious melancholy Miller dreams of replacing with the sprightly “You Could Drive a Person Crazy” sung in *Company* “by Marta, Kathy, and April, all somehow performed [at Miller’s ex-lover R’s funeral] by myself.”<sup>14</sup> The other, “The Best of Times Is Now,” is drag queen Albin’s number in *La Cage aux Folles*, a pre-figuring of Miller’s female impersonation written into the character. This process enacts what Sedgwick calls “the trope of inversion...[that preserves] an essential *heterosexuality* within desire itself,” and in dismissing it as homophobic in nature she labels this trope “a choreography of breathless farce.”<sup>15</sup> By valorizing both choreography and farce, Miller rehabilitates the trope of

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 46-47. The opening quotation mark is Miller’s original, as is the lack of a closing quotation mark.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 87. In the next sentence, however, Sedgwick acknowledges that “the dizzying instability of this model has itself become a token of value.”

inversion, claiming in his joint analyses of “C’est Moi” from *Camelot* and “I Enjoy Being a Girl” from *Flower Drum Song* that “Linda Low thrills men into wanting to *be* her, an identification that, for his part, young du Lac...seems already to have accomplished.”<sup>16</sup>

To Miller, gay men’s desire to embody women is central to our fandom of musical comedy. “The female performer,” he claims, will always enjoy the advantage of also being thought to *represent* this stage, as its sign, its celebrant, its essence, and its glory,<sup>17</sup> but “not even the greatest performer has talent sufficient to keep us from identifying with her.”<sup>18</sup> This explains all the men in nun’s costumes at the *Sing-A-Long Sound of Music*, it would seem, and all of the thousands of drag queens out there who “do” Judy Garland or Ethel Merman or Barbra Streisand. Women-centered performance, like musical comedy, bequeaths to the inverted homosexual man a chance to act out his inner woman.

Miller’s point is borne out in the actions of the group that calls itself Fans of MuMo,<sup>19</sup> the aforementioned singers along whose version of *Urinetown* featured a male Hope Cladwell. In their other renderings, especially in crowd scenes, men frequently act out female roles, including Peggy Sawyer in “Lullaby of Broadway” from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, Miss Jones in “Brotherhood of Man” from *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and Effie White in “I am Changing” from *Dreamgirls*. This selection runs the gamut from a silent background figure (Hope is literally gagged and tied to a chair in “Run, Freedom, Run!”) to a solo diva turn (Effie is the star of *Dreamgirls*, which deals at length with her diva status), all of whom are women embodied by men. “With One Look,” from *Sunset Boulevard*, features a male Fan of MuMo as Gloria Swanson, perfectly pantomiming Betty Buckley on

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<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 68. Note Miller’s alliteration on Linda Low and du Lac; he repeats in his writing as his subjects do in their singing.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> The group may be found (and joined) online at <http://www.facebook.com/FansofMuMo>.

the screen behind him and bedecked in gray, black, and white scarves to mimic her silent film stardom.

However, what Miller's analysis quite obviously ignores, and what manifests in the Fans of MuMo performances, is the existence of women who are not men in drag. Women in drag play men in all of the aforementioned songs that feature male characters ("Lullaby of Broadway," "Brotherhood of Man," and "Run, Freedom, Run!"), and women out of drag play women in "The Trolley Song" from *Meet Me in St. Louis* and other numbers, and their very presence does not somehow excise the gender fluidity and impersonation and embodiment of the group activity, but rather enhances it. The presence of women points out a facet of musical comedy fandom that is beside the point for Miller, whose focus is limited to gay men: even absent the single-gendered setting of the piano bar, even with a more broadly queer group of singers-along, musical comedy engenders (pun always intended) cross-dressing, cross-singing, and other variations on deliberate self-inversion. Like the gender-fluid casting of a *Rocky Horror* shadow cast, the casting of songs by Fans of MuMo seems to recognize the pleasure of gender play for its own sake, even absent *Rocky Horror's* textual predisposition toward cross-dressing.

This deliberate bucking of gender roles, the delight that we experience in performing the not-so-Other, stands in opposition to two very different attitudes toward gendered identity formation. The first of these applies to this selfsame queer audience, for when we are not deliberately embracing inversion, we often are forced to deal with the everyday consequences of being read as inverted. My passive voice construction of that sentence is deliberate, as our position outside of the nurturing piano bar or singalong is not always the subject, starring center stage, but often, rather, the object, defined by those with more social and societal authority, those who also have the option of performing a defiant gender identity, but who can choose not to when they want to be "normal." This vague category, the omnipresent mainstream ("Is anyone out of the



mainstream? Is anyone in the mainstream?” asks Mark in *Rent*, rhetorically), is the audience I have been avoiding throughout, the target audience to whom professional shows are marketed. They are just as much an imagined category as the queers, of course; Sedgwick, in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, stresses that “symmetrical binary oppositions...actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic relation [in which] the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of [the] dyad is irresolvably unstable.”<sup>20</sup> That is to say, queerly gendered folks shape normative gender just as much as normatively gendered folks decide what is queer; who is determining whom is always an open question, a framework that mirrors Edward Said’s claims in *Orientalism*, but maps gender onto Said’s racial, linguistic, and national differences.

The second attitude toward gendered identity that contrasts sharply with the joyful in-/per- version of the queer singalong belongs to another of my audiences: the children. As I noted in chapter two, repeat musical comedy viewings function as ways for children to teach themselves about the world, to learn the ways of behaving that are heroic and important, and those that are unacceptable and will be punished. In Knapp’s words, “musicals...have given people, in a visceral way, a sense of what it *feels* like to embody...alternatives...to their own life circumstances and choices,” and, through this visceral embodiment, “musicals teach people in powerful ways what and whom to care about, and how to go about caring about them.”<sup>21</sup> Among other lessons, the children who make up the audience for most musical comedy films learn what it is to be gendered from those films, and how they are expected to demonstrate that knowledge.

Suzanne Cusick, in her “On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex,” posits singing as a step, or rather several steps, in a child’s growing knowledge of the borders of hir own body:

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<sup>20</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, 283.

Like Speech, Song is a performance of the relationship of in-here/out-there that becomes ever more sophisticated as life goes on. By the age of five, most children have a repertoire of individual songs...Between the ages of 8 and 11, most children [develop] their ability...to sing in tune with each other (thus to perform their willingness to merge the sounds that perform their own interior bodies with the similarly exteriorized sounds of their peers).<sup>22</sup>

In Cusick's formulation, based in the gender theories of Judith Butler, this burgeoning understanding of singing and of the body's penetrability occurs in parallel with and not at all distinct from children's understanding of the existence of gender—and both processes reiterate at the onset of puberty, when gender and singing become suddenly fraught with complexities and challenges unknown to childhood. This entanglement of learning music and learning gender plays out in Stacy Wolf's case study of girl fans of *Wicked*; she notes that “[adolescent g]irls in a life stage of intense identity formation embrace the opportunity to explain themselves through identification with a character...[and] with the quintessential diva, the singer of big, belting songs of self-determination and self-celebration.”<sup>23</sup>

For both Cusick and Wolf, children and adolescents use musical reception, emulation, and eventually performance as methods of teaching themselves their own gendered identities, identities that are in flux with their changing bodies and ideas. For the children of my second chapter, the ones who see and hear and see and hear and see and hear again their favorite musical comedies, this repetitive process can function as a necessary drill, what Cusick refers to (following Butler) as “our initiation into the Law”<sup>24</sup> of sex and gender. Even for children who will not grow up to identify as

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<sup>22</sup> Cusick, “On Musical Performances,” 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 227-228.

<sup>24</sup> Cusick, “On Musical Performances,” 26-27.

queer, which is to say most children, this self-education through repetition (though not always through musical comedy) is needed to produce a legibly gendered identity, to progress.<sup>25</sup>

While Wolf, following Judith Halberstam, insists quite rightly that “girlhood, adolescence, and teenness should not be seen ‘as stages to pass through,’”<sup>26</sup> for children themselves, the departure from childhood looms as an inevitability; in current USAmerican society, their lives are organized so as to emphasize progress and development toward adulthood. This long march to adult gender is drastically unlike the cyclic comedy of Bakhtin’s carnival, and through musical comedy repetition, through the series and the sequels that proliferate in children’s literature and other media, there opens a window back to the carnival. The sequel allows for an escape from progression, a forum for the child himself to “carry forward, inhabit and sustain”<sup>27</sup> the uniquely pre-gendered state of childhood even as it simultaneously trains hir to strive toward and perform the very gendered state of adulthood, a carnivalesque birth-in-death and seasonal progression.

As I noted in chapter four, the categories of queers and collectors overlap substantially. Many collectors of musical comedy are gay men, like the patrons of Miller’s piano bar, who perform their knowledge of musicals as a way of taking part in the queer community I have been exploring in this chapter. However, as I also noted in that chapter, there are many, many collectors who are not self-identified as queer, whether they are closeted gay men or simply men who aren’t gay—though they are overwhelmingly male. What makes the entire population fit into the framework of gender trouble is the way that their—our—collecting functions socially, both within the queer context of the piano bar and in broader USAmerican culture. Simply, collectors are, by and large, men who do

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<sup>25</sup> “Hello 12, Hello 13” from *A Chorus Line* enacts this learning process through song and dance, positioning “adulthood” as an active verb that the pubescent dancers perform, rather than a process that happens to them.

<sup>26</sup> Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 234, partially quoting Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, 177.

<sup>27</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 179, quoted in Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 234.

not perform normative masculinity adequately collecting as objects women who do not perform normative femininity adequately.

Let me unpack that statement backwards. The women performers on whom I mainly focused in chapter four, Bea Arthur, Elaine Stritch, and Ella Fitzgerald, all perform(ed) a gender identity that was far more unstable than their cissexual<sup>28</sup> womanhood might suggest. Arthur's voice and height forced (or allowed) her to play men's roles in school, and all of her most acclaimed performances were as women who teetered dangerously close to maleness: Vera Charles in *Mame*, who informed the knowing audience that "the Man in the Moon is a lady;" Maude Findlay on the television show *Maude*, which made a running joke out of her being mistaken for her husband over the phone; and Dorothy Zbornak on *The Golden Girls*, who functioned as the man of a house full of women by opening jars, threatening burglars with violence, and, on one memorable occasion, singing a few bars of "Ol' Man River" from *Showboat*.<sup>29</sup> Charles Isherwood, in a 2010 review of Stritch's cabaret show, noted semi-facetiously that "unlike the mercurial [Plácido] Domingo, Ms. Stritch began her career as a baritone and has remained a baritone ever since,"<sup>30</sup> while she lacks Arthur's height, her vocal range similarly marks her as mannish, nowhere more than in the career-defining "Ladies who Lunch" from *Company*, which positions her character Joanne as tragically outside the homosocial world of women.

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<sup>28</sup> Cissexual is gradually becoming the accepted term in the queer community for the opposite of transsexual, a person who has not had (and does not desire) gender confirmation surgery. Cisgender is likewise the opposite of transgender, a person whose gender identity is and has always been expressed in a manner that is legible to society as consonant with hir physical body.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur won a Tony award as Vera (1966 Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical), and Emmy awards for both television roles (1977 and 1988 Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series). The episode of *Golden Girls* in which she sang "get a little drunk/and you land in jail" featured guest star George Hearn, of *Sweeney Todd* and *La Cage aux Folles* fame.

<sup>30</sup> Isherwood's "Opposites in Style, Equals in Stature" from the *New York Times* of January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010, is a prime example of journalistically acceptable diva worship, about which see below.

Fitzgerald's gender transgression is somewhat more opaque, as she has no character songs to explore, no famous fictional personae that made and marked her reputation. Her reputation was shaped not by roles played on stage or screen, but by roles she played within jazz bands, orchestras, combos, and narratives. Fitzgerald transcended the heavily circumscribed role of the "girl singer" from the moment she began her career, singing with Chick Webb's orchestra. Chris Wells has demonstrated how critical reception of the orchestra changed upon Fitzgerald's gradually displacing drummer and bandleader Webb as the most important member, with many critics dismissing her not as a jazz musician in her own right, but rather as a "personality."<sup>31</sup> Despite this reception, which not only dismissed her as a woman but also feminized the group of men around her, Fitzgerald used her voice from the start as a jazz instrumentalist would, not as a singer, occupying the virtuosic soloist role that even today remains startlingly male-dominated. From her duets with instrumentalists that demonstrated her impossibly large range and registral agility to her frankly joyous renditions of melancholy standards, Fitzgerald eschewed singing her emotions and instead sang her joy in singing and her technical skill at doing so.<sup>32</sup>

Aside from the individual career narratives of these specific women, their status as divas also marks them all as transgressive of gendered boundaries. The term diva has been theorized in many contexts and from many angles, not least by the scholars mentioned in my own brief exploration of the term in chapter three (John Clum, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Mitchell Morris). In her "Stars and Fans" chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, Holley Replogle-Wong labels the diva "inextricably bound up in notions of genius and embodiment...the diva must show resilience and

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<sup>31</sup> Chris Wells' "A Dreadful Bit of Silliness?: Feminine Frivolity and the Early Reception of Ella Fitzgerald" was presented at the American Musicological Society's 2012 meeting in New Orleans and has not yet been published. His dissertation on Chick Webb is forthcoming from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>32</sup> For a fuller examination of virtuosity as gendered male except when it communicates emotion, see Susan McClary's "Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen" in her *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*.

the ability to make a comeback against steep odds,”<sup>33</sup> noting that her “specialties” are “tales about women’s independence and survival.”<sup>34</sup> Replogle-Wong, like other scholars of the diva, locates diva-ness at least partly in the spectacle of a woman embodying notions historically limited to men: genius, independence, and public visibility. D. A. Miller, dissecting *Gypsy*, the most frequently cited “diva musical,”<sup>35</sup> points out the gender instability of both Louise and Rose, the titular star and the actual star, labeling each a celebration of female dominance on stage and a “rebus” for “the sissy boy” he himself embodies.<sup>36</sup>

The women whom Wolf examines in detail in *A Problem Like Maria* are all divas as well, by almost any definition,<sup>37</sup> and her reading of them not as objects of gay male fandom but rather as points of identification for lesbian fans recenters the diva in a broader queer context, rather than Miller’s predominantly gay male context; though she does not use the word diva to describe them, Wolf enacts a fandom-identification hybrid that she reads as lesbian and Replogle-Wong reads as characteristic of diva worship.<sup>38</sup> Each of Wolf’s subjects participates in the star culture that Richard Dyer examines in *Heavenly Bodies* and that Wolf explores in her introduction, a culture in which

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<sup>33</sup> Replogle-Wong, “Stars,” 381.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 386.

<sup>35</sup> The term is Clum’s, repeated in Replogle-Wong’s assessment of the show (386).

<sup>36</sup> The quotation is from page 74 of *Place For Us*; the argument about gender fluidity unfolds very gradually and with many digressions throughout pages 69-121.

<sup>37</sup> Wolf’s list overlaps, of course, with Miller’s, Replogle-Wong’s, and Clum’s definitions in the person of Ethel Merman.

<sup>38</sup> See Wolf’s discussion of lesbian reactions to Julie Andrews and to *The Sound of Music* in *Problem Like Maria* 209-218. Replogle-Wong discusses diva fandom and identification on 381. Wolf does mention Streisand’s status as “diva-of-divas” on page 177, but the term does not provide her sustained frame for examining the stars.

character can never be entirely separated from a larger-than-life performer;<sup>39</sup> divas, Replogle-Wong notes, always either are or were just such stars.<sup>40</sup>

Diva worship, once removed from an explicitly gay male fan base, merges into collector status. Collectors know their collections intimately, whether those collections comprise stacks of records, libraries of playbills, or binders full of women stars whose personal details they—we—familiarize ourselves with often to the detriment of our awareness and understanding of what is called common knowledge. It is in this substitution of marginal knowledge for common knowledge that I locate the collector's tenuous grip on masculinity, a transgression that mirrors his divas' lapsed femininity. By performing expertise in a category of knowledge not sanctioned by cultural expectations of manhood, the collector positions himself outside such expectations, escapes, he hopes, a set of strictures as confining as the figurative corset of femininity is to the diva.

Ben Bagley, the collector, revue producer, and record producer I examined in chapter four, was described in 1955 as “a matchstick of a fellow, so light he bounces when you shake his hand. He’s five feet, eight, but even on a damp day he weighs less than 100 pounds. His belt wraps nearly twice around his fragile waist.”<sup>41</sup> His career as a record producer began when he contracted tuberculosis and became too frail to maintain the hectic pace of revue production. The narratives of physical frailty and diminutiveness that surrounded him even at the height of his career point out his inability to perform manhood, as do the photographs of him caressing his cat that adorn the backs of his albums. While Bagley’s sexual orientation goes unmentioned in the press surrounding his album releases and shows—I have no confirmation that he was gay in theory or in practice—his small size merits frequent mention. This focus unmans Bagley by simultaneously feminizing and

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<sup>39</sup> See 33-37 of *A Problem Like Maria* and all of *Heavenly Bodies*.

<sup>40</sup> Replogle-Wong, “Stars,” 381.

<sup>41</sup> Norman Mockridge in *The New York World-Telegram Saturday Feature Magazine* of March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1955.

infantilizing him; collectors, as I noted in chapter four, always hearken back to childhood and a level of obsession common among children but destined to be grown out of by normal adults.

The symbiotic relationship between collector and diva becomes eminently legible in the following example from *Bea Arthur On Broadway: Just Between Friends*. In the monologue recorded on the album under the title “Fiddler on the Roof,” Arthur describes appearing as the original Yente the Matchmaker alongside, among other child actors, Pia Zadora. “I’m not saying, you know, that she’s not a terrific little actress,” Arthur quips as the audience snickers, “but I’m sure a few of you have heard this, that when she was appearing in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, when the SS came to the apartment, the audience rose as one and yelled ‘she’s in the attic!’” Nearly the same joke occurred on the 1987 episode of *The Golden Girls* called “The Actor”: after Dorothy Zbornak (Arthur) crankily asserts that fictional local community theater star Phyllis Hammerow stinks, and Rose Nylund (Betty White) claims to have “thought she was terrific last year in *The Diary of Anne Frank*,” Dorothy reminds her that “during the entire second act the audience kept yelling, ‘She’s in the attic! She’s in the attic!’” With the interpenetration of character and actor characteristic of the star, Arthur either adapted a personal story from *Fiddler on the Roof* into a *Golden Girls* script, or a *Golden Girls* script into a personal story for *Just Between Friends*. Her joke in *Just Between Friends*, acknowledged as nothing new even in her telling of it, is a site of Bakhtinian reduced laughter, comic in its repetition and familiarity even if it gets a much smaller reaction from the audience than some of her raunchier stories. I know where the joke comes from not because “The Actor” is a well-known episode of *Golden Girls*, nor because Arthur admits it in *Just Between Friends*, but because I have seen every episode of Arthur’s two Emmy-winning television shows and have listened to *Just Between Friends* more times than I have



bothered to count. I deploy this knowledge here to impress you, my readers, and to prove my authority to analyze Arthur, as well as to cement her diva status by my worship.<sup>42</sup>



Figure 5: Cover from the published sheet music for "I'm Confessin' (That I Love You)," almost performed by Bea Arthur at her first professional audition. I found this copy of "I'm Confessin' (That I Love You)" in Capitol Hill Books, a used bookstore in Washington, DC, on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012. In *Just Between Friends*, Arthur describes blowing her 1947 audition for the Betty Garrett role in the touring company of *Call Me Mister* by deciding, on the advice of William Warfield, to substitute "Summertime" for her prepared number, this one, and then (nervously, drunkenly) forgetting all of the lyrics beyond "summertime." The cover image is "Dinah Shore...with her hair... how they used to wear it. You know, like over rats?" This is the latest object in my Arthur collection, a delight to find in that dusty old bookstore and a delight to share with you here.

The gendered nature of my interaction with Arthur is not just limited to our membership in groups labeled "collector" and "diva." As noted above, Arthur vocally and physically performs a gender status of self-identified-woman-received-as-man in most of her roles, and it is that liminality that most fascinates me about her. Arthur clearly controls her creative environments, embodying characters that are written as much by her and about her as they are written for her, and yet her characters so often wander into male regions, singing "Some Enchanted Evening" (Maude), or

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<sup>42</sup> For more on the mutually constitutive relationship between diva and worshipper, see Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and Desire*.

claiming to have been imprisoned in Attica because nobody “found out” she was a woman (Dorothy). Arthur’s apparent embrace of comic misgendering is familiar to me as a small man—5’6”, or two inches shorter than Bagley—who is frequently mistaken for a woman, despite my bass voice and facial hair. My own defense against misgendering has included, at times, deliberately dressing in women’s clothes, growing my hair long, and musically exploring my falsetto range. Like Arthur, I have learned to live with gender illegibility by becoming ever more illegible, and I crave contact with people like me who have turned what could be a source of pain and confusion into a hallmark of our public gender performance. Instead of foreclosing the possibility of being misread by butching up, in my case, or femming up, in Arthur’s, we both enter into comic inconclusiveness, forestalling Bergsonian cruel laughter with Bakhtinian reduced laughter.

Many collectors do not experience misgendering in this literal way. For many fans of, for example, Gilbert and Sullivan, gender identity is always, unquestionably, male. What these fans have in common with those of us whose gender is harder to read, or harder to write, is that they replace physical evidence of masculinity with musical comedy evidence. Many of the Gilbert and Sullivan collectors I know, ones with whom I worked in college and ones I encountered through that work, constantly strive for dominance. The singer who can recite the “Nightmare Song” from *Iolanthe* the fastest is the winner; all of the patter songs, songs almost all performed in the operettas by slight, effeminate men, are sites for demonstrating control, knowledge, and muscular achievement, though the only muscles involved are those of the lips and tongue. In *The Mikado*, the patter song that defines the effeminate male character of Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner, comprises a list of types of people whom he could execute and who’d “none of them be missed.” The list includes, in Gilbert’s original version, autograph collectors, children who impress with historical knowledge, musicians (organ and banjo players), comedians, politicians, and women who variously transgress appropriate feminine behavior (dressing “like a guy” or writing novels). A veritable catalogue of the

folks who would later (and perhaps were already becoming) Gilbert and Sullivan's fan base, the song also indicts "all people who when shaking hands/shake hands with you like that," a non-specific description that has been portrayed on stage as either too limp or too forceful a handshake, both of which can be read as indicators of gender trouble in men, either demonstrating or aggressively concealing a feminine weakness. That same feminine weakness is Ko-Ko's fatal flaw as an executioner; he cannot harm anyone.

There are other ways to solve the dilemma of the abject collector beyond either gender disruption or alternative methods of gender confirmation. For many collectors who do not express their non-normative gender externally, but whose non-normative gender nevertheless manifests in their collector status, the way out of abjection is through the academy. As I alluded to in chapters one and four, I read scholars as versions of collectors who have managed to channel their obsessions into tracks that society recognizes as, in some ways, useful. The fandom that I display in my analyses of Arthur leads to, perhaps, more glowing reviews of her career than might be considered dignified, but the impulse behind it is no different from the motivation behind archival and ethnographic research, or score and performance analysis, the pillars of my particular scholarly discipline. I want to know about her, and to let other people know the things I find out that are worth knowing. Did you know she could do a mean Mae West impression? Or Barbra Streisand? Arthur was a diva who did diva drag herself, lampooning her peerless peers in an act of affectionate mockery that recalls the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* musical.

Discussing Joss Whedon's gendered musical discourses is no longer a brand new idea. Amanda Howell, in her "More than just a rock 'n' roll reversal: tracking gender on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," notes the show's "commitment to revising the clichés of teens on screen," which allows it to explore "rock music's screen masculinities...in both their attraction and their limitations, as rock's gender conventions—like those of the horror, action, and teen films—are resurrected in order to be

reworked.”<sup>43</sup> Howell points out that many instances of male characters displaying stereotypical rock masculinity are revealed as unnatural demonic influences to be solved, rather than regarded as the natural state of men;<sup>44</sup> interestingly, while the section headings of her piece are all lyrics from “Once More, With Feeling,” Howell’s focus on rock music allows her to otherwise ignore the musical comedy episode. Kendra Preston Leonard, in “‘The status is not quo’: gender and performance in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*,” explores exactly the kind of inadequate masculinity that I have been claiming for collectors as embodied in the title character. With his opening gesture of a practiced, yet unsatisfactory evil laugh, the same gesture I examined in chapter one as a example of reduced laughter,

Dr. Horrible has set up a paradigm of maleness and performance which remain intertwined throughout the work: he admits to performing masculinity through vocalization, although needing to enhance his masculine performance with lessons from a “vocal coach” also situates him as the stereotypical effeminate man of musical theater.<sup>45</sup>

Juxtaposing Leonard’s assessment of the character with Suzanne Cusick’s claim that the act of Song is gendered female and/or assigned to childhood, I read Dr. Horrible as a quintessential collector, feminized by the world around him but engaged in a constant struggle for masculinity expressed primarily through his toys and treasures—in his case, the supervillain weapons he creates in his kitchen.

In addition to the characters within musical comedy, however, the scholars who love them are characters in their own right, and merit examination through the same gendered lens. Like most

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<sup>43</sup> Howell, “Rock ‘n’ roll reversal,” 101.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 103.

<sup>45</sup> Leonard, “Status is not quo,” 277.

collector populations, scholars are still more male than female,<sup>46</sup> and largely eschew physical performances of masculinity in favor of displays of mental authority. It would be indelicate of me to cite specific examples of the macho posturing that frequently mars (and generates) academic debate, but I hazard to guess that most scholars reading this are familiar with the phenomenon, and an examination of any journal that permits exchanges of letters will adequately illustrate this point. Rather than burning any bridges this early in my scholarly career, it would perhaps behoove me to move to an example who promises never to read my story.

You may recall Stephen Colbert from such appearances as *Company*, *The Colbert Report*, and chapter one of this dissertation.<sup>47</sup> Here I want to examine specifically his performance of gender both through musical comedy and outside of it, as he manages to embody or portray all of the audiences I've focused on throughout my story. The opening credits to *The Colbert Report* feature a star-spangled bald eagle swooping across a red and blue field out of which emerges a bespectacled and besuited Colbert, every inch the effeminate Clark Kent who would be Superman. Around him floats a cloud of words in red text, all in capital letters, many of which highlight his paramount masculine authority: "COURAGEOUS...INDEPENDENT...POWERFUL...AUTHORITATIVE... HONORABLE... STRONG..." Interspersed with these descriptors are explicitly politically conservative terms, "ORIGINALIST...PATRIOT." After another pass by the eagle, new words appear as Colbert dramatically runs at and grasps a United States flag: "SELF-EVIDENT...ALL-BEEF...STAR-SPANGLED...NATIONAL TREASURE." Some terms change from show to show, but these are fairly constant. As the brief sequence progresses, Colbert emphasizes the parodic nature of his performance of hypermasculinity, moving from words that many public figures use to describe

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<sup>46</sup> In 2009, the number of women graduating from US American PhD programs surpassed the number of men for the first time, according to data from the Council of Graduate Schools.

<sup>47</sup> My phrasing here ("You may recall...from such...as...") comes from Troy McClure, a character on *The Simpsons* voiced by Phil Hartman. McClure was a washed-up actor who hosted infomercials, whence this phrasing seems to have been drawn.

themselves to words that describe the United States and its national symbols. He conflates himself with the country, mocking and undermining the brash manliness asserted by political commentators on less intentionally comic programs, the commentators on whom his character is based.

Apart from this opening sequence, Colbert insists on his masculinity more than Gene Kelly in an MGM musical, and even less convincingly. While his character's orientation is professedly heterosexual, Colbert's gender performance is that of a man who claims any and all signifiers of maleness as a desperate attempt to stave off real or imagined assaults on his masculinity. Simultaneously, the character lets slip his departures from stereotypes so impossibly overdetermined that no human could possibly embody all of them, and in doing so implies a closeted homosexuality that Colbert uses to indict the seemingly endless parade of homophobic public figures whose sex lives are revealed by past lovers to have been anything but purely heterosexual.

I read Colbert's frequent lapses into musical comedy material as an extension of his character's ambiguous orientation and gender performance. By demonstrating his secret knowledge of musicals, Colbert outs himself as much as when he dreams longingly of fellow late-night comedy host Jimmy Fallon. Inserting himself into his guests' musical performances similarly calls into question his stable gender performance as the quintessential male; singing is itself a marker of dangerous femininity.<sup>48</sup> Alongside his infatuation with musical comedy, Colbert also periodically reveals his obsession with *The Lord of the Rings* and other science fiction and fantasy epics; his revelations bespeak a collector's abject devotion to the wrong cultural material as well as the careful concealment of that devotion, queering his character even further. To top it all off, in an out-of-character interview with *Playboy* magazine, Colbert describes his childhood as follows:

after [my father and two of my brothers] died, I inherited their record collection. I had *Bill Cosby Is a Very Funny Fellow... Right!* And *Wonderfulness*, and I listened to them

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<sup>48</sup> See Cusick for a further elaboration of this gendered musicality.

over and over and over again, every night...I just wore them out...I have them on my iPod now, and I can do every joke. I can do every joke with the exact same rhythm and timing that Mr. Cosby does them, after 30 years of not listening to them, because they were so deeply ingrained in me. The funny thing is, the albums were so scratched that I missed entire punch lines. He'd be doing a setup, and then it would skip ahead to a huge laugh. And in my mind I was like, What could that punch line have been? I was writing Bill Cosby's punch lines in my head.<sup>49</sup>

The young Colbert trained himself to use solitary, repetitive comedy reception/consumption as a ritual to cope with his brothers' death, as a rehearsal for his adult career, and as a chance to experiment with creating his own material. Having lost three important men in his life, he substituted the disembodied voice of another father figure, learning how to be a man from Bill Cosby.

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There is one particular musical that has hovered around the edges of most of my discussions, though it has not yet taken a star turn as one of my objects of analysis. John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the musical that seems more than any to be actually about gender, has drawn varied musicological attention. Knapp calls it "aggressively postmodern," noting that it "seems to thumb its figurative nose at established ways of staging a narrative musical show," being "a mixture of standup comedy and low-budget rock concert."<sup>50</sup>

Judith Peraino notes that Hedwig

has no 'known' genitals, only an unnameable fragment, and music provides the means...for the realization of Hedwig's queer gendered identity...[which] importantly does not dissolve or deny gender difference, but rather envisions a new type of coexistence that cannot be regularized and institutionalized.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Eric Spitznagel's "Playboy interview: Stephen Colbert." In the same interview, Colbert admitted that the scifi/fantasy obsession is his, not merely his character's; he keeps a *Lord of the Rings* pinball machine in his office. (See <http://www.playboy.com/playground/view/playboy-interview-stephen-colbert>)

<sup>50</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 252.

<sup>51</sup> Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*, 251.

Both Knapp and Peraino recognize *Hedwig-the-show*'s duplication of Hedwig-the-character's in-betweenness, Knapp in the heavy metal power chords that eschew major and minor tonality as Hedwig/Hansel defies binary gender and in hir "theatrical demonstration of gesture and attitude [that] underscores generic conventions without either choosing among them or denying their value as authenticating expression,"<sup>52</sup> and Peraino in the show's "rock and roll apotheosis of self-sufficient 'wholeness'—working with what one has."<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Wollman, in her history of rock musicals, notes that *Hedwig* is "one of the most successful blends of rock and musical theater elements to date, in large part because the creators chose not to fully integrate the two divergent genres,"<sup>54</sup> another mirroring of Hedwig's bifurcated gender and psyche that reads rock as male, musicals as female, and both as complementary parts of one entity. Wollman goes further, noting another gendered musical dichotomy that marks Hedwig and *Hedwig*: "[w]hile its visuals pay tribute to a subgenre that gleefully disregards rock's imagined authenticity...*Hedwig* borrows musically from subgenres that tend to embrace it."<sup>55</sup>

I want to extend these musicological analyses of the show and character through the lens of Bakhtin, and to examine Hedwig herself not as the quasi-tragedy that *Hedwig* makes hir out to be, but as a comic figure along the lines of the audience members who have been the focus of this story. In returning to a more traditional form of musical comedy scholarship, analysis of a dramatic whole, I don't intend to repudiate my focus on audience and on the inherent instability of musical comedies as viable objects of study. Rather, I intend this analysis to reiterate, following Knapp and Wolf, that

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<sup>52</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 255-256.

<sup>53</sup> Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*, 250.

<sup>54</sup> Wollman, *Theater Will Rock*, 181.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, 185. Wollman explicitly labels rock authenticity as gendered male and artifice as gendered female on 208.



analysis of shows can be used to investigate audiences, and that my approach to scholarship is not a replacement for or dismissal of other modes, but rather a complement to them.

Hedwig begins life as Hansel, a self-described “slip of a girlyboy” who is feminized while male-identified just as ze is masculinized when presenting as a woman. The complicated gender of the actor/character hybrid in the original stage productions and subsequent film is neatly summarized in Peraino’s explanation:

When Hedwig, the male-to-female transsexual character (played by a man), kisses Yitzhak, the former “drag queen” who is Hedwig’s husband (played by a woman), the parallel and cross relations between the composite bio- and neo-genders, the “real” and “fictional” genders, create a union that is simultaneously homo and hetero—a perfect, undivided sphere like the original earth, original humans, and original love.<sup>56</sup>

This big ball of genders, in spite or because of *Hedwig*’s obsessive emphasis on dualities and dichotomies, refuses to be split into any such pair. As both Knapp and Wollman note, the end of many versions of *Hedwig* emphasizes the possibility that one or more of the important men and women in hir life have been parts of Hedwig all along.<sup>57</sup> Hedwig, in these versions of *Hedwig*, is not simply a woman+man combination, but a woman+man+boy+girl+accident+political necessity=? This narrative of gender confusion, Knapp notes, has angered some transgender people whose own gender identities are far more secure than Hedwig’s, and whose surgical decisions are more their own rather than others’,<sup>58</sup> and rightly so, as Hedwig has come to represent the musical comedy stand-in for all transgender and transsexual people; no one figure, even a fictional one, can bear that burden successfully.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*, 249.

<sup>57</sup> See Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 259 and Wollman, *Theater will Rock*, 185

<sup>58</sup> Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 254.

<sup>59</sup> This burden may, however, not be Hedwig’s to bear alone for much longer. *Bring It On: The Musical*, which played Broadway in 2012, features a transgender character named La Cienega whose self-identification is, simply, female. She is played by male actor Gregory Haney, who in an interview for Broadway.com assured readers that “I’m a boy playing a

However, while Hedwig cannot be every trans- person for every fan, what ze can be is an embodiment of musical comedy's open-endedness written in gender, the star and personification of all of the gendered audiences I have been examining in this chapter. As a young boy, Hansel sings along with his rock divas, learning their music and their self-expression, which she will later teach to the adolescent Tommy, enacting the self-pedagogy of pre-gendered children both literally, as a child, and then metaphorically, communicating her knowledge to the queer teenager who may or may not be himself. The list songs that so often duplicate the collector's stance toward musical comedy are realized in Hedwig's lists of divas, of Tommy's favorite bands, of wigged identities. In the case of the latter, a list unfurled through the song "Wig in a Box," the list meets the singalong, as Hedwig projects her lyrics onto a screen for the audience to join in. Thus encouraging audience participation, Hedwig becomes the diva she has emulated, gendering herself female but drawing cries of "faggot" from angry audience members (in the film version of *Hedwig*) when she reveals in song her "unnameable fragment."<sup>60</sup>

So what, other than a lack of conclusion, makes this comedy? That could be enough, following Bakhtin, but Hedwig's gender trouble—and hir parallel musical non-conclusion in the final song of the show that ends with a harmonic cycle instead of a cadence<sup>61</sup>—support a non-narrative monologue/script that demonstrates hir investment in laughter, both reduced and audible. Pasting together Svetlana Boym's "ironic fragments" of nostalgia into a routine that Knapp

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girl, but she's not. La Cienega's a *girl* (emphasis original). See <http://www.broadway.com/buzz/163446/bring-it-on-star-gregory-haney-on-his-transformation-from-football-jock-to-broadway-cheerleader/>.

<sup>60</sup> Knapp notes that it is through renouncing her divadom that Hedwig redeems herself, but that this renunciation allows her to transcend her abjection (*Personal Identity*, 262).

<sup>61</sup> See Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 261-262; "Midnight Radio" ends with repeated alternation between tonic and flat sixth chords, denying listeners both the expected authentic cadence that ends most songs and the "amen" cadence that underscores the lyric "rock and roll." Knapp has observed elsewhere that this harmonic move blends resolution with transcendence, and that this particular musical moment "cycles endlessly between tonic and flat sixth, offering beauty, as consolation, when choice is not possible," mirroring Hedwig's personal situation (colloquium on "The Beautiful in Music," Spring 2006).

identifies as standup comedy, Hedwig entertains as ze destabilizes hir audience, making both hir on-screen fans (in the film version) and hir real-life devotees laugh audibly at hir dirty puns (“And when I think of all the people I have come upon in my travels, I have to think about the people who have come upon me.”), and reducedly about hir comical references to rock musical antecedents (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Tommy*). Opening hir act to Koestenbaumian comedy, Hedwig also touches the enemy’s shoulder, using a comedian’s polished armor to protect himself from the violent reactions of many to hir gender presentation, and from the often untenable situations ze found himself in with hir lovers (“from this milkless tit, you sucked the very business we call show...I scraped by with babysitting gigs and odd jobs. Mostly the jobs we call blow”).

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There is one other musical comedy that has not been hovering around my story, at least not like *Hedwig*. This musical has drawn no scholarly attention at all, was a critical failure at its release, and has no fan community that I have been able to locate. Unlike *Hedwig*, its plot ostensibly doesn’t revolve around gender, though of course—because it is a musical—gender “organize[s its] message, its ideological work, and its emotional effects.” In jumping from the natural, easy fit for my topic (*Hedwig*) to this seemingly most innocent and unlikely of musicals, I am again performing my expertise, my collector’s (scholar’s) knowledge of obscurities and desire to show off these buried treasures to an unappreciative world.<sup>62</sup> I am also reiterating what I have claimed in many chapters, explicitly and implicitly, that musical comedies of recent years and of decades long past have a great deal to say to one another, despite the tempered despair of Miller, Clum, and other ambivalent proponents of the Golden Age of the Closet.

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<sup>62</sup> The spoken introduction to Howard Ashman and Alan Menken’s musical *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) sets the film’s action “in the seemingly most innocent and unlikely of places.”

This last musical comedy is a film from 1954 called *There's No Business Like Show Business*, with songs written by Irving Berlin and performed by Ethel Merman, Dan Dailey, Mitzi Gaynor, Johnnie Ray, Donald O'Connor, and Marilyn Monroe. A brief plot summary is in order, since the literature on *Show Business* is, frankly, non-existent. A vaudeville family act, the Five Donahues, faces hardships as vaudeville dies, including competition from up and coming star Vicky Parker (Monroe), the departure of the oldest son (Ray) for the priesthood, and the stormy love affair of the youngest son (O'Connor) with Parker, whom he wrongly accuses of cheating on him with her producer. In the end, everything works out just fine for everybody. The plot of *There's No Business Like Show Business* is only slightly more extant than the literature on it. As I pointed out in chapter three, however, the plot is not nearly as relevant to my reading of the film as its musical numbers and individual dialogue scenes.<sup>63</sup>

What makes *Show Business* a fascinating study in light of my focus on comedy, repetition, gender, and subcultural audiences is its focus on children, its repetition of certain elements of *Call Me Madam*, its distribution as a Marilyn Monroe collector's item,<sup>64</sup> and above all its persistent, relentless queerness. Of course the film is gay, as it is a film musical from the 1950s,<sup>65</sup> but I use the word queer deliberately, as the film also presents deliciously lesbian and bisexual musical numbers, as well as implicitly challenging the 1950s nuclear family model. In addition to this upending of heteronormativity, *Show Business* is just as relentlessly comic, refusing to resolve any tension and

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<sup>63</sup> Would it be unnecessarily snarky to comment that it seems to have been irrelevant to the writers as well? Perhaps.

<sup>64</sup> The film seems to exist on DVD only as part of "Marilyn Monroe: the Diamond Collection," despite Monroe's rather small role.

<sup>65</sup> For more on the gaiety of the '50s film musical, see Part Three: Camp Interventions in Steven Cohan's *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, which collects four essays on the subject, and also his *Incongruous Entertainment: camp, cultural value, and the MGM musical*. Most of the work on this topic deals explicitly with MGM and its famous Freed Unit, also known as Freed's Fairies. See also Alexander Doty's *Flaming Classics: queering the film canon*.

instead simply singing and dancing its little heart out, often in reprises of earlier songs that demonstrate the cyclic, unending repetition of the titular *Business*.

*Show Business* opens with Merman and Dailey performing their signature duo number, “When that Midnight Choo-Choo Leaves for Alabam,” on a vaudeville stage in 1919, and then showing off their young son during the applause. Young Steve is dressed identically to his father, minus the latter’s straw boater. This number reprises much later, at Steve’s going-away-to-seminary party, performed by his sister Katy and brother Tim, Gaynor and O’Connor, dressed as their parents. Already, from the first number, the film focuses on repetition and on the training of children through musical comedy; the dialogue scene that follows the opening medley consists of Molly and Terry Donahue (Merman and Dailey) arguing over how best to educate their children, through settled, formal schooling or through the rehearsal and performance cycle of travelling vaudeville performers. Although Molly wins the argument and the children are sent to Catholic school, the later reprise of “Midnight Choo-Choo” suggests that Tim and Katy’s education had more to do with rehearsal than with schooling. The repetition of the number is not even limited to within the film; in 1948, only six years before *Show Business* was released, the already decades old number was featured in the much better known Judy Garland and Fred Astaire musical *Easter Parade*.

The familiar, repeated opening number of *Show Business* recalls/figures *Fievel Goes West*, the sequel I discussed in chapter two, which opens with a recognizable song from its predecessor, *An American Tail*; indeed, *Show Business* is full of familiarity and smacks of sequel status throughout. In 1953, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox had released *Call Me Madam*, with music by Berlin, starring Merman and O’Connor and featuring most of the behind the scenes staff that would very shortly work on *Show Business*. While the films have different writers and entirely unrelated plots, the overlapping personnel creates the same sort of series that I pointed out in chapter two with *Mary Poppins*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. Indeed, some of the costumes worn by the chorus in

“Alexander’s Ragtime Band” reuse costume pieces from *Madam*, despite the films’ different costume designer credits, and Merman and Dailey’s combination song “Play a Simple Melody,” musically recalls her similar combination song “You’re Just in Love” with George Sanders in *Madam*.

The film segues into Molly and Terry’s years performing without their children through the first of several queer musical numbers, a blond-wigged Molly singing “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody.” Stacy Wolf’s reading of Merman as performing butchness is foregrounded in her staged competition for Terry’s attention with several beautiful young blond chorus girls, which occasionally suggests a different triangulation of jealousy. As the younger blonds and Terry trip lightly across the stage, Molly struts, stomps, scowls, and pratfalls, all the while singing of how pretty girls “haunt [her] night and day”; she eyes one of the girls up and down, frowning at the attention Terry is paying her. In their next dialogue scene, Terry shushes her as she (unintentionally) hollers crudely at a priest.

The priest, responding to Molly’s concern about her children’s behavior, notes that Steve is “quiet, serious, quite an unusual boy.” Though Johnnie Ray has not yet appeared in the film as Steve, the actor’s “unusual” nature (read: homosexuality) is eventually mirrored in his character’s emotional admission to his parents that he wants to leave vaudeville to become a priest. Before he tells them, Molly worries that “he seems so far away these days...kinda like a [pause] poet or something,” and Terry hopes that “maybe he’ll write lyrics.” Steve’s subsequent coming out scene is startling in its frankness:

TERRY: Now look son, you’re very young. You don’t understand what a wonderful thing life can be. You don’t know how wonderful it is to fall in love and get married and raise a family. I’m not going to let you give all that up!

STEVE: I’ve thought about it, Pop. It’s just that some people are meant to be one thing, and some another.

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MOLLY: Steve, I wanna talk to you.

STEVE: Sure, Ma...Are you disappointed in me too, the way Dad is?

MOLLY: You can’t blame your father, Steve, the way you threw it at him. You know, just cold, without any build up. He wasn’t lookin’ for it. He had different plans for you.

STEVE: But there's still Katy and Tim.

MOLLY: Yes, but you're the firstborn. There's always somethin' about the first.  
[pause] Life's funny. You raise a kid backstage, you teach him every trick you know  
about singin' and dancin' and how to make people laugh. And then one day this.

[begins to cry] Why? How come?

STEVE: I don't know, ma. It's inside me. It must have always been there.

MOLLY: It's like losin' you, Steve. Oh I know not really, but—

STEVE: Then you are disappointed.

MOLLY: [gasps] No, I'm not disappointed, Steve, it's a wonderful thing! I'm just not  
used to it yet. But I'm proud. Very proud. [cries]

[Molly and Steve embrace]

The exchange between Molly and Steve, which avoids any mention of what “this” is, was clear enough in its subtext that Ray invited a gay friend, television critic Terrence O’Flaherty, to watch the filming of that scene. O’Flaherty later recorded in unpublished notes that even the impervious Merman was overcome with emotion after shooting.<sup>66</sup>

But it is not only Ray’s (or Steve Donahue’s) homosexuality that makes *Show Business*—and the very business we call show—all about queer gender. From the marquee of the Hippodrome theater that bills The Five Donahues alongside famed female impersonator Julian Eltinge to the family’s later reliance on Molly and Katy’s income while Terry stays at home, the film constantly questions gender roles and gender performance. When Tim sings a love song to Vicky, “A Man Chases a Girl,”<sup>67</sup> he does a solo soft shoe dance that ends with him cradled in the arms of a female statue, posing as a feminized child—and this is the straight brother, described by the priest as “all boy.” When Tim and Katy, in a Broadway revue, sing and dance backup for Vicky on “I’m Lazy,” the siblings’ stated admiration of Vicky’s body troubles Katy and Vicky’s supposed orientations; Katy meows at Vicky, while later in the number Monroe thrusts her crotch nearly into Gaynor’s face

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<sup>66</sup> These notes are contained in the Johnnie Ray file of the Terrence O’Flaherty Collection of Publicity and Promotional Material for Television, 1949-1986.

<sup>67</sup> This number is already queer in its frequent shift between gendered subject pronouns that seems intended to humorously portray heterosexual romance, but that also allows for a reading as romance between two people who each use both male and female pronouns: “A man chases a girl/until she catches him,” etc. For more on Tin Pan Alley song and its experimentation with gender, see Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris’ “Tin Pan Alley songs on stage and screen before World War II,” especially 92-95, in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*.

as all three of them share a chaise lounge. The suggestion of incest quickly dissolves as the siblings jump up and tap dance together in unison, not as a couple but facing forward next to each other like a buddy vaudeville team reminiscent of O'Connor with Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* from two years earlier. After the number, Katy's supposed love interest, the show's lyricist, tells her that she "really looked like [she was] enjoying that number," to which she replies simply, "I was."

However, the tour de force number of *Show Business*, the gender performance that parallels *Hedwig* and Hedwig in its complexity and layers, occurs during and around the number "A Sailor's not a Sailor ('til a Sailor's been Tattooed)." Within the film, the song is supposedly a duet for Tim and Katy to sing in that same revue, but Tim's car accident prevents him from performing, and "the understudy can't do it like Tim," according to Katy; "it wouldn't mean a thing," comments her lyricist honey. The solution? At the last moment, Molly steps into Tim's role, claiming she'll "have to fake the dancing, but [she's] been getting away with that for years." Merman, the famous park-and-bark diva of the musical stage, admits on screen that she can't dance, yet somehow considers herself a more qualified replacement for dancer O'Connor than his (presumably male) understudy.<sup>68</sup>

Merman and Gaynor sing the song in male sailor drag, Merman with enormous false sideburns and a pipe, accompanied by a chorus of clean-shaven young men who look a lot like Gaynor. In the introductory verse, they sing joyously of their upcoming "date with gals and drinks and food" on the Bowery, a famous location for New York's gay night life, and in the first chorus Merman details many of the tattoos on his body, including on his bottom, often (though not always) displaying them to the audience. When the two sing in harmony on the title phrase, Gaynor takes the lower line, ending on a D-flat below middle C, well into the tenor range, while Merman stays comfortably in the mezzo-soprano/alto register throughout. While all of this reads as simultaneously

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<sup>68</sup> Katy's entirely superfluous husband agrees enthusiastically with her mother; he apparently knows that Merman is the butchest member of the family.



lesbian and gay, depending on whether the costumes or the singers define the characters' genders, it takes on another layer of signification when one imagines O'Connor in Merman's role, playing the old man to his older sister's young man, singing well above her. This imagining, while perhaps violating an understood suspension of disbelief to accommodate the film's "plot," is all the more plausible when one recalls O'Connor's gay-coded role in *Singin' in the Rain*, an intertextual example of how stars permit queer meanings to accrue on films.<sup>69</sup>

When the song segues into a dance break during which Gaynor's character gets tattooed, a shirtless, muscular chorus man functions as a physical catalogue of the tattoo artist's work for hir to examine. Gaynor then dances in unison with a line of (male) sailors to the appreciative rhythmic clapping of a handful of tight-dressed chorus women, while Merman has a dance trio with two male choristers in age drag, playing "old salts" like hir. The number ends in a triumphant pyramid, with the topless tattooed tar holding a grinning star on each arm, a tableau that would cross way over the line from homosocial into homosexual if the stars weren't women playing women playing men. The literal conclusion of the number is made possible only by the doubled gendering of Merman and Gaynor.

The gender constellations of *Show Business* are different from those in *Hedwig*. The musical styles of the two shows have little to nothing in common. One of them features only original music, the other mostly music that was old long before the film was released. Their historical moments of creation were decades apart—though, thanks to video, both shows continue into the current historical moment, gaining new contexts as they age. What they have in common, however, is their availability to audiences with gender trouble, to the audiences I have been examining throughout this story. While we can take any cultural object and read it queerly, turn it to our own purposes, these

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<sup>69</sup> For Cosmo Brown as coded gay man, see Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 76.

musical comedies, so seemingly different from each other, demonstrate the capacity of the form to speak to those whose genders, as performed, received, experienced, or some combination of those three, are comically open.

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I am writing this on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Yesterday, there was an election here in the United States, an iteration in the annual/biannual/quadrennial cycle that recurs and recurs as the quintessential carnival season.<sup>70</sup> This election, as he has done for the past seven years, Stephen Colbert involved himself heavily in the process, performing electoral comedy alongside his persistent performance of comic musicality, or musical comedy, a Bakhtinian clown *par excellence*. Countless political junkies and commentators, collectors in their own right, argued relentlessly over minute details of polls and averages, issues and candidates. Most of them, at least the ones on television and prominently situated on the internet, were straight men—including my uncle, the one I mentioned in chapter two, the one who collects Oz books.<sup>71</sup> The poll statistician with the most comprehensive knowledge of the data, who predicted the election’s outcome almost perfectly, was a gay Jewish man in New York City, ~~Lorenz Hart Leonard Bernstein Stephen Sondheim Fred Ebb Nathan Lane~~<sup>72</sup> Nate Silver, who was criticized by at least one conservative commentator for being “thin and effeminate,”<sup>73</sup> too much so to accurately assess presidential politics. In this election, the populations of four states voted on whether or not those states would/should/could allow two people of the same gender to marry each other.

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<sup>70</sup> Recalling once again Javert’s “Stars” in *Les Misérables*: “each in your season returns and returns/and is always the same.”

<sup>71</sup> Greg Dworkin, known on Twitter and on the political website Daily Kos as DemFromCT.

<sup>72</sup> Lane is not, in point of fact, Jewish, but has made a career of playing what my boyfriend would describe as “Jew...ish.”

<sup>73</sup> [http://www.examiner.com/article/the-far-left-turns-to-nate-silver-for-wisdom-on-the-polls?cid=db\\_articles](http://www.examiner.com/article/the-far-left-turns-to-nate-silver-for-wisdom-on-the-polls?cid=db_articles)

It is startling to see so many of the issues and people who star in my story starring simultaneously on the national (metaphorical) stage. This election was not, by any measure, about musical comedy. There were no referenda on Bakhtin or Sedgwick; Elaine Stritch did not run for president (although comedienne Roseanne Barr did). And yet, the story of the four ballot measures on gay marriage is another story about the position of queers, of the marginally gendered, in this country at this moment. In every past campaign revolving around queer visibility, viability, and citizenship, there has been one overwhelming argument that has won the day for the people who would keep us out of sight: what about the children? Astute observers will recognize that I use the word “argument” loosely here—this rhetorical question is nothing like an argument, but in the emotional world of gender and sexual difference, it has more force than any reasoned appeal.

In this election, for the first time, more than half of the voters who considered the question of whether queer people harm children concluded that we don’t. In every one of the four states assessing our humanity, our subjectivity, we were deemed to be people, rather than bogeymen. Despite the witch of *Into The Woods*’ widely accepted assertion that “children will listen,” many, many voters decided that that was okay, that when “children...look to you/for which way to turn,” you need not turn away from queerness. Gay and lesbian candidates won races, as did transgender and pansexual candidates, without hiding their orientations or gender identities. We arrived, as a nation, at the “Queer and Now” opening of Sedgwick’s *Tendencies*, at the proof of her claim that “something about *queer* is inextinguishable.”<sup>74</sup> It is difficult, in this moment of political victory, to refrain from triumphalism, from celebrating a history that is both Whig and Wig, the coronation of the drag queen.

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<sup>74</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii.

My corrective is to return once again to Bakhtin and to his “gay and free laughing aspect of the world,” pun entirely intended.<sup>75</sup> There is no conclusion that can wrap up this story of political triumph, nor my story of musical comedy and gendered identity; conclusion is hostile to the “unfinished and open character”<sup>76</sup> of these carnivals. Political victory does not spell the end of musical comedy’s necessity. Children will teach themselves gendered behavior with it, even when the gendered behavior they learn there can just as easily be learned elsewhere. Queerness is not a majority perspective, and the delight some of us take in flouting conventions remains even when the gender and musical conventions we flout shift and change. Even as collectors seem to be coming into our own, when nerd culture is celebrated in Hollywood comic book films, political data-driven analysis, and the vast proliferation of fantasy/science fiction/horror television, we will always find objects to collect that aren’t what everyone else is collecting—musicals scholars will always find another obscure diva to unearth, another archive of composers’ letters to read through and imagine ourselves writing.

Mikhail Bakhtin ends with “thus no new artistic genre ever nullifies or replaces old ones. But...promotes their renewal and enrichment.”<sup>77</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum ends with Harpo’s butt and with a polished chestnut.<sup>78</sup> Stacy Wolf ends as Momma Rose begins: “Sing out, Louise,”<sup>79</sup> a death-and-birth combination that evokes queer diva figures dear to D. A. Miller. Scholars have their own ways of ending things, but so do musical comedies. Ben Bagley liked to end with silly medleys, pivoting from song to song on a word or a syllable that they had in common. In a Gilbert and

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<sup>75</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 83.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 271.

<sup>78</sup> Koestenbaum, *Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, 298-299.

<sup>79</sup> Wolf, *Problem Like Maria*, 238 and Laurents, *Gypsy*, 3.

Sullivan operetta, the second act finale is usually just a quick tour through some of the more upbeat songs after a “conclusion” that defies believability and, seemingly, relevance. In the words of one version of Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*, quod erat demonstrandum.

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