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Just for Fun?: The Politics of Representation and Critical Education in High School Musical Theater

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Abstract: Musical theater engages norms, ideas, and representations of identity in an ever-changing America. Millions of students, teachers, and audiences engage with high school shows each year. While more ‘serious,’ issues-driven shows often directly address socio-political themes and identities, the widely-produced, contemporary canon of high school musicals most often features fantastical romantic comedies—shows which are considered to be apolitical, family-friendly, and ‘fluffy.’ I interrogate this assumption of playful neutrality through my perspective as a musical theater writer by employing critically examining the ‘politics of representation’: how ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are subliminally circulated through the content, narrative structures, and storytelling techniques of musical theater. My analysis fills a significant gap in theater scholarship by considering *The Addams Family*, *Seussical*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Little Shop of Horrors*—some of the most frequently-performed high school musicals of the 2010s. Finally, I discuss critical educational interventions that allow high school theater educators and students to increase their awareness of the ‘politics of representation’ in order to more intentionally select, engage with, and create musical theater.

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Abstract

Musical theater engages norms, ideas, and representations of identity in an ever-changing America. Millions of students, teachers, and audiences engage with high school shows each year. While more ‘serious,’ issues-driven shows often directly address socio-political themes and identities, the widely-produced, contemporary canon of high school musicals most often features fantastical romantic comedies—shows which are considered to be apolitical, family-friendly, and ‘fluffy.’ I interrogate this assumption of playful neutrality through my perspective as a musical theater writer by employing critically examining the ‘politics of representation’: how ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are subliminally circulated through the content, narrative structures, and storytelling techniques of musical theater. My analysis fills a significant gap in theater scholarship by considering *The Addams Family*, *Seussical*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Little Shop of Horrors*—some of the most frequently-performed high school musicals of the 2010s. Finally, I discuss critical educational interventions that allow high school theater educators and students to increase their awareness of the ‘politics of representation’ in order to more intentionally select, engage with, and create musical theater.

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Introduction

Musical theater is one of America's most significant and cherished cultural touchstones. An interdisciplinary, collaborative, and uniquely "popular" art form, the musical reflects America's ever-changing identity, incorporating a diversity of performance traditions and stories—all while sustaining a historical canon of shows. Renewed interest and participation in musicals has erupted during the 21st century, largely stemming from the popularity of TV shows (e.g. *Glee*, live filmed productions such as *Grease* and *The Wiz*), the commercial success of movie musicals (e.g. *High School Musical*, *Hairspray*, *Mamma Mia!*), the massive accessibility of YouTube, and the monumental cross-cultural influence of iconic *Hamilton* (Wolf, 2019).¹ Indeed, the reach of musical theater (MT) is massive: during the 2018-2019 season, over 33 million people saw a Broadway musical or national tour production, collectively generating over three billion dollars in revenue.²

The "lifeblood" of MT flows at the local level. Exposure to and participation in amateur theater—through schools, community theaters, summer programs, and more—cultivates the future artists and audiences of Broadway.³ Licensing companies earn half of their gross through non-Equity and amateur licensing, allowing flops to recoup their investment through years of school productions.⁴ On Broadway and in schools, musicals tend to draw larger revenues and audiences than plays. Exposure is widespread: the Educational Theatre Association's 2019-2020 High School Play Survey—which includes musicals—extrapolated that a national audience of

¹ Stacy Wolf, *Beyond Broadway: The Pleasure and Promise of Musical Theatre Across America* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

² "Broadway Facts" (The Broadway League Research Department, June 2, 2020); "Touring Broadway Facts" (The Broadway League Research Department, August 27, 2020).

³ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

over 49 million would have attended high school shows this year absent the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ That number, consistent with data from the past three years, is roughly equal to the combined audience of Broadway touring companies and regional theatres. According to the President of iTheatrics, a “company that develops short adaptations of Broadway musicals for kids,” the vast majority of Americans’ ‘Broadway experience’ “takes place in school theaters, community theaters and regional theaters...in inner-city schools, suburban schools and rural schools. These folks...have a great time putting on a musical for their community.”⁶

The most popular high school musicals are those thought to be apolitical, family-friendly, and ‘just for fun.’ Based on annual rankings by EdTA, the top ten most produced high school musicals in the 2019-2020 school season were (in order): *The Addams Family*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Into the Woods*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Seussical*, *Little Shop of Horrors (tie)*, *Matilda (tie)*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Cinderella*.⁷ Notably, the six most-produced shows of the 2010s are shared with this list. The majority of these are a sort of romantic-comedy ‘wonder tale’: a fable, similar to a fairy tale, which Thompson describes as “mov[ing] in an unreal world without definite locality or definite creatures and is filled with the marvelous” or is some sort of speculative fiction “based on classic and/or historical cultural narratives.”⁸ Even shows which take place in more ‘real’ versions of society (e.g. *Little Shop*, *Matilda*, *Mamma Mia!*) contain elements of magic and/or take place in a fantastical version of reality. Although fantasy and comedy are not mutually exclusive to socially-conscious theater, these particular shows—written

⁵ EdTA News, “2020 Play Survey,” Blog, July 30, 2020, <https://www.schooltheatre.org/blogs/edta-news/2020/07/30/2020-play-survey>.

⁶ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 5.

⁷ Elissa Nadworny, “The Most Popular High School Plays And Musicals,” NPR.org, June 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2019/07/31/427138970/the-most-popular-high-school-plays-and-musicals>.

⁸ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (University of California Press, 1977), quoted in Farrell, Kate. “What Is a Wonder Tale?” March 14, 2016. <https://katefarrell.net/wonder-tale/>.

by white people and, except for three of the thirty credited artists, men—often appear to avoid overt commentary on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other potentially controversial themes of identity. For many students, educators, and community members, they represent a ‘safe’ choice: a musical that doesn’t offend or annoy too many people, appeals to a sense of rosy nostalgia, comfortably communicates an easy moral, and sends you home with a lovely song stuck in your head and a smile on your face.

Yet MT is “one of America’s most powerful, influential, and even at times polemical arts precisely because it often seems to be about nothing at all.”⁹ These ‘apolitical’ pieces are shaped by a history, industry, and culture that is deeply ingrained in sociopolitical contexts and suffused with ideologies of power, history, and identity—more specifically, those which uphold racism and sexism. The choice of which stories to tell, how those stories are told, and which stories are excluded speaks to the priorities and power structures of MT. To say that a show doesn’t engage in social issues or dimensions of identities because those elements are not explicitly commented upon is “one of the grossest misreadings of musicals.”¹⁰ While these shows may not explicitly comment on overtly socio-political content and themes, the narrative structures and storytelling mechanisms they employ (i.e. the ways that a show tells its story) interact with concepts of identity, power, and history to influence how their stories affirm and/or subvert ideas about how things ‘ought to be.’ Engaging this idea—the ‘politics of representation’—forms the basis of my analytical approach and reflexive critical pedagogy. In my research, I reveal how racist, patriarchal, sexist, and heterosexist ideologies both are transmitted through and directly shape the

⁹ Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick, United States: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

politics of representation in five musicals of the high school canon, imparting ideas about the ‘proper’ social order to our hierarchical society.

The spectacular artifice of MT—its escapist, campy pleasures of epic emotions, larger-than-life characters, and suddenly breaking into song and dance—gives the art form a delightful, beguiling sheen that masks its political messaging. The musical “sings, dances, and performs its politics in plain sight, but we the audience are so mesmerized by the spectacle that a show’s social context and ideologies may become difficult to see.”¹¹ When show elements are deemed problematic, one might point to the show’s other redeeming virtues, insist on benevolent intent, and/or dismiss the criticism for ruining the fun; sure, “Kiss the Girl” can be interpreted as misogynistic and dismissive of consent, but who can resist singing along to those “sha la la’s”?

Moreover, the historic positioning of arts education in America as ‘extracurricular’ has tended to emphasize a “pedagogy of performance”—one in which students engage with MT through socioemotional learning and honing their creative craft—rather than research, critical dramaturgy, and student-devised work.¹² But students should engage more fully, deeply, and critically with MT, no matter how ‘neutral’ or silly its content appears to be. “Theater can be more,” argues arts administrator and advocate Howard Sherman, when students acknowledge and struggle with the political intricacies of the shows they perform.¹³ In highlighting the politics of representation in the most popular, seemingly neutral, and surface-level “fun” musicals and encouraging critical education, we can more intentionally select, engage with, and create MT.

¹¹ Ibid, 3.

¹² Heather Cousins, “Upholding Mainstream Culture: The Tradition of the American High School Play,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 85–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/135697800114212>.

¹³ Howard Sherman, “Keynote: School Theatre Can Be More,” Howard Sherman (blog), October 18, 2017, <http://www.hesherman.com/2017/10/18/keynote-school-theatre-can-be-more/>.

Background

A Bit of Historical Context

Most popular high school musicals appear to be ‘diversionary’—“nice, clean, safe, moralistic, evasive of painful issues, and primarily entertaining”—rather than ‘issues-driven’—focusing on ‘serious’ social issues, dimensions of identity, and specific cultural contexts.¹⁴ Yet these apolitical shows are products of a distinctly American art form shaped by the forces of history, power, and identity. Musicals are “America’s mythology, a chronicle not just of America’s times, people, and events, but even more of America’s dreams, legends, national mood, politics, and its extraordinary muscle and resilience.”¹⁵ The multicultural roots of MT draw from traditions such as vaudeville, minstrelsy, and European opera, each suffused with ideologies about identity.¹⁶ For example, Knapp argues that blackface and minstrelsy—popularly performed through the beginning of the 20th century—served “to reassure white audiences that the social order in America was just, and that blacks on the whole did not deserve better than they had.”¹⁷ Indeed, MT “typically run[s] parallel to contemporary societal developments, whether by engaging with emerging ideas and attitudes (either negatively or positively) or by attempting to advance alternatives more aggressively, through bringing them out in the open

¹⁴ John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003).; Liora Bresler, Judith Davidson Wasser, and Nancy Hertzog, “Casey at the Bat: A Hybrid Genre of Two Worlds,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 2, no. 1 (March 1997): 87–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356978970020106>.

¹⁵ Scott Miller, *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre* (Pearson Education, 2007).

¹⁶ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Len Platt and David Walsh, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003).

¹⁷ Knapp, *National Identity*, 10.

within a mainstream venue of demonstrated persuasive power.”¹⁸ The commercial history of Broadway in the late 60s/early 70s—*Hair*, *Pippin*, *Godspell*—matched the rise of American counterculture movements.¹⁹ One can assess how Dreamworks’ *Shrek: The Musical* links the commercial branding of diversity to the neoliberal branding of the Obama presidency.²⁰ *Hamilton*’s diverse casting of people of color as founding fathers (re)defines cultural memory, simultaneously promoting “current liberal ideas of diversity and inclusivity” while upholding “the construction of whiteness and masculinity as unmarked categories that have always dominated US culture,” all with potent effects on young consumers’ national and ethnic identification.²¹ MT continuously defines—and is defined by—America.

Not everyone’s America, however. Despite the historical contributions of female and artists of color to MT,²² the canon, industry, and history of MT has largely been defined and controlled by educated white men. Broadway provided opportunities for immigrant groups, especially Jews, to assimilate their ethnic identities into American whiteness, passing through a ‘cultural Ellis Island’ to achieve commercial and creative success.²³ Still, a hegemony of straight,

¹⁸ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 205.

¹⁹ Grace Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage : The Role of Women in Musical Theatre* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015), 45.

²⁰ Jessica Brater et al., “‘Let Our Freak Flags Fly’: Shrek the Musical and the Branding of Diversity,” *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 151–72, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.0.0351>.

²¹ Elissa Harbert, “Embodying History: Casting and Cultural Memory in 1776 and Hamilton,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2019), 251, https://doi.org/10.1386/smt_00004_1.; Leslie Jennings Rowley, “Let Me Be a Part of the Narrative: Effects of Exposure to Musical Theater Production Hamilton on Adolescent National Identity” (Ph.D., United States -- California, Fielding Graduate University, 2018), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2051185828/abstract/2A2FC546C0346EBPQ/1>.

²² E.g. Bud Coleman, Bertram E. Coleman, and Judith A. Sebesta, *Women in American Musical Theatre: Essays on Composers, Lyricists, Librettists, Arrangers, Choreographers, Designers, Directors, Producers and Performance Artists* (McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2008).; Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011).; Stewart F. Lane, *Black Broadway: African Americans on the Great White Way* (Square One Publishers, 2015).; Allen L. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Louisiana State University Press, 1989).; Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, José, *Can You See?: Latinos on and Off Broadway* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

²³ Stuart J. Hecht, *Transposing Broadway* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001740>.

white maleness granted access and recognition to the ‘dominant’ group and limited opportunities for people identifying as POC, LGBTQ+, and female/nonbinary, meaning that, racially and otherwise, “the history of the American musical, like any other American institution...is a history of segregation.”²⁴ The work of white male creatives continues to dominate the MT canon and industry to this day.²⁵ Thus, although Knapp envisions MT as being “connected in vital ways to [its] American constituency, with a connection more reinforced than undermined by [its] collaborative and broadly democratic participatory basis,” one might question the reality of his assertion, given that a limited number of artists from a homogenous ingroup hold disproportionate sway; in fact, three of the top-10 most-produced musicals (*Little Shop, Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid*) were written by the same creative team (Alan Menken and Howard Ashman).²⁶ The top-10 most-produced shows of the 2019-2020 high school canon were written by white people, with only three of the thirty credited artists identifying as women. Thus, even though these shows appear to be ‘fluffy’ and apolitical, they are steeped in historical and current power dynamics about identity. What might be the implications?

The ‘Politics of Representation’

To draw on John Bush Jones’ conceptual labels, ‘issues-driven’ musicals thrust their sociopolitical content to the narrative forefront, located in a specific cultural context and/or made saliently ‘political’ (here defined as “pertaining to ideologies of identity, historical hierarchies, and the control of power and resources”). ‘Diversionary’ musicals, on the other hand, tend to be fun, fantastical romantic comedies which take a more subliminal and structural approach to

²⁴ Robin Breon, “Show Boat: The Revival, the Racism.,” *Drama Review*. 39, no. 2 (1995), 91.

²⁵ “The Visibility Report: Racial Representation on NYC Stages (2017-2018)” (AAPAC, 2018); Sean Patrick Henry, “Broadway By The Numbers 2019,” *ProductionPro*, *Broadway By The Numbers* (blog), accessed November 7, 2020, <https://production.pro/broadway-by-the-numbers>.

²⁶ Knapp, *National Identity*, 4.

‘political’ content. This allows their ideologies to subtly circulate without raising flags. If anything, the stereotypic characterization of ‘diversionary’ musicals—as fun and ‘unserious’ escapes from the real world with “nothing profound to offer”—is precisely “the cover that serves to mask [their] more complicated and even insidious political views.”²⁷

Instead of looking for explicit content, then, one must look beneath the surface. The ‘politics of representation’ asserts that the ways that shows are written are themselves political choices. This approach considers how characterization, story, relationships, arcs, character descriptions, musical styles, agency, complexity, morals, and other storytelling mechanisms perpetuate ideas about identity and power, while affirming, disrupting, and/or directly engaging historical hierarchies. The ‘politics of representation’ have been working steadily throughout historical MT conventions, from ethnic dialects to orientalism to heterosexism to marriage plots and beyond. The subtlety of the ‘politics of representation’ to peddle mainstream, hegemonic perspectives helps to explain inherent contradictions within the MT tradition—like how so many shows perpetuate regressive, sexist depictions of women for a predominantly female audience and performer pool, or how a preponderance of gay writers write predominantly heterosexist narratives.

Thus, it may be worth reconsidering the ways that ‘diversionary musicals’ operate subtly as ‘issues-driven’ musicals, and that they are more ‘serious’ than they let on. There is indeed a rich and growing tradition of explicit political engagement within MT, and high schools sometimes produce these ‘edgier’ shows—though likely not as frequently as ‘diversionary’ ones. Most importantly: I’m investigating the most frequently-produced shows of the high school MT canon because they’re 1. Very popular 2. Likely quite politically-charged, 3. Learned, consumed,

²⁷ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 3, 5.

and reproduced/performed by millions of adolescents in a sensitive period of psychological self-development, and 4. Have received little scholarly attention.

In investigating first how shows are selected, we can better understand the mechanisms and context which both shape *and* obscure the politics of representation.

The Purpose and Practice of MT

Since its release by Theatrical Rights Worldwide in 2014, *The Addams Family* was the most produced high school musical in America for the following three years. Steve Spiegel, the President of the licensing company, explained its popularity: “the cleverness of the script, the number of major roles for women and the familiarity of the characters. And, in dealing with acceptance and tolerance, it brings forward a wonderful message that is universal and appreciated by all ages.”²⁸ His statement encapsulates how most theater educators pick shows, and consequently, what the purpose and practice of high school MT is in America.

The EdTA’s Survey of Theatre Education in United States High Schools, 2011-2012 asked its 1200 respondents to rank their most important factors when selecting a play. From most- to least-relevant, they listed: quality of the script, cast size, gender breakdown, available student talent, whether it was ‘appropriate’ for ‘student understanding,’ approval by school administrators/local community, and, finally, the potential to teach about the power of theatre or social issues.²⁹ Stacy Wolf—in her intensive ethnographic investigation of American amateur theater, including in high schools—similarly agrees. So did the five theater teachers I interviewed, who added the importance of student enthusiasm and turning a profit.

²⁸ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 104.

²⁹ Matt Omasta, “Special Issue: Survey of Theatre Education in United States High Schools, 2011-2012,” *Teaching Theatre* (Educational Theatre Association, October 1, 2012).

However: who is school theater for? Although the answer varies by circumstance, one can envision two poles of the spectrum. An advocate for boundary-pushing arts education, Howard Sherman imagines a hierarchy of priority that privileges the “students who choose to do it,” followed by “other students in the school,” “parents,” “siblings and extended family,” and finally the “community at large.”³⁰ In placing the community last, Sherman claims: “those who have no stake shouldn’t drive the educational priorities of theatre. School theatre shouldn’t be looked at as a public relations tool with which to entertain the community at large, since doing so diminishes the focus on the students themselves.”

Yet, as Stacy Wolf cautions, “in selecting high school musicals, educators must consider both the educational needs of their students and the entertainment desires of audience members from a variety of age groups and belief systems. As community-wide gatherings, musicals catalyze conversations and controversies about what material can and should be presented on the high school stage.”³¹ Though this might seem more relevant to ‘edgy’ shows that provoke visible outrage, it’s essential to consider any high school production—and its associated subtle ideologies—as a form of civic engagement. Especially as community members and show performers know each other, the interactions of those relationships with the messages, norms, and performance qualities of MT can be seen as sites for public discourse, “posing questions to the community about who is valued, and who is visible.”³²

Thus, high school MT is a site of cultural norm negotiation between the passions of a younger generation and the traditions of older stakeholders. This is evident in the unique

³⁰ Sherman, “Keynote.”

³¹ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 9.

³² Jennifer Chapman, “Knowing Your Audience,” *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, November 4, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195385946.013.0029>.

relationship between the Broadway and Educational domains and the influence of nostalgia on canonization.

The Broadway-School Relationship

Broadway is more than a cultural and commercial hub; it's a place, brand, and price.³³ While shows adapt to please both local, educated liberal elites and widespread tourists that form their audiences, it's the spirit of NYC that becomes the "cultural center" of the American musical. Chapman argues that "musical theater histories tend toward an unreflecting and often unconscious focus on Broadway, neglecting national tours and alternative centers of musical theater production."³⁴ Yet, when it comes to educational MT, the cultural and critical values of Broadway do not reliably track as shows propagate to schools across the country. For example, reviews, "especially from the influential *New York Times*, offer a subjective assessment that often became the historically accepted interpretation and judgement of the show."³⁵ Yet, a number of the most popular members of the high school MT (e.g., *Into the Woods*, *Seussical*, *Mamma Mia*) were originally panned on Broadway but have achieved runaway success in the educational domain. The *New York Times* even attempted to explain this seemingly anomalous afterlife: "'The Addams Family' Musical Was Panned. Then It Became a Hit."³⁶ "Show-tune-crazed students across the country, it is clear, have their own opinions," wrote former *NYT* critic Charles Isherwood.³⁷

³³ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*.

³⁴ Chapman, "Knowing Your Audience."

³⁵ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.

³⁶ Laura Collins-Hughes, "'The Addams Family' Musical Was Panned. Then It Became a Hit.," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2020, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/theater/addams-family-musical-history.html>.

³⁷ Charles Isherwood, "Talk About Your Spring Awakening (Published 2008)," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2008, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/theater/13ishe.html>.

Perhaps that might explain the popularity of family-friendly Disney musicals like *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, which were derided as unartistic corporate shlock in NYC but consistently top the lists of most-produced high school shows.³⁸ These days, Broadway producers have a financial incentive to develop shows for widespread school production; “we can reduce shows down, make them singable, make them producible, and make it possible,” says Thomas Schumacher, president of Disney Theatrical Productions.³⁹ Yet just because a musical is geared toward younger generations does not mean that its political ideologies will be progressive. While Disney may have been regarded—by some—as empowering and subversive (e.g., for female characters) at the time of production, its responsible for peddling regressive ideas about gender, race, and for promoting relentlessly heterosexist narratives. It’s likely that many of the problematic representations of MT are a symptom of commercial interests promoting “risk free” shows with mainstream ideologies that present familiar, comfortable, and entertaining tropes to (often older) audiences.⁴⁰ Even if young people attend shows, it’s the parents who pay for the tickets.

‘Nostalgia’

As such, due to economic control, title recognition, and the promise of “well-delineated, memorable characters,” the majority of commercial musicals—and the popular canon of high school shows—are vehicles of nostalgia and brand recognition.⁴¹ Nearly all of the top 10 most-

³⁸ Nadworny, “The Most Popular High School Plays And Musicals.”

³⁹ Ruthie Fierberg, “How Disney Shows Are Changing the Landscape of the American Musical Theatre,” Playbill, August 10, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/article/how-disney-shows-are-changing-the-landscape-of-the-american-musical-theatre>.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth L. Wollman, “The Economic Development of the ‘New’ Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical,” *American Music*, Winter 2002, 445–65.

⁴¹ Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubin, “‘Telling the Tale’: Adaptation as Interpretation,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2015), 4. https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.9.1.3_2.

produced shows of the 2019-2020—*The Addams Family*, *Mamma Mia*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Into the Woods*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Seussical*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Matilda (2010)*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Cinderella*—are adaptations of historic mainstream source material, from popular music to children’s books to TV cartoons to fairy tales.⁴² Each is a (romantic) comedy and/or fantastical wonder tale. Audiences can more easily trust a “consumer-tested and familiar brand.”⁴³ Older audiences in particular: while the average age of Broadway audiences has floated between 40 and 45 for the past two decades, the average age of those attending touring productions is in the mid-50s, suggesting that the audience of high school shows are even older than those of Broadway and thus might desire something even more nostalgic and conservative.⁴⁴

While MT should theoretically promote narratives that “typically run parallel to contemporary societal developments, whether by engaging with emerging ideas and attitudes (either negatively or positively) or by attempting to advance alternatives more aggressively,” the average year of the currently licensed version of the top-10 most-produced high school musicals of the 2019-2020 season was two decades ago.⁴⁵ This chronological and cultural lag isn’t new: Starting in the 1960s, the average distance from the original year of production of the most popular-produced high school shows of each decade has ranged from 15 to 35 years.⁴⁶ Ironically, it would seem that high school MT has been consistently ‘stuck in the past,’ with shows written

⁴² Nadworny, “The Most Popular High School Plays And Musicals.”

⁴³ David Savran, “Class and Culture,” *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, November 4, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195385946.013.0018>.

⁴⁴ The Broadway League Research Department, “Broadway Facts,” “Touring Broadway Facts.”

⁴⁵ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 205. As for the calculation: *Matilda (2010)*, *Seussical (2000)*, and *Beauty and the Beast (1993)*, *Into the Woods (1989)*, and *Mamma Mia (1998)*. While *Little Shop* premiered on Broadway in 2003, its canonical **1982** off-Broadway run is the licensed version. Though the movie of *The Wizard of Oz* premiered in 1940, the licensed stage version was first performed in **1987**. For the 2010s and year 2020, the most licensed version of *Cinderella* was the heavily rewritten **2013** Broadway revival. While *The Little Mermaid* premiered on Broadway in 1987, its substantially revised regional/amateur version was finalized in **2011**. Though *The Addams Family* premiered on Broadway in 2011, the revised version for national tours and high school licensing was published in **2013**.

⁴⁶ Nadworny, “The Most Popular High School Plays And Musicals.”

during and for a ‘different time’; for example, *Beauty and the Beast* book writer Linda Woolverton sought to create a “woman of the 90s” in Belle.⁴⁷ But to say that the conservative racial and gender politics which pervade many of the shows simply reflects the general ‘ethos’ of older eras—which would suggest that there is some ‘objective’ history of generalized attitudes—is not accurate. To be specific, it’s a reflection of the constructed ideologies of dominant society members which have been inherited, accepted, reproduced, and implicitly endorsed by the shows’ writers, producers (i.e., both mostly white, educated men who lived and worked in NYC), performers, audiences, and—most relevantly—school populations. Whether or not the authors intended to convey controversial, political messages through their shows, it may be that they didn’t intend to craft and perpetuate problematic representations. That these liberal-minded, ‘well-meaning’ stories—with their fun comedy and uplifting, inspirational messages—peddle such politically fraught, racially-coded, and aggressively problematic representations makes the art all the more complex, multilayered, and worthy of study.

As a disclaimer, solely meting out judgements of problematic representations in older shows could be seen as engaging in “historical presentism,” a practice vehemently avoided by historians whereby one “applies contemporary moral judgments and worldviews to those of the past.”⁴⁸ At an extreme, it can lead to “moral complacency and self-congratulation,” because the past can never seem to live up to present-day standards.⁴⁹ Given the gradual diversification of representation within power structures—and the reshaping of power structures themselves—the notion of what is authoritatively ‘politically correct’ (in the sense of how power and resources

⁴⁷ Elaine Dutka, “Ms. *Beauty and the Beast* : Writer of Disney Hit Explains Her ‘Woman of the ‘90s,’” *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-01-19-ca-544-story.html>.

⁴⁸ Paul Bartow, “The Growing Threat of Historical Presentism,” *American Enterprise Institute - AEI* (blog), December 10, 2015, <https://www.aei.org/society-and-culture/the-growing-threat-of-historical-presentism/>.

⁴⁹ Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism | Perspectives on History | AHA,” *Perspectives on History*, May 1, 2002, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>.

flow to legitimate the normative, ‘legal,’ and ‘right’ in society) will change, potentially in ways that empower marginalized opinions and deconstruct systems of oppression. In response, historian Lynn Hunt recommends “maintaining a fruitful tension between present concerns and respect for the past.” But these aren’t pieces of history or myth. They’re currently performed stories. “Within our societies there are patterns of responding that appear ‘natural’” write Taylor & Symonds. “It is not until they are problematized by the reflection from another culture”—or through diverse, empowered perspectives “that our own prejudices are revealed.” Thus, “we must continually challenge how our own representations of others might be perceived and what that might say about us.”⁵⁰

The fact that most of these stage musicals have received scant scholarly attention yet are taught, performed, and consumed in thousands of educational institutions by millions of Americans every year—especially our nation’s young adults—merits critical review. Critical inquiry and pedagogy are powerful tools and helpful ways to begin.

Narrative Literature Review

Nearly all MT history and critical analysis literature focuses on Broadway shows that are characterized as being some combination of the following: 1. Commercially successful, 2. Directly engaging with socio-political issues (e.g., dimensions of identity) and/or occurring in a specific culture context, and 3. A critically acclaimed display of ‘craft’/artistic innovation. In attending to more ‘serious’ shows, scholars tend to neglect flops (i.e., a lack of commercial and/or perceived artistry), ‘fluffy’ shows, jukebox musicals (e.g., featuring scores of well-known

⁵⁰ Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre : Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 95-96.

songs, often by a specific artist, rather than original music), musicals backed by a massive corporate entity (e.g., Disney, DreamWorks), and ‘family-friendly’ shows. Yet those shows comprise the bulk of American high school MT; *Mamma Mia!* was the second most licensed musical of the 2019-2020 school year, right behind *The Addams Family*, whose Broadway production was panned by critics.⁵¹ My analysis seeks to address this gap within the MT literature, specifically through a critical examination of how ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality directly shape and are transmitted by the ‘politics of representation’ in high school musicals.

Standard MT histories catalogue large swaths of shows and contextualize them within cultural, artistic, and social trends.⁵² Others take a more targeted approach, examining how significant musicals engage specific dimensions of national and personal identity.⁵³ However, this writing again favors ‘issues-driven’ musicals over ‘diversionary’ ones; in “Our Musical, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical,” Jones compiles “appendices [that] catalogue the most popular diversionary musicals by their periods in order to provide the broader musical theatre context for the socially conscious musicals I discuss.”⁵⁴ Additionally, both standard and targeted critical histories have not meaningfully been updated to engage contemporary shows; few texts cover Broadway musicals of the mid-to-late 2000s and early 2010s (for context, four of the 10 most-produced high school musicals of the 2019-2020 season premiered after 2007).

⁵¹ Collins-Hughes, “‘The Addams Family’ Musical Was Panned”; Ben Brantley, “Buh-Da-Da-Dum (Snap Snap),” *The New York Times*, April 8, 2010, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/09/theater/reviews/09addams.html>.

⁵² E.g. Walsh & Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture*; Jones, *Our musicals, ourselves*.

⁵³ E.g. Knapp, *Personal Identity, National Identity*; Wolf, *Changed For Good*; Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*; Lane, *Black Broadway*; Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage*; Elizabeth Titrington Craft, “Becoming American Onstage: Broadway Narratives of Immigrant Experiences in the United States,” June 6, 2014, <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/12274310>.

⁵⁴ Jones, *Our musicals, ourselves*, 2.

Despite considerable scholarship on Disney princess films,⁵⁵ far less attention has been paid to their stage adaptations—and the process of adaptation itself.⁵⁶ These theatrical versions go beyond simple reproductions, adding songs, tweaking narrative structure, and aiming to bring complex inner lives and relationships to formerly ‘two-dimensional’ characters.⁵⁷

Critical frameworks from adjacent disciplines—cultural studies, literary analysis—often touch upon entertainment media, identity, and narrative structure.⁵⁸ However, MT literature that employs cultural analysis and critical theory (e.g. critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory) again tends to focus on specific ‘serious’ shows that directly and frequently engage themes of identity,⁵⁹ once again neglecting ‘apolitical’ and ‘fantastical’ shows.⁶⁰ However, some

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Linda Coates, Shelly Bonnah, and Cathy Richardson, “Beauty and the Beast: Misrepresentation and Social Responses in Fairy-tale Romance and Redemption,” *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 14, 2019): 119–37, <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs101201918809>; Allison Craven, “Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 9, no. 2 (May 2002): 123–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350682002009002806>; June Cummins, “Romancing the Plot: The Real Beast of Disney’s Beauty and the Beast,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1995): 22–28, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.0872>; Sharon D. Downey, “Feminine Empowerment in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 19, no. 2 (July 1996): 185–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.1996.11089812>; Susan Z. Swan, “Gothic Drama in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast: Subverting Traditional Romance by Transcending the Animal-human Paradox,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16, no. 3 (September 1999): 350–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039909367100>; Jaclyn Neuffer, “Part of a Man’s World: A Modern Feminist and Musical Perspective on The Little Mermaid,” ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (M.M., United States -- California, California State University, Long Beach, 2019), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2307396826/abstract/E98346AFAF184C72PQ/1>; Leland G. Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity in The Little Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney,” *Communication Studies* 65, no. 1 (January 2014): 112–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.832691>; Rebecca-Anne C Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 34–59.

⁵⁶ George Rodosthenous, “Introduction,” in *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from “Snow White” to “Frozen”* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 1–14, <http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com.yale.idm.oclc.org/doall/encyclopedia-chapter>.

⁵⁷ Michael Lassell, *The Little Mermaid: From the Deep Blue Sea to the Great White Way* (Disney Editions, 2008); Michael Lassell, ed., “Disney’s Beauty and the Beast,” in *Disney on Broadway* (A Disney Theatrical Souvenir Book), 1st ed. (Disney Editions, 2002), 16–57.

⁵⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (Routledge, 1997).; Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315724843>; Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, c1988).

⁵⁹ For example, a scholar examining the portrayal of Latino culture/identity might turn to *A Chorus Line*, *In The Heights* and *West Side Story* before *The Addams Family* and *Seussical*.

⁶⁰ E.g. Sandoval-Sánchez, José, *Can You See?*; Taylor & Symonds, *Studying musical theatre*; Sarah Whitfield, *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity* (Macmillan Education UK, 2019); Marc Jensen, “‘Feed Me!’: Power Struggles and the Portrayal of Race in ‘Little Shop of Horrors,’” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): 51–67, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0064>.

scholars aim at “confronting silences” within shows’ apparent apoliticism.⁶¹ For example, Hoffman takes a whiteness studies approach to examine both shows which explicitly engage nonwhite characters/stories and those which appear to not deal with race at all. These scholars argue that the perceived absence of identity-related social issues in shows constitutes a politicized disappearing act. Challenging a show’s perceived racelessness Hoffman argues that whiteness’ self-erasing power has enabled its ability to hegemonically shape the American MT tradition.

It’s worth noting that despite its supporting scholarship, Hoffman’s argument is a commonly accepted idea (especially for devoted producers and consumers of MT) and was, for one book reviewer in 2014, an ”unremarkable” articulation.⁶² Additionally, in response to the book’s 2020 reissue, one critic pointed to increases in diverse representation and dialogues about racism within the MT community as rendering Hoffman’s second edition an “overdose” of “woke supremacy.”⁶³ Yet despite some industry-wide improvements, progress toward inclusion and equity has materialized onstage far more than offstage, and substantial systemic disparities are still prominent.⁶⁴ The same trends might be said of American (arts) education. Moreover, if anything is to be gleaned from the recent controversy over Dr. Seuss’ anti-Asian caricatures, a

⁶¹ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*; Most, *Making Americans*; Carol J Oja, “West Side Story and The Music Man: Whiteness, Immigration, and Race in the US during the Late 1950s,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3, no. 1 (August 1, 2009): 13–30, https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.3.1.13_1.

⁶² Zachary A Dorsey, “The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical by Warren Hoffman (Review),” *Theatre Topics* 24, no. 2 (June 2014): 165.

⁶³ Jonathan Mandell, “The Great White Way. A Book of Woke Supremacy about Broadway’s White Supremacy,” *New York Theater*, February 20, 2020, <https://newyorktheater.me/2020/02/19/the-great-white-way-a-book-of-woke-supremacy-about-broadways-white-supremacy/>.

⁶⁴ AAPAC, “The Visibility Report,” Henry, “Broadway By The Numbers 2019”; Gordon Cox, “When Will Broadway’s Onstage Diversity Carry Over Behind the Curtain?,” *Variety*, 2015, <https://variety.com/2015/biz/features/broadway-diversity-behind-the-scenes-1201636823/>.

healthy critical awareness and reconsideration of identity and power within even the most beloved, fantastical, and innocuous artistic traditions is warranted.⁶⁵

Overall, the literature has not substantially applied critical, cultural, and historical analysis to the shows of the contemporary high school canon. This constitutes a massive research gap examining how issues of power, identity, and ideology manifest in these shows. Additionally, by excluding ‘diversionary’ shows from the historiography of MT’s development, scholars have painted these ‘unserious’ contemporary musicals as aberrations from proper theatrical evolution,⁶⁶ when in fact they must be understood as natural outgrowths—and powerful shaping forces—of the artistic conventions, financial priorities, and political ideologies of future mainstream MT. These ubiquitous shows are taught, performed, and consumed in tens of thousands of educational institutions by millions of Americans each year, particularly our nation’s developing adolescents. In striving to build critical consciousness and dream of meaningful, investigative learning through MT, it’s essential to find out: are these shows ‘just for fun’?

⁶⁵ Mark Pratt, “6 Dr. Seuss Books Won’t Be Published for Racist Images,” AP News, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/dr-seuss-books-racist-images-d8ed18335c03319d72f443594c174513>.

⁶⁶ “If you’re expecting a close reading of *Mamma Mia* or *Jersey Boys* at this point, I can happily say that I will be sparing you. Suffice it to say that these shows are nostalgic vehicles for pop music that, despite whatever accolades they might have garnered, are hardly making a lasting or indelible contribution to the canon of musical theater” (Hoffman 2014, 202).

Show Analysis

Methodology and Scope

Five shows were analyzed: *The Addams Family*, *Beauty and The Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Seussical*, and *Little Shop of Horrors*. These shows were selected from the top 10 most-produced high school musicals of the 2019-2020 season, based on survey data compiled by *Dramatics Magazine* and NPR. *Beauty and the Beast*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *The Addams Family*, and *Seussical* also appear in the top 10 most-produced shows of the 2010s. The analysis occasionally draws on other shows from the 2019-2020 list (e.g., *Matilda*, *Into the Woods*). The selection of shows and list itself are inherently limited given the scope of the thesis, breadth of survey respondents,⁶⁷ and restricted access to NPR's database. That said, these particular musicals are popular and relatively unexamined by scholars; additionally, this kind of historic nationwide data is the most comprehensive available.

The most up-to-date, licensable versions of the shows' librettos and original Broadway cast recordings were used for text and musical analysis. The critical approach draws from techniques across disciplines (e.g., critical race theory, whiteness studies, gender studies, MT history, and socio-cultural analyses of MT), which have been used to identify analytic frames, emergent themes, and lines of inquiry to use when researching shows. Additionally, the research

⁶⁷ The survey was sent to members of the Educational Theatre Association—which publishes *Dramatics* magazine—and comprised ~3,300 responding schools for the 2019-2020 school year (EdTA News 2020).

draws upon several types of sources (e.g., academic texts—journal articles, dissertations, theses, books; theater reviews; interviews with writers, directors, original cast members; blog posts; conversations with peers and high school educators involved with MT). A show’s source material and non-theatrical reproductions are occasionally considered to illuminate how prior versions, historical context, and adaptation strategies might influence its politics of representation. As for the writers themselves: while positionality, socio-political context of a show’s development, authorial intent, and one’s prior creative oeuvre may influence the politics of representation within and around a show, these factors are difficult to fairly and fully evaluate. As such, extrapolations are intended to be reasonable and relevant.

Some theater scholars (e.g., Wolf, Bringardner) take a performance studies approach, assessing works by considering multiple ‘texts’ beyond the libretto. Such a framework builds its analysis using “the cultural background and knowledge that an audience brings, the social and political setting in which the work is performed, and the myriad artistic choices made by director, actors, and other creative players.”⁶⁸ Although this holistic approach is helpful to capture the ‘total artwork’ of a musical, it’s not feasible nor logical for the scope and nature of this project. The “myriad artistic choices” (especially casting) of a production *may absolutely* influence the effects of a show’s politics of representation⁶⁹; however, while some high school productions might resemble each other and original, historic versions, these performance elements are more of a multidimensional variable than a known quantity. The only (theoretically) standardized independent variables are a show’s libretto and score, which schools are legally

⁶⁸ Rowley, “Let Me Be Part of the Narrative,” 29.

⁶⁹ E.g. Angela Chia-yi Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

obligated to perform.⁷⁰ These primary sources comprise the show’s genetic material and deal significantly in the politics of representation, and thus will be primarily considered.

The analysis focuses on the broad themes of Race & Ethnicity (Part 1) and Gender & Sexuality (Part 2). While there are other dimensions of identity present in these works (e.g., class, geopolitics⁷¹)—as well as intersectional dimensions of identity *between* the broad themes—the analysis will not focus on these. Future research should apply a more intersectional approach.

Feel free to locate a synopsis for each show, should the context be helpful.

Race & Ethnicity

1. Introduction: The Great White Way

For many high school theater departments with predominantly white casting pools, the ‘safer’ show selection to avoid controversy may be pieces which don’t explicitly engage a specific nonwhite/non-European cultural context and/or historical events related to identity.⁷² Whether or not this approach occurs, the reasoning behind it obscures a powerful paradox: the most prominent and least-talked-about racial identity in MT is whiteness. In “The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical,” Warren Hoffman establishes that, with few exceptions, the musical “is written by white people, for white people, and is about white people. From its

⁷⁰ However, educators will still alter licensed material.

⁷¹ See Chase A. Bringardner, “The Politics of Region and Nation in American Musicals,” *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, November 4, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195385946.013.0017>.

⁷² The spectrum of approaches and beliefs around this topic, however, is wide and geopolitically specific. See community responses to: Jared Grigsby, “When Shows Require Diversity but the School Is Not Diverse,” *Open Forum*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.schooltheatre.org/communities/community-home/digestviewer/viewthread?GroupId=133&MID=15389>.

creators to its consumers, the musical firmly reflects a white outlook on American life.”⁷³

Although its own history is built through intersections with performance traditions and popular music styles “that are infused with the cultural contributions of African Americans” (e.g. minstrelsy, vaudeville, ragtime, rock n’ roll), there has and continues to be a systemic lack of representation of Black and other POC creatives, performers, narratives, and audiences in mainstream MT.⁷⁴ During the 2017-2018 Broadway season white actors occupied almost two-thirds of all available roles—although musicals tend to be more inclusive than plays.⁷⁵ At a slight improvement to the all-white cadre of writers responsible for the contemporary high school MT canon, only six out of ten Broadway musicals in 2017-2018 had all-white creative teams, a trend consistent with the demographic breakdown of most new musical development programs.⁷⁶ Thus, as is still pertinent to today, “the history of the American musical is the history of white identity in the United States.”⁷⁷

The ability for whiteness to seemingly erase itself and establish the ‘universality’ of its unique lens endows it with a self-perpetuating power; as Toni Morrison writes, “The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act.”⁷⁸ Just as MT spectacularly appears to “hide nothing,” so too does “whiteness [mark] itself and its concomitant politics as invisible.”⁷⁹ In this way, whiteness is authoritative and authorial, but it writes reality under a pseudonym. Carol Oja compares the multiethnic world of *West Side Story* with the rural,

⁷³ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁵ AAPAC, “The Visibility Report.”

⁷⁶ Brett Ryback, “Race and the New Generation of Musical Theatre Writers,” August 3, 2015, <http://brettryback.com/2015/08/03/race-and-the-new-generation-of-musical-theatre-writers/>.

⁷⁷ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 3.

⁷⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 1993).

⁷⁹ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 9.

Midwestern, white world of *The Music Man*—both premiered on Broadway in 1957, and the latter won the Tony Award for Best Musical—and attempts to uncover any racial/racist attitudes held by *The Music Man*'s writer, Meredith Wilson. Despite discussing the racist history of barbershop music—a cherished hallmark of the show and a favored pastime for Wilson—she admits: “Suggesting this racialized interpretation means confronting silences.”⁸⁰ Despite a preponderance of cultural criticism on Latino identity in *West Side Story*⁸¹, “in the limited literature about *The Music Man*, race never enters the discussion, as can be the case with art or entertainment coded as white.”⁸²

Instead, nonwhite racial identities are rendered salient, totalized, and defined against whiteness. “As long as race is something only applied to nonwhite people,” writes Richard Dyer, “as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.”⁸³ Most scripts tend to denote the race of a character only when they are not white. In *West Side Story*, the white Jets never sing about their racial (and/or immigrant) identity, but the Puerto Rican Sharks have an entire number about it.⁸⁴ In the 2017-2018 NYC theater season, only 20% of all available roles were cast with BIPOC actors without regard to race—“either because they have been cast in traditionally White roles or have been cast when race is not germane to the role.”⁸⁵ Pulitzer Prize-winning MT writer Michael R. Jackson writes of the few production opportunities “for African-American musical theatre writers, particularly if their stories do not use whiteness (or racism, especially in historical terms)

⁸⁰ Oja, “West Side Story and The Music Man”, 19.

⁸¹ E.g. Sandoval-Sánchez, José, *Can You See?*; Susan Smith, *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance* (Wallflower Press, 2005);

⁸² Oja, “West Side Story and The Music Man”, 19.

⁸³ Dyer, *White*, 1.

⁸⁴ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 8.

⁸⁵ AAPAC, “The Visibility Report”, 15.

as a primary frame of reference”; their stories are usually then relegated to the “black slot” of an artistic season.⁸⁶ When considering how the following analysis predominantly focuses on Blackness and spends less time on whiteness, one should contemplate how that decision is both deliberate *and* a byproduct of MT’s engagement in the same racial project.⁸⁷

Representations of race and ethnicity are conveyed subliminally and disarmingly through these ambiguously fantastical wonder tales. The stories haphazardly ground themselves in clear geopolitical and historical contexts within which to make sense of race and ethnicity. Yet this selective commitment to ambiguity and fantasy

1. Masks the subliminal circulation of ideas and
2. Reveals how nonwhite racial and ethnic identities are defined, spectated, performed, and reproduced through the lens of whiteness. While the conventions of characterization for the following analyzed characters are not uncommon in terms of general MT supporting/feature parts in general, when compounded with race, power, and history, they manifest as retrograde stereotypes that erase nuance and render ‘ethnic’ identities antagonistic, foreign, and/or comical, all while promoting white-benefitting racial hierarchies through the storytelling mechanisms of the politics of representation.

2. Racial Coding, Agency, and Arcs

Based on how characters were written, originally performed, and historically or ‘conventionally’ cast, they may become ‘racially-coded’: their identities are associated with

⁸⁶ Jackson, “Unpacking ‘Diversity’ In Musical Theatre.”

⁸⁷ This racial project has also been perpetuated through techniques of MT historiography. MT history tends to focus on the evolution of “serious, integrated musicals”—a process whereby “the achievements of one generation of [white, male, educated] musical theatre writers gets ‘developed’ and progressed by the next” (Whitfield 2019, xiii). This in turn excludes and delegitimizes ‘nontraditional’ MT forms (e.g. minstrelsy, vaudeville, dance-theater pieces, reviews, all-Black casts, and other innovations by nonwhite artists), relegating the remaining creative work of Black writers, for example, “under the oversight of existing mainstream white control” (Knapp 2010, 2). Whitfield dubs this technique the “cool white guy narrative” of MT history, a process which “mak[es] certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline and others not even part” (Whitfield 2019, xiv; Ahmed 2013, quoted in Whitfield).

symbols (i.e., the ways they sound, look, and behave) which activate certain racial stereotypes, without necessarily explicitly ‘bringing up’ race. Thus, a non-Black person may still play a character who is Black-coded but not prescriptively ‘Black’; this phenomenon might make such characters—for better or for worse—more ‘accessible’ and ‘approachable’ for high school educators.⁸⁸ Musical theater’s ‘telescoping’ tendencies (i.e., the simplification of complex characters and narratives into easily digestible tropes and themes) and code systems may flatten the nuances of a character’s inner life into broad racial stereotypes. In *Little Shop of Horrors*, Audrey—famously played by white actress Ellen Greene—is described as a conglomeration of “Judy Holiday, Carol Channing, Marilyn Monroe, and Goldie Hawn,” four white movie stars with similar looks associated with whiteness: blonde hair, fair skin, and traits that fit Western beauty standards.⁸⁹ The voice of Audrey II is described as “street-smart”—associated with the Black, urban stereotype of the ‘inner city’—“a cross between Otis Redding, Barry White, and Wolfman Jack”—the former two being famous African-American singers—and conjuring a provocative “funky Rhythm and Blues” feel—both funk and R&B being historically Black music traditions.⁹⁰

Nonwhite-coded characters and characters of color in historic mainstream MT have been disproportionately written without the complex inner lives and rich narrative arcs of their white counterparts.⁹¹ For example, unless they’re the primary character of a story, nonwhite characters often don’t have “I Want” songs—staples of MT story structure in which a character shares

⁸⁸ In line with my lack of emphasis on a performance studies approach, my analysis is less concerned with literal racial representation (i.e. the racial makeup of the performers) than with representations of race within characters and narratives. However, the former is a pressing issue within the MT industry and art form, and is undeniably intertwined with the latter.

⁸⁹ Ashman, *Little Shop of Horrors*, (New York: Music Theatre International, 1982), 8.

⁹⁰ “Little Shop of Horrors,” Music Theatre International, September 16, 2015, <https://www.mtishows.com/little-shop-of-horrors>.

⁹¹ At least in predominantly white-created/curated/casted shows in professional, repertory and amateur-level canons.

their dreams and desires.⁹² The politics of (racial) representation may begin working before the first page of a libretto. Most character descriptions in *Seussical* detail motivations and personal qualities, going so far as to humanize antagonists: “He is not sadistic, mean or abusive. He is proud...”; “These are not the bad guys!”⁹³ Yet the Sour Kangaroo—a single mother and main antagonist who sings in Black musical traditions—receives this three-sentence blurb: “She isn't really sour at all. She's just got a lot of attitude. She's loud, brassy and a lot of fun.”⁹⁴ Not only is her character deprived of motivation, arc, or backstory, but the invocation of the ‘strong Black mother’ trope—along with the descriptors “lot of attitude” and “brassy”—flatten her character into a stereotypical ‘angry Black woman.’ She's got “a lot of attitude,” but about what? Given her iconically cruel treatment of Horton, why would she be “a lot of fun”? This latter description frames her identity perhaps through the lens of a nonwhite audience; someone else's ‘idea’ of a Black woman more than an actual Black female character (or frankly, a layered character at all).

“Better than a strong female character is an interesting one,” writes theater critic Amanda Hess, and the sentiment applies just as much to nonwhite roles.⁹⁵ Interesting characters tend to be complex and agentic, integrated within the plot to shape the story. Their story arcs and actions may occasionally serve the needs of others, but there's promise of self-development, too. Yet for Black or Black-coded characters—*especially* female ones—the opposite is often true. This denial of complexity, agency, nuance, and self-development *dehumanizes* nonwhite characters throughout MT. The Sour Kangaroo's arc is characterized by cartoonishly cruel behavior without clear motivation to explain her “attitude.” She consistently attempts to obstruct the journey and

⁹² Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 7.

⁹³ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, (New York: Music Theatre International, 2000), 2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Amanda Hess, “The Broadway Musical Has a Man Problem,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2019, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/theater/broadway-musicals-gender-politics.html>.

destroy the reputation of the protagonist: harassing Horton as the “biggest blame fool in the Jungle of Nool,” arresting him, and threatening to boil the Whos alive.⁹⁶ Yet when the Whos prove their existence, she immediately has a “change of heart and is slightly embarrassed.” She delivers her last line to Horton: “And, from now on, you know what I’m planning to do? (*with genuine sweetness*) From now on, I’m going to protect them with you!”⁹⁷ This antagonistic juggernaut drops her iconically cruel demeanor to actively support the characters she had aimed to destroy throughout the entire show; her arc pivots in service of the protagonist’s happy ending and the assurance of a neat moral cap for the piece.

Accordingly, Black-coded characters don’t tend to embody nuanced roles that span a diverse spectrum of characterization. Stuart Hall theorizes three dominant archetypes of Blackness within white narratives: the primitivized native, the slave figure, and the clownish entertainer.⁹⁸ Elements of each trope are present throughout MT, embodied in the HS canon by Shrek’s desperate, dutiful, comic sidekick Donkey (*Shrek*)⁹⁹ and Ariel’s chaperone and confidante Sebastian (*Little Mermaid*). This Trinidadian-accented crab has been historically played by Black performers¹⁰⁰ and is King Triton’s court composer (“entertainer”) and royal advisor, as well as Ariel’s chaperone under Triton’s oppressive command (“slave”). He’s an eternal servant, attempting to obey Triton and assist Ariel in her romantic journey—often failing at both. In a quartet added for the stage adaptation explicitly to flesh out characters’ emotional desires, Sebastian’s dream is to “simply wave my claw and make [Ariel’s] dreams come true”

⁹⁶ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 19.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁸ Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (NYU Press, 2000), 271–82.

⁹⁹ See Brater et al. (2010) for a more extensive analysis.

¹⁰⁰ Samuel E. Wright (1989 film), Titus Burgess (2008 Broadway), Shaggy (2019 TV Movie), and Daveed Diggs (upcoming film remake).

¹⁰¹. He’s a tragic, beat-up, and self-deprecating clown (“But Your Majesty, she’s a clever mermaid! I’m just a crustacean! Surely you ought to pick someone higher on the evolutionary scale...”¹⁰²) who often finds himself in *literal* hot water: he’s nearly killed, cooked, and eaten by the French Chef Louis in a dramatic chase sequence.¹⁰³ Though his songs—“Under The Sea” and “Kiss The Girl”—are some of the show’s most fun and beloved, his character’s entertainment value comes at the cost of nuance, dignity, and self-fulfillment.

A fourth candidate for Halls’ archetypes might be the “magical narrator”: a character removed from a show’s plot who comments on the action (not critically, but in service of the story’s ‘needs’) or serves as a ‘comment’ herself.¹⁰⁴ The latter is typified by the “big Black lady,” whose show-stopping performances are “both integral to, yet remain separate from, mainstream Broadway musical theatre.”¹⁰⁵ Dinero calls these portrayals “multifariously excessive” in regard to their impressive vocals, emotional intensity, and racial presence—the stark relief of a Black musical genre and Black body against a white-dominated space.¹⁰⁶ Indeed,

¹⁰¹ Score: Alan Menken, *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, Lyrics by Howard Ashman & Glen Slater, (New York: Music Theatre International, 1989); Script: Wright, *Disney’s The Little Mermaid*, (New York: Music Theatre International, 1989), 87.

¹⁰² Ibid, 16.

¹⁰³ Note, too, the subtextual colonial power dynamics: a 19th-century world in which the only Black-coded character—who happens to be Caribbean—is violently hunted by a white-coded Frenchman.

¹⁰⁴ The “magical narrator” is similar to the Greek Chorus, but takes on additional meanings given the role’s racial coding and MT writing conventions. For example, “Ol’ Man River” from the canonical *Showboat* (1927), compares African-American hardship to the unending flow of the Mississippi. The song is sung and reprised by the Black dock man Joe through the show’s saga, framing its initial Jim Crow South setting. Yet, for all of the song’s dramatic merits, Joe has no real character and instead plays a one-man Greek Chorus, appearing intermittently only to sing his song. Additionally, *Showboat* uses racism as a plot device in Act I only to catalyze the multigenerational family drama of the second act (race seemingly ‘disappears’). Joe becomes an atmospheric, tokenized plot device.

¹⁰⁵ Dan Dinero, “A Big Black Lady Stops the Show: Black Women, Performances of Excess and the Power of Saying No,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 6, no. 1 (March 28, 2012), 29. https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.6.1.29_1.

¹⁰⁶ Dinero cites “2 Good 2 B Bad” (*The Goodbye Girl*) as the seminal big black lady song, along with examples like “Soloist #1” from “Seasons of Love” (*Rent*) and Miss Jones in “Brotherhood of Man” (*How to Succeed...*). The trope is hard to pin down but ubiquitous; see Patina Miller singing Kooman & Diamond’s “Random Black Girl.”

Seussical's original *NYT* review referred to Sharon Wilkins' portrayal of the Sour Kangaroo as "the inevitable big woman with the big rafters-shaking voice."¹⁰⁷

Little Shop's magical narrators are the "African-American street urchins"¹⁰⁸: Crystal, Ronnette and Chiffon—named after (and reminiscent of) girl groups of the 1960s.¹⁰⁹ The "young, hip, and smart" trio frequently serves as Greek Chorus and messes with the main characters. The Urchins, too, are 'a lot of fun,' providing comic relief and the show's greatest hits, but in their narrator function are condensed into one monolithic 'super character' lacking internal life, arc, or agency; instead, they support the perspectives of the characters for whom they sing backup. Menken employs this exact trope in *Hercules* with the Muses, but it also appears subtly in *Seussical*'s Bird Girls, a nameless trio who chronicle Horton's journey in contemporary R&B harmony (only ever joined by other Black-coded characters). Blackness is entertaining but extra-narrative, a form of 'back-up' strictly in service of other (white) journeys.

3. 'Eating the Other,': Musical Styles, Antagonism, and Humor

By its holistic nature, the musical delivers its stories and politics through many aesthetic channels, but music is the most prominent, communicating emotion, character, and racial codes with salient immediacy. The eclectic scores of *Seussical*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Shrek* draw upon a diversity of genres (e.g., RnB, calypso, vaudeville, 50s rock 'n roll, etc.) and aesthetically, the appeal makes sense. The stylistic variation can capture attention, please a broad array of musical tastes, and layer new dramatic meanings through pastiche. The eclecticism is

¹⁰⁷ Ben Brantley, "The Cat! The Whos! The Places They Go!," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/01/movies/theater-review-the-cat-the-whos-the-places-they-go.html>.

¹⁰⁸ MTI, "Little Shop."

¹⁰⁹ 1960s girl groups comprised groups of young, working-class African American girls who sang doo-wop harmonies. In a sort of meta-parallel to MTs politics of representation, their careers—and lives—were often controlled by powerful white men; see Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (Routledge, 2013).

warranted by a show’s fantastical nature, which—according to *Seussical*’s Stephen Flaherty—gives writers license to create the “musical logic” of the world.¹¹⁰ So what’s the trouble?

The first potential ‘trouble’ involves the commodification of people of color to make them safe and consumable for white enjoyment. Radical black feminist theorist bell hooks calls this “eating the other,” a process by which “dominant white culture treats marginalized cultures like spices added to an existing dish.”¹¹¹ As a result, “white people retain their privilege as arbiters of taste, enjoying the thrill of interacting with others, while avoiding the negative consequences of racism on actual people of colour.” In fact, the *NYT* review of *Seussical*’s original Broadway production noted that its score “often has the mild Caribbean spice” of Ahrens and Flaherty’s past work.¹¹² Notably, the writing team have striven to earnestly portray the layered experiences of Black characters, examining the harms of racism, police brutality, colonialism and slavery.¹¹³ Their shows have been artistically acclaimed and considered politically empowering by many, though some consider their efforts regressive for social change and culturally appropriative.¹¹⁴

A particularly jarring moment—in fact, the one that partially inspired this project—opens Act II of *Seussical*. Over an upbeat funk groove, Hunters capture Horton in his home (the fictional Jungle of Nool) and transport him—via ship—to New York City. Horton is then “taken to auction” and sold to a man from a traveling circus. The groove abruptly cuts out and the cast

¹¹⁰ Kenneth Jones, “Creators of *Seussical* Share the ‘Thinks’ That They Think,” Playbill, August 11, 2000, <http://www.playbill.com/article/creators-of-seussical-share-the-thinks-that-they-thunk-com-91197>.

¹¹¹ hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992; Donatella Gallella, “‘Superman/Sidekick’: White Storytellers and Black Lives in ‘The Fortress of Solitude’ (2014),” in *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity*, by Sarah Whitfield (Macmillan Education UK, 2019), 7.

¹¹² Brantley, “The Cat! The Whos! The Places They Go!”

¹¹³ See *Ragtime*, *Once on This Island*, and *Dessa Rose*.

¹¹⁴ E.g. Reanna A. Ursin, “Cultural Appropriation for Mainstream Consumption: The Musical Adaptation of ‘Dessa Rose,’” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 47, no. 1 (2014): 91–109, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030129>.

mournfully sings what can only be described as a ‘slave spiritual,’ complete with a riffing Sour Kangaroo: “Sold.../ Sold... / Sold...”¹¹⁵ This dramatic choice should theoretically recontextualize the entire story: the Jungle of Nool represents some sort of pan-African country, Horton’s voyage represents the Middle Passage, and the ‘fantastical’ animals represent enslaved Africans, with the American humans as white colonists. That *would* be the case, if the moment weren’t so discrete, used as a plot device, and a possible source of comic relief. Instead, this dash of ‘spice’—loaded with the baggage of generational and historical trauma—is nothing more than a flavor note within an assortment of ‘ethnic tunes,’ a mockery of its pain. The selection of diverse ethnic genres purely for their aesthetic components complicates the stories’ geopolitical and historical implications. According to Flaherty, Horton’s insanity trial “is done as a big gospel number, because they're *testifying*," more inspired by a cheeky plot detail than a cultural music tradition.¹¹⁶ The same goes for Ashman’s choice to make Sebastian Trinidadian seemingly based on his affinity for the Caribbean musical tradition, which encouraged the calypso-reggae “Under The Sea.”¹¹⁷ To reference Dinero, Black characters are “both integral to, yet remain separate from, mainstream Broadway musical theatre” (pg. 29). The simultaneous fetishization of distilled Black aesthetic qualities and the denial of complex characterization casts these characters in entertaining but ambivalently ‘human’ roles. What kind of message might that subliminally send to youth cast in these roles, especially Black adolescents?

A second ‘trouble’ is that though writers may invent a show’s “musical logic” and assign their own patchwork of styles, those assignments to certain characters 1. Can often compound coded identities and 2. Can conflate music, racial identity, and moral character. Firstly,

¹¹⁵ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 68.

¹¹⁶ Jones, “Creators of Seussical Share the 'Thinks' That They Thunk.”

¹¹⁷ Interview with Actor Samuel E. Wright: Little Mermaid, The Lion King, Dinosaur and More., 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y06cu-PCI_A&t=312s.

whiteness' normative and self-erasing lens renders nonwhite racial identities overridingly salient, even in fantasy worlds in which conventional sociopolitical constructions of race shouldn't exist. Although neither the Sour Kangaroo, Sebastian, or Donkey are human, they're strongly coded as Black through their dialect and musical styles. The riffing Sour Kangaroo surveys blues, funk, early R&B, gospel, and quotes directly from Aretha Franklin hits.¹¹⁸ Her cronies, the Wickersham Brothers, are mischievous monkeys who like to "tease," "play pranks," and enjoy "making music together on the street corner"—another direct reference to a Black urban stereotype.¹¹⁹ Their feature number—"Monkey Around"—is a fusion of 70s R&B, soul, and funk; note how their characterization as monkeys evokes the historic simian pejorative used to dehumanize Black people.¹²⁰ Unlike other characters, the Wickersham and Kangaroos speak with phrasings common to AAVE (e.g. "ain't," "uh-huh," "mmhmm"). Sebastian speaks in a transliterated 'Caribbean' dialect—"Such a voice, dat child!"; "He's one a' dem?"; "You jes' miss her. She slip away"—and his songs are of the Calypso-Rock genre.

Secondly, if Blackness isn't external to the plot (e.g., the Urchins) or manifested through 'Hallsian' archetypes (e.g., Donkey, Sebastian), it may become associated with evil. *Seussical's* antagonists sing in traditionally Black musical styles, and Horton's conflicts—whether caused directly by the antagonists or not—are underscored by menacing funk. The world might be

¹¹⁸ These styles are cobbled together under the catchall "R&B." Composer Stephen Flaherty, who grew up listening to and loving R&B, was thrilled at the opportunity to incorporate "that musical style" (read: Black) into *Seussical*. He reported that "the jungle world is sort of like an R&B place, sort of a funk place" (Jones 2000).

¹¹⁹ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 2; e.g. Philip Groia, *They All Sang on the Corner: A Second Look at New York City's Rhythm and Blues Vocal Groups* (New York: Phillie Dee Enterprises, Inc., 1983), 28, quoted in Jensen, "Feed Me!"

¹²⁰ Charles W. Mills and Wulf D. Hund, "Comparing Black People to Monkeys Has a Long, Dark Simian History," *The Conversation*, February 28, 2016, <http://theconversation.com/comparing-black-people-to-monkeys-has-a-long-dark-simian-history-55102>.

‘surreal,’¹²¹ but its genres, racial-coding, and associated castings of threat and immorality mirror historical American ideologies, racial hierarchies, and media narratives.

When a show is rooted in a more ‘real’ version of society, historical context can further activate racial-coding. Marc Jensen’s (2008) analysis of the 1986 film version of *Little Shop* explores how the show’s musical styles, historical context, and narrative structure work to frame the story’s conflict in terms of 1960s American race relations. While the surface conflict appears to focus class struggle—the poor Seymour kills in a bid for social mobility, attempting to escape the slums of Skid Row for a quaint suburban paradise by earning fame and fortune—the “corrupting influence” of Audrey II is “insidiously African American.”¹²² The plant’s speech is clearly rendered as Black through its accent and idiomatic expressions, but writers Menken and Ashman especially infuse racial identity through song. Seymour—the “normal, white, heterosexual everydayman” protagonist—and Audrey sing in the mainstream, 50s rock n’ roll and modern musical theater styles, both genres associated with whiteness.¹²³ Audrey’s dream life is somewhere “like Levittown”—a suburban housing development infamous for its racial discrimination policies.¹²⁴ The Black R&B tradition is the musical domain of the growling, riffing Audrey II, the alien other intent on infiltrating “every household in America.”¹²⁵ Indeed, the show’s music draws upon pop styles of the height of the Civil Rights Movement, when “young whites increasingly turned to black music and its derivatives for their entertainment” to

¹²¹ Much like the slippery fantasy of Seuss’ own political cartoons and racial undertones, *Seussical*’s veneer of fantasy winks at its real-life, American audiences. The show travels to “Whoville,” “Nool,” and “Solla Sollew”, as well as New York, Fort Worth, Palm Beach, and San Juan.

¹²² Jensen, “Feed Me!”, 54.

¹²³ Christen Mandracchia, “‘Don’t Feed the Plants!’: Monstrous Normativity and Disidentification in *Little Shop of Horrors*,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2019): 309–16, https://doi.org/10.1386/smt_00009_1.

¹²⁴ Bruce Lambert, “At 50, Levittown Contends With Its Legacy of Bias,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1997, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/28/nyregion/at-50-levittown-contends-with-its-legacy-of-bias.html>.

¹²⁵ Ashman, *Little Shop*, 91.

the revulsion of white adults, who perceived the trend as an attack on white, middle-class, “social, sexual, and racial values.”¹²⁶ A “monster metaphor for blackness,” Audrey II’s ambitious pseudo-cannibalistic tendencies and musical, racial coding together conjure a “kind of demonization accentuating white fears and prejudices.”¹²⁷ One reviewer interpreted the show’s message to be: “Black music will destroy our fine WASP nation.”¹²⁸ In eating his exploitative owners, Audrey II thus “fulfills segregationists’ worst fears, devouring from within the white infrastructure that foolishly admitted and nurtured him because of his profitability.”¹²⁹

Little Shop’s creatives were openly invested in Black aesthetics. Ashman adored the “power, emotion, and expressiveness” of African-American musicians, which informed his key writing dictum: “Never go white when you can go black.”¹³⁰ Movie director Frank Oz cast Motown legend Levi Stubbs as the voice of the plant, searching for a performer “who was real black, real street...who had a touch of malevolence but could be real silly and funny at the same time.”¹³¹ Any “‘white’ streetwise voice” would have been “a rip-off of a black voice,” and Audrey II “had to be black because it was black in the play.” Yet Oz insisted that race wasn’t a factor in “casting a black voice for a plant that eats only white people.” Facing criticism of the plant’s Black-coded design—its head is a giant pair of exaggerated lips—Oz flipped: “We weren’t trying to make it look black, we were trying to make it look like a plant, but we had to have lips...It certainly wasn’t intended, and if people see it that way I’m sorry.” This

¹²⁶ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2, quoted in Jensen, “Feed Me!”

¹²⁷ Jensen, “Feed Me!”, 57.

¹²⁸ James Reel, “Wilted Plant,” Tucson Weekly, April 22, 2004, <https://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/wilted-plant/Content?oid=1075980>.

¹²⁹ Jensen, “Feed Me!”, 64.

¹³⁰ John Musker, “John Musker Question Countdown - Number 9,” Howard Ashman, accessed February 28, 2021, <https://www.howardashman.com/blog/john-musker-question-countdown-number-9>.

¹³¹ Richard Harrington, “‘Little Shop’s’ Voice of Vine Dine,” Washington Post, January 2, 1987, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1987/01/02/little-shopss-voice-of-vine-dine/bc8ac16e-126f-4d0e-b90d-23c7f17db6f1/>.

uncomfortable ambivalence draws attention to the dysfunctional process of ‘eating the other’—the fission of racial aesthetics from racial identity, the fetishization of the Black voice that simultaneously tries to deny its offensive qualities. As evidenced across multiple shows, writers’ inoffensive intentions and affection for Black cultural aesthetics may not correspond to respectful, nuanced, and unproblematic depictions of Black-coded characters.

Hoffman cites Eric Lott’s casting of blackface as “love and theft”—whereby “whites exhibit an unspoken envy of and fascination with blacks and their culture while stealing and turning a profit from that same culture”—and claims that American MT is “a direct inheritor of this process, but in much subtler terms.”¹³² He specifically mentions how white Jewish artists create all-white worlds “infused with black culture,” where ragtime, jazz, and other originally Black performance staples are “recuperated for mainstream audiences.”¹³³ This appropriation might be said to characterize the worlds of *Seussical*, *Little Mermaid*, and *Little Shop* (written by majority white Jews): nonwhite racial identities are decontextualized from their history, authenticity, and socio-political challenges into aesthetic, palatable flavors, tailored for a white consuming class.

While exoticism and orientalism are less common in MT,¹³⁴ ethnic identities are still played for laughs. *The Addams’ Family*’s Gomez is of Spanish heritage, originally portrayed for TV by the non-Hispanic John Astin, who expanded upon the “faintly suggested strain of Latin-lover blood in Gomez’s veins.”¹³⁵ In 1964, producers happily greenlit Astin’s caricaturish

¹³²Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 22.

¹³³ It’s an interesting coincidence, then, that the Cat in the Hat sings “ala Louis Armstrong” for a jazz-tinged number, invoking a controversial African-American musician criticized by members of his own race for pandering to teach “white Americans the virtues of the black aesthetic” (Ahrens & Flaherty 2000, 59; NPR 2006).

¹³⁴ Though not uncommon: *Anything Goes*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Miss Saigon*, for example, all enjoy commercial success and popularity in high schools. See Ramos, 2019 for further criticism on *Miss Saigon*.

¹³⁵ John Astin. “Gomez of Addams Family Yearns to Play Hamlet.” Ocala Star-Banner, July 12, 1965.

choices: lascivious eye rolls, a penciled-on moustache, and an ardent devotion to his wife. Famously portrayed only once by a Latino actor—Raul Julia—Gomez seems to be based more on the *idea* of a Hispanic person than an actual one. In the show, Gomez speaks in light Spanglish and sings: “I’m a Latin man and Latin men are smart / Everything we do is muy sincere / Leading with a sword as much as with a heart.”¹³⁶ However well-meaning, his generalized self-description evokes Hispanic stereotypes that outline, rather than fill in, his character. Arriving on the warship “*Pico de Gallo*,” the Gomez ancestry included “Redondo Ventana Laguna Don Jose Cuervo” and “Hector Fernando Escondido Chimichanga.”¹³⁷ Tailored to the broad comedic style of the non-Hispanic Nathan Lane (the original Broadway star, sporting a Castilian accent), the swashbuckling stage version of Gomez plays ethnicity as shtick.

In *Seussical*, Mayzie vacations in Palm Beach with the “suave,” mostly silent “José the Latin Pool Boy,” a cameo for the Cat in the Hat.¹³⁸ A briefly-worn ethnic ‘costume’ to add cultural ambience and comedy, José’s depiction perpetuates the oft-linked ‘Latin Lover’ and ‘Pool boy’ tropes, by which Latino men are cast as romantic objects and menial laborers.¹³⁹ Considering the infrequency and demeaning stereotypicality with which nonwhite characters are depicted in MT narratives, it’s easy to see why racially marginalized theater makers and audiences could find aspects of the art form culturally inaccessible, unempathetic, and offensive.

In conclusion, the white-controlled politics of representation construct a racial hierarchy whereby nonwhite (especially Black) characters lack the inherent complexity and agency of their

¹³⁶ Score: Andrew Lippa, *The Addams Family*, (New York: Theatrical Rights Worldwide, 2011); Script: Brickman & Elice, *The Addams Family*, (New York: Theatrical Rights Worldwide, 2011), 103.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 35, 63.

¹³⁸ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 71.

¹³⁹ Tre’vell Anderson. “Some Tiresome Latino Stereotypes - North.” Accessed April 9, 2021. https://digitaledition.chicagotribune.com/tribune/article_popover.aspx?guid=6d88948f-74a8-45c5-8e2e-1d110dc10a7a.

white counterparts. Further, characterization and music are used as tools to render Blackness antagonistic, comical, and/or reduced to its aesthetic ‘spice,’ used in service of (white) narratives without granting characters of color inner lives, structural story resources (e.g., agentive roles within the narrative) and actual representation. The denial of agency, complexity, and nuanced character dehumanizes and marginalizes nonwhite characters in MT. What might it mean for schools to look beneath the entertaining surface of these aesthetically ‘multicultural’ shows? To seriously consider the cost of their ‘fun’? White writers want to ‘eat the other’ and get away with it—to portray a campy, fantastical paradise that employs socio-politically-conscious cultural aesthetics while remaining apolitical, colorblind, and fluffy. But the racial coding is present, insidious, and—if unaddressed—poised to continue to perpetuate ‘othering’ stereotypes that bias how and about whom we tell stories.

Gender & Sexuality

1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a theater teacher intent on putting on a musical must be in want of lots of girl parts. Wolf argues that MT “has always been the terrain of women and girls, from its vibrant female characters to its passionate female fans,” and one need not look further than the demographic turnout of high school shows.¹⁴⁰ So too is gender “a constitutive element of Broadway musical theatre, fundamental to the musical’s architecture”; the moment that an actor steps foot onto the stage, the audience sees the actor’s gender and interprets that character accordingly. Who are they? How might they behave? Do I like this character? Do they

¹⁴⁰ Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 6.

remind me of myself? Are they what I typically imagine a person of this gender to ‘be’? “What the actor does, matters, too,” Wolf continues, employing a feminist performance studies framework to argue that women use acting and singing to “wrest[] the composing voice away from the [overwhelmingly male] librettist and composer” to re-empower their characters.¹⁴¹ Non-male performers may find liberation in a ‘queer’ reading of musicals, which “moves attention from narrative to ‘performative and spectacular elements.’”¹⁴²

What the actor does, matters, of course—but performance elements vary by production. It’s not always assured that a director or actor will craft a subversively empowering portrayal, nor is it guaranteed that an audience will understand these choices. One Belle might thrust impassioned anger toward the Beast, while another might take a politely civil tone; by the end of the show, however, both Belle’s will still get hitched to a formerly furry prince. The show’s licensed libretto is a more stable mandate. For all the acting styles and artistic direction, ‘what the *character* does, matters’ just as much.

Through agency, arc, characterization and narrative structure, a show’s ‘politics of representation’ perpetuate ideas and norms about gender and sexuality. As political constructs, gender and sexuality are multifaceted, intersectional dimensions of identity, shaped by and actively shaping society. MT is a place where “alternative understandings of gender and sexual identity exist within and alongside more traditional understandings,” celebrating virtues, challenging paradigms, and reimagining new relationship dynamics, hierarchies, and self-expressions.¹⁴³ Musical is in a “deceptively sensitive and intimate conversation with their

¹⁴¹ Carolyn Abbate, *Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women, Musicology and Difference* (University of California Press, 2020), quoted in Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 7.

¹⁴² Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Indiana University Press, 1993), quoted in Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom.”

¹⁴³ Stacy Wolf. *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (University of Michigan Press, 2002).

cultural, historical moment,” yet for the average musical produced in the 2019-2020 canon, that ‘moment’ is over 20 years old; accordingly, so are the gender politics.¹⁴⁴

Despite being the “terrain of women and girls” onstage and in the audience, men have dominated the fields of MT writing and producing. For the top-10 most produced high school musicals in 2019-2020, male writers outnumber female writers for these shows ten-to-one. A similar proportion marked both the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 Broadway seasons: only about 15% of shows were written by women/nonbinary writers.¹⁴⁵ Despite some innovations, the historic disparity is still present—though shrinking—on Broadway and across the nation. Rather than being born out of a collaboration of diverse perspectives, then, representations of gender and sexuality in MT are predominantly crafted by (white) men who—despite many identifying as gay—peddle heterosexist and patriarchal stories; this is likely in an effort to cater to a conservative-leaning, middle-class, ‘mainstream’ audience’s desires and expectations—of particular relevance for shows which hope to enjoy a post-NYC afterlife in, say, high schools across the nation. Despite good intentions, these shows may promote retrograde, offensive, inappropriately idealized, and stereotypical representations of women—or rather, “what a male writer imagines a woman is like.”¹⁴⁶

The following sections examine how ideas about gender and sexuality are circulated through character, thematic content, and the politics of representation of select musicals. The analysis will explore representations of femininity and masculinity, the hegemonic romance/marriage narrative and its effects on feminist subversions, and deviant expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation. To start at the very beginning—a very good place to start—

¹⁴⁴ Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Henry, “Broadway by the Numbers 2019,” “Broadway by the Numbers 2018.”

¹⁴⁶ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage*, 12.

—we turn to one of the most insidious social/cultural/political/historical forces to shape the world: the patriarchy.

2. “It’s A Rich Man’s World”: The Patriarchy

In an entertainment industry, canon, and society historically controlled by men, so too are the shows’ worlds culturally and structurally patriarchal. The royal kingdoms and castles of *Beauty and The Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* are ruled by men; men control the businesses and media sectors of *Little Shop*; the family structures of *The Addams Family* are overall paternalistic (despite some egalitarianism and power dynamic reversals); characters like Mr. Mayor, General Genghis Khan Schmitz (who sings: “The military, that’s what makes a boy a man!”), and Judge Yertle The Turtle mark the political domains of male leadership in *Seussical*.¹⁴⁷ In reproducing this paternalistic hierarchy, these musicals reveal the limits of their ‘fantasy’—dreaming in magical, aesthetic dimensions but stopping short of reimagined structural paradigms.

The dominance of the patriarchy is contrasted with a substantial absence of mother figures. This is a trend common to historic wonder tales and famously distilled in Vladimir Propp’s 1968 *Morphology of the Folktale*.¹⁴⁸ In his survey of the folk tale’s *dramatis personae*, the lack of a mother figure and fusion of “the princess and her father” into a single unit incidentally furthers the weight of male power. Mothers have disappeared from the worlds of *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and The Beast*, and the “very simple urban fairytale” of *Little Shop*, either killed off or unmentioned.¹⁴⁹ Though some mothers (e.g., Morticia and Alice in *The Addams Family*, Mrs. Potts in *Beauty and the Beast*) remain, less ‘proper’ mothers—in terms of

¹⁴⁷ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 38.

¹⁴⁸ Downey, “Feminine Empowerment.”

¹⁴⁹ Ron Base, “Man-Eating Plant True to Its Roots,” *Toronto Star*, December 19, 1986, D10, cited in Jensen, “Feed Me!”

adherence to traditional gender norms and family structure—are trivialized and/or antagonized (e.g., single parents like the Sour Kangaroo and Mayzie LaBird in *Seussical*). So too may the absence of a mother “inadvertently reproduce[] the weight of male power in the wonder tale, and the consequent alliances which set women against women; the tension erupts within the stories as female dissension and strife.”¹⁵⁰ However, this opposition is often triggered by and flows through a (literal) ‘middleman.’ Ursula and Ariel’s conflict is directly spurred and mediated by their respective relationships to King Triton. The indirect tension between Wednesday and Morticia is enabled through Gomez’s shifting alliances, and his respective conflicts with the women drive the plot. Narratively and structurally, the presence of men facilitates conflict between women, helping to drive the story while rendering itself invisible.

Even stories with a more liberal feminist ethos—working within an existing hierarchy to bring about gender parity, rather than rejecting the entire system—can reproduce patriarchal dynamics through the politics of representation, especially in terms of plot agency.¹⁵¹ The three central couples of *The Addams Family* rupture, repair, and re-calibrate to a seemingly egalitarian balance: the lovers reaffirms their mutual love and each party gets what he/she desires, even reversing traditional heterosexual power dynamics in the process (i.e. Mal and Alice). However, the narrative trajectory of these subplots involves 1. The male party hurting/betraying the female party and 2. The male party catalyzing and driving the struggle that ultimately mends the relationship.¹⁵² The main drama and resolution is chiefly enabled by dramatic agency, emotional growth, and saviorism by the men, with women somewhat along for the ride.

¹⁵⁰ Marina Warner. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Ann Arbor, United States: Random House, 1995), 238, quoted in Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom.”

¹⁵¹ Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*.

¹⁵² Gomez betrays Morticia’s trust by keeping Wednesday’s secret marriage intent from her; when revealed, Morticia threatens to run away, and Gomez books them a vacation in Paris, convinces her to stay and accept his daughter’s choices, and invites her to a reconciliatory dance. While Alice disrupts the relationship by revealing her

The same gender imbalance is perpetuated through a character's written complexity, a quality directly tied to the role's sense of humanity. Amanda Hess describes the romantic lead of the 2018 musical *Tootsie* as "strong, independent, and forgettable. A powerful woman but a wisp of a character."¹⁵³ Her point is well taken: we don't go to the theater to watch virtuous paragons be virtuous and make only good decisions. Even in the 'fluffiest' fantastical comedies, the dramatic 'spark' of MT comes from the characters' complexity, agency, and human quality. Yet these nuanced aspects are often reserved for men. Knapp illustrates this dichotomy in the essentialized sexism of 'chivalry' in older MT: the juxtaposition of an "idealizer (man) and embodied ideal (woman)."¹⁵⁴ Troubled, complicated men become the defining spectator of a virtuous, uncomplicated woman. The man has agency, perspective, and flaws, whereas the woman's humanity is transmuted into a personification of symbolic beauty and purity. Her main purpose is to be observed, striven towards, and *used* by the man (and, oftentimes, by the story itself). This dynamic is paralleled in the very names of "Beauty" and "Beast," whereby the kind, beautiful, and wise Belle inspires the tormented prince to grow into a gentleman and romantic partner. It's demonstrated with melodramatic, satiric aplomb by the big-hearted, gorgeous, and martyr-like Audrey, who redeems her self-respect and value thanks to support from Seymour,¹⁵⁵ the ambitious, awkward, and morally-conflicted male protagonist. It's palpable between the sensuous, subtly powerful, loyal Morticia and Gomez, her ardently devoted husband who keeps her in the dark while wrestling with his responsibilities as husband and father. While both men

marital pain to Mal, it's triggered—and centered around—Mal's past actions, and the reveal is catalyzed by a potion that she unknowingly takes; Mal wins her back by embracing a younger, freer version of himself and reversing their power dynamic. Yet, Wednesday and Lucas are a partial exception. Wednesday proposes running away and getting married, but Lucas is reticent, leading Wednesday to temporarily leave him; he wants to be with her, and when challenged by her to be more impulsive and daring, he acquiesces and wins her back (*The Addams Family* 2011).

¹⁵³ Hess, "The Broadway Musical Has a Man Problem."

¹⁵⁴ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 169.

¹⁵⁵ The climactic "Suddenly Seymour"—in which the nebbish protagonist redeems a self-deprecating Audrey—illustrates this dynamic: "He purified me!"; "Suddenly Seymour showed me I can!" (*Little Shop* 1986, 70).

and women strive for each other, the nature of this striving tends to confer agency and complexity to one aspect of the male journey, whereas it dominates the arcs of women and centers their dramatic trajectory on romance.

While a bit of deviant pushback against the patriarchy is allowed, those who rail too much against it are ‘punished’—by both the characters and the show. Ursula’s motivation to manipulate Ariel and overthrow the kingdom is rooted in her frustration with the patriarchy: in “Daddy’s Little Angel,” she explains how her lack of power, unfeminine physical appearance, lack of appreciation from her father, and ambition led her to remove her sisters to gain control of Atlantica. Foiled by Triton being the next male heir—“as soon as he came of age, he stole everything from me”—she hatches her plan for revenge on her brother.¹⁵⁶ She manipulates Ariel into sacrificing her voice by painting a disparaging portrait of male attitudes: “Come on, they’re not all that impressed with conversation / true gentleman avoid it when they can / but they dote and swoon and fawn / on a lady who’s withdrawn / it’s she who holds her tongue who gets her man.”¹⁵⁷ Instead, she suggests that Ariel use her physical attractiveness to win Eric’s heart: “You’ll have your looks...your pretty face...and don’t underestimate the power of body language!” Ironically, Ursula’s evaluation of the objectifying ‘male gaze’ is affirmed by the plot: for nearly all of Act II, a mute Ariel wins Prince Eric’s affection through her physical appearance and the power of dance.

Book writer Doug Wright envisions that the women are “truly linked” by their desire to succeed (Ursula, to Ariel: “We’re so very alike, you and I – gals with ambition!” (*with a conspiratorial wink*) ‘Nothing scares a man more, does it?’), yet “it’s their methods that render

¹⁵⁶Wright, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *Little Mermaid*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

them so different.”¹⁵⁸ Those methods—and the story structure—dichotomize Ariel into a morally-right protagonist and Ursula into a ‘comic antagonist.’ In this way, her critiques of the oppressive patriarchal system are bowdlerized and vilified. By linking her feminist aims and righteous anger to reprehensible tactics—and placing her in direct opposition to the protagonists—Ursula’s deviance from the status quo is cast as distasteful and ‘wrong.’ Charming, easily opposable antagonists are a common telescoping convention of family-friendly MT, but here it also means that when Ursula is vanquished by Ariel, we celebrate the triumph of (what we perceive as) good over evil and quietly, unquestioningly return to the standard patriarchal fare.

Though not eviscerated by her show’s narrative and characters to the same degree, *Seussical*’s free-spirited Mayzie La Bird is an ‘antagonistic comic’ role whose self-involvement, empowerment, and deviation from gender norms (while somewhat celebrated) are framed in direct conflict with the protagonist’s journey and as antithetical to the story’s moral. One of the most complex and unorthodox female characters in this canon, “Amazing” Mayzie seeks “self-improvement” and personal empowerment by beautifying herself. She’s high in self-esteem, easily bored, capricious, and avoidant of responsibility, preferring instead to vacation; the libretto describes her as “self-centered, selfish and vain.”¹⁵⁹ A fiery single woman with a history of romantic flings (“We spent three weeks of bliss / Then, the usual segue”), Mayzie is abandoned by her lover with their egg.¹⁶⁰ When she becomes “bored...cranky and tired” from the responsibilities of unexpected motherhood, she gives the child to Horton—for “one afternoon”—and flies to Palm Beach. When she encounters him seemingly months later, he begs her to take it back. Instead, she gives the egg away for good, but not before soberly self-evaluating:

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 54; Lassell, *The Little Mermaid*, 68.

¹⁵⁹ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 59.

I MAY BE
 UNRELIABLE.
 FANCY FREE.
 IRRESPONSIBLE.
 CRAZY ME,
 ALWAYS EAGER TO FLY.

BUT SEEING YOU
 GIVES ME TRUE DELIGHT

JUST FOR ONCE
 I'VE DONE SOMETHING RIGHT.
 ...
*(Just a moment, MAYZIE is actually sincere and
 even a little contrite.)*
 GOOD LUCK WHEN IT HATCHES.
 (pg. 73)

In a rare moment of self-awareness and vulnerability, Mayzie acknowledges her flaws, hints at her shame, and, for the first time, feels “true delight” in her decisions. The script defines this as the moment that makes Mayzie “not all bad”; “she has a moment of generosity—she realizes she isn’t the kind of person who’d be a good parent, and she does the best thing she can for the egg.”¹⁶¹ Indeed, is a foil for the overly-caring, sacrificing Gertrude, who ends the show co-parenting the child in a happy partnership with Horton. It’s telling that Mayzie and her decision are framed in terms of her actions as a generous mother, rather than as an independent, if ‘irresponsible’ woman honoring her true nature. The narrative reveals its priorities, goals, and message—proper family structure and responsible parenting—by disappearing Mayzie from the rest of the show following her refusal to be a mother. Like Ursula, her self-empowerment and transgression of patriarchal norms are tinged as ‘negative’ and ‘irresponsible’ by her antagonistic framing, antisocial personal qualities, and the show’s hyperfixation on traditional gender norms.

Shows may have been considered to be feminist tales with empowered female characters 20 years ago, but they may not resonate the same way today—especially as more revolutionary and diverse voices are uplifted within MT and views on gender among adolescent students have become relatively more progressive. When *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and The Beast*

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 2.

premiered on Broadway in the 1990s, Belle and Ariel may have been crafted and understood to be feminist heroines; they're now considered "stepping stones" between the "old passive princesses from the Classic era [1937-1989]" and "the modern actionable princesses of the Disney Renaissance [1989-1999]."¹⁶² The predominance of "courtships with predictably stereotyped gender behavior" in the high school MT canon is a systemic, on-the-ground issue.¹⁶³ In her in-depth ethnography of amateur MT, Wolf recalls "countless conversations with frustrated high school theatre directors who want nothing more than a show with a lot of girls' parts, empowering roles for them, and a non-heterosexist narrative."¹⁶⁴

Taken together, the evidence begs the question posed by Grace Barnes in "Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre": "Is a show with a woman in the central character a feminist musical when the character she plays is defined by the rules of patriarchy?"¹⁶⁵ Are partial subversions and empowering dialogue enough, even if the show doesn't seek to deconstruct institutions at a fundamental level? How might female characters find liberation and empowerment within a sexist narrative? To explore how the themes of feminism, patriarchy, gender, and sexuality converge in the politics of representation, we must turn to a foundational trope of MT—one that operates simultaneously as a site of tradition and subversion: love.

¹⁶² Lenika Cruz, "The Feminist Legacy of The Little Mermaid's Divisive, 'Sexy' Ariel," *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/the-little-mermaid-at-25-and-the-evolving-definition-of-strong-female/382581/>; Neuffer, "Part of a Man's World."

¹⁶³ Chapman, "Knowing Your Audience."

¹⁶⁴ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 105.

¹⁶⁵ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage*, 13.

3. Love, Marriage, and Feminist Failings

You know the story: boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy and girl get married and live happily ever after. In a tale seemingly as old as time, Knapp asserts that “the American Musical has been most consistently successful when its stories and themes resolve through the formation of conventional romantic relationships.”¹⁶⁶ But the commercial and artistic success of “conventional romantic relationships” in MT doesn’t only affirm conservative American norms. Like any Shakespearean comedy, heterosexual courting, romance, and marriage serve as plot frameworks and storytelling devices.¹⁶⁷ This is the politics of representation at work: that musicals grounded in conventional romance between a man and a woman have been so reliably ‘functional’ in historical MT. Some shows are driven from opening to finale by love: in *The Addams Family*, the catalyzing conflict can only be solved once “love triumphs,” three couples comprise the central arcs, and the final lyrics implore all to “move toward the darkness, and love!”¹⁶⁸

Additionally, the specifically heteronormative conventions of MT romance were “lodged long ago in the U.S. cultural unconscious.”¹⁶⁹ These particular shows are not exceptions but the rule, each built around one or several heterosexual love stories ending in a ‘happily-ever-after’ partnership.¹⁷⁰ The heterosexism is subtle and assumed: “She’ll have lots of boys,” says Morticia; “Who’s the lucky merman?” wonder Ariel’s sisters.¹⁷¹ In an art form hallmarked by its

¹⁶⁶ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 264.

¹⁶⁷ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*.

¹⁶⁸ Brickman, Elice, & Lippa, *The Addams Family*, 7, 118.

¹⁶⁹ Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 8.

¹⁷⁰ Belle/Beast, who’s technically a human male, get married (*Beauty and the Beast*); Gomez/Morticia, Mal/Alice, and Wednesday/Lucas all resolve, with marriage looming for the latter (*The Addams Family*); Ariel/Eric get married (*Little Mermaid*); Audrey/Seymour get together in life and are reunited in death (*Little Shop*); Horton/Gertrude’s saga of one-sided romance ends in a platonic co-parenting situation (*Seussical*).

¹⁷¹ Brickman, Elice, & Lippa, *The Addams Family*, 14; Wright, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *The Little Mermaid*, 36.

heightened emotions, “the romance narrative...naturalizes heterosexuality through a musical’s affective power.”¹⁷² Despite the historic prominence of gay creatives, heterosexual marriage has historically been a narrative norm in MT, perhaps tailored to a more conservative family audience.

In centering plots and characters around marriage/partnership between male and female characters, MT promotes ideas about gender through the politics of representation. The “unrelentingly heterosexual” repertoire “relies on and reinforces many negative gender stereotypes”, particularly female ones.¹⁷³ These shows support the idea that marriage is the ‘happy ending’ which female characters should strive for in order to achieve ‘womanhood,’ supplanting and totalizing their personal aspirations with the pursuit of romance.¹⁷⁴ Any subversions or empowerment might needle—but not destroy—the inevitable ‘ideal’ of partnership. True, Knapp notes that some might see a degree of symbiotic gender parity in marriage, with heterosexual union standing in for the metaphorical reconciling of ‘opposites,’ capping off a story with a sense of restored balance.¹⁷⁵ For some, a courtship narrative—by which both the ‘princess’ and ‘hero’ are looking for love—“suggests an alternative way of focusing on the romance, which sees it not as driven principally by a linear development of the princess’s desire for marriage, but by an equal, shared interest in finding love.”¹⁷⁶ Ultimately, however, these traditional depictions of marriage tend to perpetuate an unbalanced male-benefitting power dynamic, marginalize queer relationships, valorize motherhood as an ideal

¹⁷² Stacy Wolf, “In Defense of Pleasure: Musical Theatre History in the Liberal Arts [A Manifesto]1,” *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 1 (March 2007), 54.

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/218653625/abstract/E23DD09CAD674016PQ/1>.

¹⁷³ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 64.

¹⁷⁴ Cummins, “Romancing the Plot.” Additionally, the marriage trope implies that “the sense of freedom necessary for exploration and accomplishment must finally be curbed if one is to become a woman” (Malfrid 2009, 52).

¹⁷⁵ Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 264.

¹⁷⁶ Swan, “Gothic drama in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*,” quoted in Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom,” 54.

gender role, limit aspirations for personal development, and portray women as forced to/willing to sacrifice their mental health, physical wellbeing, voice, freedom, or even life to receive the love of a central male character.

“Girl bird” Gertrude McFuzz is unrequitedly infatuated with Horton. She’s written him “Four Hundred and Thirty-Seven” love songs.¹⁷⁷ She ties her insecurity over her “one feather tail” to the goal of impressing Horton (e.g., “Amazing Gertrude”, “Notice Me, Horton”), and forces a doctor to prescribe her pills to produce a gigantic tail—which Horton doesn’t notice and, ironically, grounds her from flying. As she recounts to him, her loss of personal mobility was troubling *specifically* because “I couldn’t even help you” and “no one else was gonna go to all the labor.”¹⁷⁸ She prunes her tail so that she can embark on a perilous, physically-harmful journey to rescue Horton and find his Whos for him (rendered comically in the aptly-titled “All For You”). Gertrude finally receives a single moment of appreciation, which she immediately deflects:

HORTON: Gertrude...I never noticed...you’re...*Amazing!*

GERTRUDE: Aw, it was nothing.

(pg. 89)

After defending Horton in court, Gertrude’s arc ends when she offers to co-parent Horton’s elephant-bird child, fulfilling her role as “true friend” and mother.¹⁷⁹ Despite the lack of mother figures in these shows—or perhaps in response to it—female characters are guided to caretaking and/or maternal positions. Even when a story culminates in marriage between a princess and prince, there’s an implication that the royal bride “ensures the kingdom’s

¹⁷⁷ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 44.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 86.

¹⁷⁹ A near-identical narrative move happens at the end of *Into The Woods*: without prior discussion, Cinderella—offers to live with the wifeless Baker, clean his house, and help raise his child.

continuity.”¹⁸⁰ Likewise, narratives which emphasize the construction of family (i.e., *The Addams Family*, *Into The Woods*, *Seussical*) endorse the furthering of the family line. As her character description makes clear: “Gertrude changes during the show from a vain, neurotic, nervous and shy bird into one with the power to protect and care for a baby elephant bird and commit herself to Horton. In other words, she stops worrying about her looks and grows up.”¹⁸¹ Rather than involve her own growth/empowerment, Gertrude’s journey of self-development is designed to win Horton’s love, provide him largely unthanked labor, and prepare to mother his child. Is this really what it means for a woman to “grow up”?

A former nightclub worker/dancer described as having “poor self-worth and education, but incredibly good looks and a sweet and vulnerable demeanor,” Audrey embodies the ditzzy ‘hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold’ trope.¹⁸² She dates an abusive dentist but harbors a small crush on Seymour, with whom she dreams of escaping Skid Row for “Somewhere That’s Green”—a suburban fantasy where she’ll “cook like Betty Crocker”, “look like Donna Reed,” and be Seymour’s “December Bride” (although “He’s Father, he knows best”) as they raise children.¹⁸³ After her abusive boyfriend disappears, Audrey’s relief is tempered by her guilt that she doesn’t “deserve a nice guy.”¹⁸⁴ Seymour initially offers “sweet understanding” as a friend, praising Audrey’s kindness rather than her looks (“Underneath the bruises and the handcuffs, you know what I saw? A girl I respected. I still do.”). However, the song swiftly shifts to a romantic power ballad ending in a “passionate embrace.”¹⁸⁵ Audrey cares for a spiraling Seymour, which ultimately leads her into the jaws of Audrey II. As she dies in Seymour’s arms—dressed in a

¹⁸⁰ Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom,” 42.

¹⁸¹ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 2.

¹⁸² MTI, “Little Shop.”

¹⁸³ Ashman & Menken, *Little Shop*, 35.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 68.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 68, 71. The song’s refrain changes from “Seymour’s your/my friend” to “Seymour’s your/my man.”

virginal “white nightgown,” “Fay Wray-like”, beaming in “saintly self-sacrifice”—she begs him to feed her to the monster. “It’s the one gift I can give you...” she says. “And if I’m *in* the plant, then I’m part *of* the plant. So in a way...We’ll always be...Together.”¹⁸⁶ After she bittersweetly reprises “Somewhere That’s Green,” her arc and character are (literally) subsumed by Seymour’s.

The focus on heterosexual romantic relationships is further enabled through a lack of positive, platonic female friendships.¹⁸⁷ A motherless Ariel is manipulated by her aunt Ursula, teased by her sisters and royal staff, and rivaled by other princesses; Belle is a town outcast; Wednesday, Audrey, and Gertrude have seemingly no female friends—or, really, friends at all. If they exist, platonic supporting characters may specifically encourage the protagonist to pursue love.¹⁸⁸ Members of Ariel’s close circle of friends are either secretly in love with her or actively helping her woo Eric; the castle servants encourage Belle to forgive, cooperate with, and love Beast; Mayzie encourages Gertrude to improve her image to attract Horton (yet maintains a condescending superiority over her); even the Urchins pressure Audrey to leave her abusive relationship in order to be with a nicer guy like Seymour. Without the presence of healthy, fulfilling platonic relationships, heterosexist shows may subliminally suggest that the only kind of relationship which can bring meaning and joy to the lives of female protagonists are romantic ones with men.

Yet despite the ways that the marriage trope narratively and structurally circumscribes the potential for independent, complex, and subversive female protagonists, certain feminist

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 88-91.

¹⁸⁷ Neuffer, “Part of a Man’s World,” 10.

¹⁸⁸ This trend is influenced by an older MT tradition of A/B romantic couples as the leads of golden-age shows (e.g. *Guys and Dolls*, most of Rodgers & Hammerstein’s canon). In this dynamic, the pair of leading women is bound in ‘friendship’ by their mutual pursuit of men.

interpretations locate transgressive empowerment for women despite—and even *through*—their romantic relationships. This next section considers these innovative readings, specifically for the “relevant anachronism” of the Disney princess. “Some have sought to reveal her beauty as stereotype, her good-nature as submissiveness,” writes Do Rozario (2004), “but still she prevails” (pg. 1). These iconic figures are inspiring for many middle- and elementary-school children, but their appearance in the high school MT canon takes on a particular salience; adolescent female performers are around the same age as these protagonists, and may be grappling with similar issues of independence, identity, views of the world, and romantic relationships. In the case of *The Little Mermaid*, deliberate structural changes in the stage narrative sought to empower Ariel beyond her romantic journey. “Disney’s creative teams are conscious that the princesses are one of their strongest merchandise branches,” writes Rodosthenous (2017). “Thus, when they adapt them to the stage, they make adjustments that speak for our time.” Do they succeed?

3. “Something There”: Evaluating Feminist Interpretations and Innovations

A. ‘Feisty’ Belle

To address the “beauty as stereotype” critique cited by Do Rozario, Taylor & Symonds (2014) argue that, in MT, “the only power women have (we are told) is the sexual power of their body, a commodity that they flaunt to seduce men” (pg. 140). Although most leading female characters are described as beautiful, there are some attempts to subvert that focus. Seymour’s attraction to “sweet and good and beautiful” Audrey partially comes from her being a loyal friend and coworker.¹⁸⁹ Gertrude’s generous actions—not her tail—earn Horton’s appreciation.

¹⁸⁹ Ashman & Menken, *Little Shop*, 45.

Personal values and character seem to be the most integral qualities for Lucas & Wednesday's and Mal & Alice's relationships; while Gomez is clearly sexually attracted to Morticia, the power she wields over him manifests romantically and emotionally. Even Belle—despite her namesake beauty—uses her emotional warmth, intellect, and 'feisty' spirit to navigate her relationship with Beast.¹⁹⁰

Belle—written by librettist Linda Woolverton to be a “heroine of the 90s”—is an ambivalently empowered female protagonist.¹⁹¹ She's adventurous, self-educating, suspicious of men (repeatedly refusing Gaston's proposals), technologically savvy (helping her father with inventions), brave, somewhat athletic, and at times heroic (searching the forest, saving Beast). These unconventionally feminine traits are conscious departures by Disney from the original tale, in which the more passive 'Beauty' was adored for her virtues and looks.¹⁹² Here, Belle's empowered uniqueness gives her the confidence to overcome “the discomfort she feels in being different.”¹⁹³

Thus, Belle's “feistiness – her graceful, perky, fighting spirit – is also modified to incorporate a few (rather simple) feminist sentiments, a quality which makes her an outcast among the townsfolk and endears her to Beast.”¹⁹⁴ Yet 'feisty' accurately describes the way that female characters' subversions of normative gendered behavior are circumscribed by paternalistic plots. The word—habitually used in reference to the feminine—characterizes one who is “touchy, quarrelsome, exuberantly frisky” and/or “having or showing a lively

¹⁹⁰ It should still be noted that within these examples, there is a mix of 1. Female characters claiming their own empowering traits by their own recognition and 2. Male characters revealing those traits and uplifting the women.

¹⁹¹ Dutka, “Ms. Beauty and the Beast.”

¹⁹² Craven, “Beauty and the Belles”; Kirsten Malfroid, “Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Disney Princesses Series” (Doctoral dissertation, Ghent University, 2009).

¹⁹³ Swan, “Gothic drama”, 355.

¹⁹⁴ Craven, “Beauty and the Belles”, 129.

aggressiveness: spunky.”¹⁹⁵ Words like ‘feisty,’ spunky,’ and ‘quirky’ (commonly associated with modern-day, ‘progressive’ female leads) condescendingly assign a harmless inefficacy to the subject, painting behaviors as refreshingly subversive but not substantially disruptive. The aggression and ‘edge’ of male characters tend to be functional, but women are removably ‘quirky.’

The lead producer of the Broadway production determined that “above all, *Beauty and the Beast* is a moving love story, which we wanted to make a dramatic emotional experience for the audience.”¹⁹⁶ Ultimately, Belle’s intelligent and inquisitive nature 1. Specifically benefit Beast’s character arc and 2. Further her romantic ‘learning’—which becomes her personal development—to grasp the “tawdry moral” that Beast’s true beauty lies beneath ugliness.¹⁹⁷ Belle’s opening, definitive desire—“I want adventure in the great wide somewhere / I want it more than I can tell!”—is ironically limited by the Beast’s imprisonment.¹⁹⁸ Relatedly, Belle’s temporary escape from the castle “is no doubt imagined by Disney as a positive virtue of ‘feistiness,’” but “her reward for [it] is recapture and romance with Beast.”¹⁹⁹ Woolverton’s favorite adaptation for Broadway is a scene in the library in which Belle introduces the illiterate Beast to the “magic of books, by reading him the story of King Arthur.”²⁰⁰ Thus, “despite some

¹⁹⁵ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “feisty,” accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feisty>

¹⁹⁶ Lassell, “Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*”, 23.

¹⁹⁷ Craven, “*Beauty and the Belles*”, 132. A narrative move that might be said to counterbalance this by highlighting Belle’s personal development is her Act II solo, “A Change in Me.” She hopefully shares the maturity, self-assuredness, and ability to see that “good can come from bad” that she gained from her relationship with Beast. The self-development is still tied to Beast, and only serves to draw Belle closer and further the romance narrative. The song was actually originally written four years into the Broadway run in order to convince singer Toni Braxton to join the cast as Belle. Despite earning widespread praise and structurally supporting the narrative, it’s telling that Belle’s acknowledgement of personal growth arose so late in the show’s production history and as a somewhat logistical solution (BroadwayBox, 2020).

¹⁹⁸ Score: Alan Menken, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, Lyrics by Howard Ashman & Tim Rice, (New York: Music Theatre International, 1994); Script: Woolverton, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, (New York: Music Theatre International, 1994), 26.

¹⁹⁹ Craven, “*Beauty and the Belles*”, 135.

²⁰⁰ Lassell, “Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*”, 29.

clever changes in the depiction of Beauty who is a cultivated book lover and a woman not afraid to speak her mind, we have the exact same plot of a woman who sacrifices herself for her father and for the improvement of a monster such as the beast.”²⁰¹

B. How do you solve a problem like *The Little Mermaid*?

From a pro-feminist perspective, Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario envisions the princess’ central romantic role in wonder tales as an opportunity to challenge patriarchal norms. Where Propp saw a singular ‘princess/father’ unit in older stories, Do Rozario envisions a more progressive, dynamic duality whereby the father (king) represents tradition, autocracy, and law and order, and the princess represents autonomy and openness. While “the passage of power through the princess is ostensibly patriarchal” in ensuring the kingdom’s continuity as a daughter, wife, and mother, her function of validation can be wielded as a tool to “irrevocably chang[e] the status quo by choosing a consort contrary to accepted norms.”²⁰² Ariel’s marriage to Prince Eric quells Triton’s human prejudice and earns his trust and respect, while allying the underwater and land kingdoms. Belle’s love for the shunned, monstrous Beast softens his demeanor, improves the castle atmosphere, and *literally* transforms all the servants into their free, human forms. Wednesday’s engagement to Lucas prompts both families to reevaluate their own relationships, reestablish trust, and broaden their understanding of what is ‘normal.’ Whereas an antagonistic *femme fatale* was customarily the primary disruptor of patriarchy in wonder tales, the telescoped dichotomy of ‘good/bad’ is complicated as the princess takes an

²⁰¹ Zipes, Jack. "Fairy Tale as Myth: Myth as Fairy Tale" (Lexington, 1994), 46, quoted in Warner, Rebecca. "The Beauty and the Beast Trope in Modern Musical Theatre." *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2015), 32. https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.9.1.31_1.

²⁰² Do Rozario, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom", 42, 57.

“active role in the disruption” (pg. 57). As Do Rozario argues: “The Disney kingdom may still seem a man’s world, but it is a man’s world dependent on a princess.”

Reconciling this ambivalence was the primary goal of Doug Wright, the playwright hired to retool *The Little Mermaid* for Broadway. The project provided a chance to challenge the notion that “Ariel is simply passed from her father to her husband and that she focuses her interest on being a wife.”²⁰³ Thus, the guiding revision for the stage version was to empower Ariel as “the author of her own redemption”: to emphasize her personal journey just as much as her romantic arc.²⁰⁴ Wright strove “to make it clear that Ariel’s longing is not so much for the prince, but for a world in which she feels truly realized on her own terms, and it’s important that she voice those aspirations before she meets a prince.” Accordingly, Wright capitalized on the narrative salience of a musical’s opening moments—which tend to convey who/what a show is about—to foreground Ariel’s desire to be human (as expressed iconically in “Part of Your World”). Thus, Ariel begins the show “beam[ing] with enthusiasm” at the water’s surface—declaring “this is where I belong” —as she yearns to join the “World Above.”²⁰⁵ In the following scene, she curiously examines human paraphernalia, and after rescuing Eric from a shipwreck (a dramatic role reversal from the original story), implies that her romantic focus revolves around him being a gateway to the human world. “If only I could be ‘up there’ instead!” she cries. “Walking on the very same ground he is, breathing the very same air.”²⁰⁶

Yet although Wright introduces Ariel’s desire to become human at the outset of the show, the narrative is structured in such a way that this desire quickly blends with romantic feelings.

²⁰³ Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 180, quoted in Neuffer, “Part of a man’s world”, 11.

²⁰⁴ Lassell, *The Little Mermaid*, 67.

²⁰⁵ Wright, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *Little Mermaid*, 1.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 41.

While at first “she longs to grow intellectually, to expand her horizons and face new experiences’ – mostly by disobeying her father and meddling with humans – from the moment she saves Eric she aims for a marriage.”²⁰⁷ Her trove of ‘human stuff’ is “dominated by a huge, discarded bust resembling Prince Eric.”²⁰⁸ Only after falling in love with him—a plot point that earns an entire new number (“She’s in Love”)—she defends humans to the xenophobic Triton. Structurally, the two goals are intertwined: her contract with Ursula stipulates that in order to become fully human, she must get the prince to kiss her. Thus, achieving his love is simultaneously the subject of her desire and the instrumental task to achieve her super-objective of humanity. While a coexistence is theoretically possible, the politics of representation show a clear bias towards the pursuit of love. Act II focuses nearly exclusively on romance. Finally a human in the human world, Ariel—similar to Gertrude—is most upset about her muteness specifically because it obstructs her chance at a relationship with Eric. She strives to win the prince’s affection through dance (which he taught her) while he gradually falls in love with her, motivated by Ariel’s friends (“Kiss the Girl”).

From a pro-feminist perspective, Ariel achieves her voice *and* legs, autonomy, prince, and father’s respect by precipitating her own “moral victory.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, critics of the original 1989 film praised what they saw as an independent, fully-realized girl.²¹⁰ “She creates her own dilemma and resolves it,” says director Francesca Zambello “The way she saves her father and

²⁰⁷ Christine M Yzaguirre, “A Whole New World? The Evolution of Disney Animated Heroines from Snow White to Mulan” (MA Thesis, Seton Hall University, 2006), quoted in Malfroid, “Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Disney Princesses Series”, 52.

²⁰⁸ Wright, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *Little Mermaid*, 22.

²⁰⁹ Neuffer, “Part of a man’s world”, 14.

²¹⁰ Cruz, “The Feminist Legacy.” It’s important to note that Ariel is a rebellious **teenager** figuring out her place and relationships within the world. As such, the ambivalent gender tropes/norms and pro- vs. anti-feminist conflict of her arc are also indicative of her physical/mental development of maturity (i.e. growing up is *weird*). She’s impulsive and distracted, unmotivated by her royal status, adventurous, naive, physically awkward (especially on land), and somewhat of an outsider—despite being ‘daddy’s little girl.’ “Her function is self-centered, directed to self-discovery and self-rule rather than obedience to dictated masculine or feminine roles” (Do Rozario 2004, 51).

gets the guy herself is a message that I wanted to convey to young women.”²¹¹ Yet although Ariel is agentive in her goal-seeking, what of the patriarchal goals themselves? Additionally, she must give up her voice in order to get what she wants, be with a man, and control her body—which she uses to win the prince’s affection. In this way, “Ariel represents a woman giving up her voice in order to be accepted, successful, and loved in a male dominant society.”²¹² As a family-friendly show performed in high schools across the country, the story “teaches girls that a romantic relationship with a man is more important than a woman’s independence or freedom of speech.”²¹³

The theatrical adaptation most structurally lives out its empowering creed through the climactic fight scene. Whereas in the movie Prince Eric and Ursula face off, here it’s Ariel who breaks the magic shell that destroys Ursula, returns her voice, and frees her father. Ariel controls her destiny, takes action, and ‘saves the day.’²¹⁴ The following sequence, however, is more ambivalently feminist. Triton and Ariel apologize, repairing their father-daughter bond; Triton accepts that Ariel loves Eric and subsequently turns her into a human. When Eric seeks Triton’s permission to marry Ariel,²¹⁵ Triton quips, “Ariel can speak for herself” —a clever subversion of the patriarchal norm of fathers ‘giving away’ their daughters—eliciting a “loving, grateful look” from Ariel.²¹⁶ Ariel accepts, and the cast reprises a re-written version of “Part of Your World.”

²¹¹ Lassell, *The Little Mermaid*, 67.

²¹² Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, 1st ed (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 136, quoted in Neuffer, “Part of a man’s world”, 12.

²¹³ Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity”, 119.

²¹⁴ “We felt that the dramatic antagonists were Ariel and Ursula, so that the final showdown had to be between them, and that Ariel should rescue herself,” said Doug Wright (Lassell 2008, 68).

²¹⁵ It’s a speech that centers himself and emphasizes what Ariel can provide him: “I’ve found someone who makes me eager to seize the future, and claim my birthright as King. But if I slip out to sea sometimes, I don’t think she’ll mind...because she’ll be right there next to me, keeping us both on course” (*Little Mermaid* 2011, 99-100). As in other plots, marriage becomes the inevitable “antidote for the adventuresome female spirit,” for “adventure should be left in the hands of men” (Malfroid 2009, 66).

²¹⁶ Wight, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *Little Mermaid*, 100.

While this version mainly celebrates the couple's happy marriage and future, note how Ariel's last line briefly calls back to her original desire:

Ensemble:	Prince Eric: JUST YOU AND ME...
NOW THEY CAN WALK	Ariel: AND I WILL BE...
NOW THEY CAN RUN	All: PART OF YOUR WORLD!
NOW THAT AT LAST THEIR STORY'S	(pg. 102)
BEGUN!	

In reaction to the repressive historical context of the original Anderson tale, when women “were expected to subjugate themselves to men,” Wright saw the musical adaptation as a chance to reward, rather than punish, Ariel's appetites.²¹⁷ He hoped this version would show that “young women with ambition...can have their own dreams and autonomy independent of the men who may fulfill their romantic lives.” However, whether a meaningful, equitable coexistence between a woman's autonomous “dreams” and heterosexual romance is possible given the structural priorities of the politics of representation is dubious. The patriarchally circumscribed subversions produce, at best, an outdated and palatable expression of “consumer feminism,” with the focus on ultimate marriage and motherhood facilitating a regressive “domestication of feminism.”²¹⁸ The unconventional, empowering traits that render women “feisty” are valued, but only in ways that further the ‘marriage plot.’

²¹⁷ Lassell, *The Little Mermaid*, 67.

²¹⁸ Craven, “Beauty and the Belles”, 127; Warner, “From the Beast to the Blonde”, 313, quoted in Craven, “Beauty and the Belles”, 124.

4. Boys will be Boys

A. “Good Guys” and Fathers

While more gender normative—albeit hyperfeminine—traits dominate female-coded protagonists (e.g., romance, marriage, caretaking, emotionality, beauty), male leads tend to be more complex and ‘unconventionally’ masculine. Horton is described as a “gentle giant, rotund and appealing...a big-hearted blue-collar guy.”²¹⁹ He’s sensitive, ignorant of Gertrude’s romantic pinings (and generally unmotivated by romance), and—most strikingly—spends the show protecting the Whos and acting as a single father to Mayzie’s egg. Seymour is described as “an insecure, put-upon florist’s clerk” —a historically feminine profession.²²⁰ He’s a “naive,” “sweet,” and “well-meaning” orphan with “clumsy ways and poor social skills” who learns to be a hero.²²¹ Although handsome, rich, and royal, Prince Eric is a self-proclaimed “fish out of water” who’d rather sail the ocean than fulfill his princely obligations of ‘proper’ marriage. The Baker in *Into The Woods*—the second most-produced show of the 2010s—eschews militant, ‘hard body’ ideals of ‘manliness’ in favor of the “modern masculine” ethos, one guided by Christian, middle class values like law and order, self-control, and commitment to family.²²² His is a “masculinity that is wholesome and idealized, that is domestic without being soft.”²²³ Unlike the women, most of these ‘good guys’ are not conventionally attractive but endearingly homely.

²¹⁹ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 1.

²²⁰ MTI, “Little Shop.”

²²¹ Ashman & Menken, *Little Shop*, 8.

²²² Peter C. Wood, “Back(Lash) Into the Woods: Putting Women Back in Their Place,” in *Text & Presentation*, 2012, ed. Graley Herren, *The Comparative Drama Conference Series 9* (McFarland, 2012), 145.

²²³ *Ibid.* Yet, in his pursuit of fatherhood and reforging of a nuclear family unit, Wood argues that he “puts the women of the play in their proper places: the Witch is gone, the adulterous wife is dead, and the woman who wished of palaces [Cinderella] is returning to the kitchen to keep house for a man” (Wood 2012, 148).

Their transgressive physical appearances, behaviors, and values are empowering within the narrative and add dimensions of complex humanity to the roles.

Additionally, while mothers figures have disproportionately disappeared, transgressive fathers get a turn in the spotlight. Most embody or are learning to embody a softer, more feminine, and emotionally-attuned style of parenting; it's almost as if mothers haven't just disappeared, but rather have been subsumed by the dads themselves. In the case of Horton, the reproductive labor of fathers is made salient and celebrated in a way seldom attributed to mothers—both in narratives and in life. This simultaneously downplays the historic contributions of women and uplifts the 'deviant' struggles of men. Belle's father Maurice is elderly, quirky, affectionate and powerless, an incompetent, socially-rejected inventor with dowdy fashion and short stature.²²⁴ Despite flashes of confidence, his subordinate victimhood drives the plot; he's kidnapped by Beast, rescued by Belle, and nearly carted off to an asylum by Gaston. Nonetheless, he shows solidarity and affectionately supports Belle when she's teased for her 'feisty' uniqueness; "you're all I've got / no matter what," they harmonize.²²⁵ As the patriarch of the Addams family, Gomez also leads the show's plot. Despite his commitment to Morticia, he breaks his wife's trust by secretly supporting Wednesday, developing a strong but complicated father-daughter dynamic. He's commanding, comical, and a bit dorky—à la old-fashioned, 'sitcom-esque' tropes of fatherhood— yet passionately and publicly pines for his wife and privately soliloquizes his raw emotional anguish in several soliloquies. He explores the emotional contradictions of life, love, and parenthood as he consoles Wednesday in "Happy/Sad." His values don't seem to jibe with traditional ideas of fatherhood and masculinity:

²²⁴ Jerald Bolden, "The Metamorphosis of Masculinity in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*" (MA Thesis, California State University, Sacramento, 2009).

²²⁵ Menken, Ashman, Rice, & Woolverton, *Beauty and the Beast*, 14.

Mal: Lucas? He's a little soft like his mother. But when he gets out of college, I'll toughen him up. Teach him the business. Make him a man.

Gomez: May I say something? You and I – I feel we understand each other. Do you feel this?

Mal: No.

(Brickman et al. 2013, 46).

Some fathers are not as actively sensitive—even somewhat abusive—yet redeemable, complex, and/or entertaining enough to maintain the audience's sympathy. In *Little Shop*, Mushnik uses the promise of fatherhood to emotionally exploit the orphaned Seymour in order to keep his business afloat (in the comic Klezmer tango, "Mushnik And Son"). King Triton's opening description reveals that beneath his "imposing presence and commanding nature lurks the harried single father of seven girls."²²⁶ Overbearing, overprotective, and aggressive, he grapples with his roles of father and king. Additions to the theatrical version include him privately longing for his dead wife. "If only she were here," he sings, "She'd know just what to say. / She'd firmly and yet gently / Help the girl to find her way. / She'd know what to forbid / And what we must allow / She'd have the strength and patience that I lack, somehow."²²⁷ Still, he eschews his own emotional growth and parenting responsibilities by delegating Sebastian as Ariel's chaperone, destroys Ariel's prized possessions (followed by some private regret) and pushes her further away. Ultimately, he sacrifices his power for Ariel's freedom, and after being rescued by her, apologizes for his xenophobic attitudes (but not his abrasive parenting), acknowledges her maturity ("you grew up") and grants her humanity so that she can marry Eric.²²⁸

²²⁶ Wright, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *Little Mermaid*, 9.

²²⁷ Ibid, 15-16.

²²⁸ Do Rozario draws a parallel between the father-daughter dynamic in *The Little Mermaid* and the 'teen folk musical' of *Dirty Dancing*, arguing that both evoke conservative, mid-20th-century gender power dynamics. There's a disapproving, yet loving father; a handsome, forbidden 'bad boy'; a teenage daughter learning to use her body and

Despite the prominence of female audience members and performers in high school MT, motherhood is sidelined while fatherhood is explored. Fathers in these shows are complex, emotional, and agentive, transgressing gender norms as they learn to parent their (often female) children. Thus, men maintain their patriarchal power through narrative content and the politics of representation—even while promoting problematic values of parenting and masculinity.

B. “Bad Guys” and the Beast

Opposite the quirky ‘nice guys’ are the malevolent male antagonists. The cartoonishly narcissistic Gaston fervently attempts to coerce Belle into marrying him—harassing her, scheming to ship her father to a mental asylum, and mortally wounding Beast before falling to his death. The sadistic dentist Orin Scrivello abuses Audrey (she sports a black eye and arm cast, and jokes about needing “Epsom salts and ace bandages”); he calls her a “slut,” slaps her, but ultimately suffocates on laughing gas and is fed to the plant. In ‘telescoping’ fashion, these men are so blatantly antagonistic that it’s easy to condemn their immorality and cheer at their demise. Yet it’s through a more complicated, emotionally vulnerable, and relatable male character—enabled by the affective power of MT storytelling—that these shows enable acceptance and complicity for abusive behavior.²²⁹

Enter Beast. Despite being a Disney Princess story, *Beauty and the Beast* centers on Beast’s personal journey. The show’s opening—which, again, tends to tell us exactly who/what a

sexuality in a struggle to gain autonomy. By the end, the fathers accept the transgressive choice of mate, “acknowledge that their ‘little princesses’ have grown up, and give their blessings to the romantic commitments the daughters have made” (Do Rozario 2004, 51).

²²⁹ The abuse in the satirical *Little Shop* might be a step too far for some. Two theater educators I spoke with found that element discomfiting, with one considering it a dealbreaker in terms of producing the show. Early demos reveal how ingrained abuse was in the narrative: a cut song for Audrey features lyrics like: “But when he hurts me / that’s how he tells me / that he would never let me go” and “One slap is worth ten thousand words” (“The Worse He Treats Me,” track 24 on soundtrack/cast album, *Little Shop of Horrors - New Broadway Cast*, DRG Records, 2003.)

show will be about—sets up Beast’s backstory and the tale’s central conflict *before* transitioning to “Belle.” In the show, Belle is a stand-in for the audience, the “subject of learning, moral instruction and sexual desire” for her Beast teacher, who compels her to find beauty beneath ugliness.²³⁰ Not just physical ugliness: “For Disney to extract this moral requires outrageous disregard of the worst aspects of Beast – his cruelty, rages and hostage-taking,” argues Craven, citing Gray’s view that Beast “‘has the ‘psychological profile . . . of a violence prone wife batterer.’”²³¹ A group of psychologists investigated this idea, updating the folk ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ interpretation of the tale with a theory of “response-based practice to show how the film uses misrepresentation and social responses to disappear violence and advance the narrative of a fairy-tale love story.”²³² In this framework, the actions of social responders—the people who respond to victims and perpetrators of violence, abuse, and adversity—are important for understanding the actions of the victims and perpetrators themselves. For example, “social responders are integral to affirming that the violence was wrong, that the victim was not responsible, that the victim is worthy of social concern and redress, and upholding the social meaning of the actions,” potentially influencing future behavior.²³³ The show’s social responders—castle servants Lumiere, Cogsworth, Mrs. Potts, and others—have a motivation to develop romance between Belle and Beast: once he can love, the curse will be broken and servants will be transformed back to free humans. Yet this self-serving motivation is papered over by an apparent fondness for the couple, so rather than “pimp-like beings...they come across

²³⁰ Craven, “Beauty and the Belles”, 139. The teacher-learner positionality and emphasis on Beast’s story was furthered by the show’s marketing: the poster featured only Beast and the rose. Thus the audience identifies with Belle, placed “under Beast’s instruction.” (Craven 2002, 133).

²³¹ Ibid, 133.

²³² Coates et al., “Beauty and the Beast”, 119. While both Craven and Coates et al. analyze the film, the theatrical version is extremely faithful to the original script, while deepening Belle and Beast’s relationship; Woolverton wrote both the screenplay and libretto (Lassell 2002).

²³³ Ibid, 122.

as knowing friends or mentors of Beast.”²³⁴ Likely also motivated for a concern for their own safety, the social responders minimize, misrepresent, and “talk away” the Beast’s abusive actions (e.g. “his temper”), use friendship and support to pressure Belle’s relationship, and distance Beast’s agency from his consequences (e.g., Belle “lost her father and her freedom”). Through socialization:

Ideas about how men and women should behave and the meaning of those actions in romantic or intimate relationships are conveyed... Through these processes, the filmmakers change the meaning of the events so that viewers can accept that a man who imprisons, abuses, and threatens a woman could actually not mean any of those actions; that is, they are not deliberate acts of violence but acts of ignorance and even positive intention. We can make sense of the Beast falling in love with Belle, and even more importantly we can make sense of Belle falling in love with the Beast...[Yet] in real life, those who choose to use violence do not undergo a metamorphosis caused by women and girls’ resistance to their violence...And in real life the abusive person is very unlikely to turn into a kind prince. (pg. 131-132)

Adaptations for the stage version further emphasize Beast’s positive intentions and relatability; these entail, namely, new songs to deepen character and, according to librettist Woolverton, opportunities to “develop Belle and the Beast’s relationship and define the common ground between them.”²³⁵ Belle expresses how, in the face of dark despair, she began to appreciate her relationship with the Beast and saw “that good can come from bad” (“A Change in Me”).²³⁶ The Beast wrenchingly soliloquizes his self-hatred as he struggles to express his love for Belle and earn hers (“If I Can’t Love Her”). Through the uniquely emotional language of MT, the Beast’s negative masculine behavior is put into conversation with his positive intentions and indirectly absolved by Belle’s appreciation—he becomes ‘complex’ and relatable. This

²³⁴ Ibid, 125.

²³⁵ Lassell, “Disney’s Beauty and the Beast”, 29.

²³⁶ Menken, Ashman, Rice, & Woolverton, *Beauty and the Beast*, 86. Ironically, she then sings: “That may not make me wise / But, oh, it makes me glad” (ibid).

potentially dangerous—and dangerously effective—technique acts on the audience to make us more sympathetic and forgiving of abusive male characters.

5. ‘Queer’ Expressions of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

In regard to its canonical practitioners, current participants, nontraditional theatrical devices, and ‘campy’ ethos, MT can be considered a ‘queer’ art form.²³⁷ High school MT—“notoriously a fag space”—has become a “space of liberation and relaxation” where students gay and straight “can enact a variety of gender practices.”²³⁸ Yet despite the vast contributions of (often closeted) gay men to the MT tradition, Knapp argues that “the strong gay presence in musical theater has had much to do with an entrenched general reluctance to see the art form as contributing centrally to American culture, and thereby to our collective image of ourselves.”²³⁹ Gay characters are scant in shows of high school MT canon. Moreover, when gay characters are depicted in Broadway shows, it’s often been foregrounded in a “comforting, stereotypical version of gayness.”²⁴⁰ Further, the focus on “the relationship between musical theatre and homosexual men has obscured the lack of representation of lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters in musicals until recently.”²⁴¹

Historical American MT naturalizes heterosexism, and high school musicals are no exception. Deviant expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation in these librettos are outright avoided, antagonized, or rendered comical by the politics of representation.

²³⁷ E.g. Knapp, *National Identity*; Wolf, *Changed for Good*; Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*.

²³⁸ Cheri J. Pascoe, *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school* (Univ of California Press, 2011), 78, quoted in Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 127.

²³⁹ Knapp, *National Identity*, 5.

²⁴⁰ John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 10, quoted in Whitfield, *Reframing the Musical*, 188.

²⁴¹ Whitfield, *Reframing the Musical*, 192.

A. Sexuality

The confluence of sexual deviancy, the politics of representation, and MT has a striking history. Knapp identifies most representations of ‘sexual deviance’ in 20th-century shows as “licentious behavior or display for women and the suggestion of homosexuality for men.”²⁴² Narrative structure begins with a “partial celebration of such alternatives for their spirit of independence and liberating effect.”²⁴³ Secondly, “increased understanding” of that alternativity encourages characters and audiences to recognize how a bit of that deviance lives in all of us. Finally, the deviant are punished for their alternativity: “bad girls and homosexuals (especially the latter) tend to die in the end, often but not always as a token of their redemption.” This is embodied clearest in *Into The Woods* wherein, following her affair with Cinderella’s Prince and an epiphany about challenging life’s expectations for her, escaping life’s expectations, scholars assert that the *show itself* kills the Baker’s Wife as symbolic retribution for enacting her desires, breaking her wifely vows, and putting her family at risk.²⁴⁴ While this exact trope isn’t as perpetuated in high school MT (e.g. slightly present with Mayzie, but fully rejected in *Mamma Mia*), its historical prevalence informs women’s conservative sexual behavior and the rampant heterosexism in the contemporary high school canon.

Knapp identifies two senses of sexual deviancy: sexual orientation and “licentious” behavior that diverges from traditional gender norms. As for the former, in these majority heterosexist/heterosexist-coded worlds, nearly no character is explicitly depicted, substantially-coded, or openly identifies as being queer. One small exception is a father from *Mamma Mia*, Harry, who briefly mentions that “There’s all kinds of families, aren’t there? Yours is you and

²⁴² Knapp, *Personal Identity*, 206.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 207.

²⁴⁴ Wood, “Back(lash)”, 144.

Sophie. Mine is me and Nigel.”²⁴⁵ Beyond this, sexually (and somewhat gender) ambiguous Uncle Fester winkingly asks the audience: “You’re probably thinking, what could a fat bald person of no specific sexuality know about love? But I, too, am in love...[with] the moon!”²⁴⁶ Fester’s candor is refreshingly honest, but given his function as a comic relief and that his crush—although ‘out of this world’—isn’t human, the line becomes an absurd (if earnest) joke rather than an honest depiction of non-normative sexuality.

Ironically, even the most imaginative fantasies seem to draw a line at heterosexism. The *Cat in the Hat* has been historically performed by both male and female artists, but while libretto gives the option to cast a male or female performer in the role and the score provides key changes for different registers, the script stipulates one textual change “necessary to accommodate a female.”²⁴⁷ During an expositional song in which Mayzie catches the audience up on her life, the *Cat in the Hat* plays an ancillary character—“José, the Latin Pool boy” in the ‘Male Version’ or “Renee, the Beautician” in the ‘Female Version.’²⁴⁸ Why? The *Cat in the Hat* is “the essence of mischief, fun and imagination,” playing a litany of eclectic cameos across gendered tropes—a TV host, kooky doctor, jazz pianist (who sings “ala Louis Armstrong”), and circus ringleader *Mr. McGurkis*—yet in this specific instance, gender stereotypes must be enforced. Perhaps because Mayzie is a sexually active female character and the ethnic trope of “Latin Pool Boy” implies sensual romance that the writers felt it would be best—perhaps to cater to conservative-minded communities when the show was licensed in the mid-2000s—to avoid any implication of queerness. Instead, sexual and gender deviance—as with Fester—must be inherently associated with comedy, not more ‘serious’ love.

²⁴⁵ Catherine Johnson, *Mamma Mia!* (New York: Music Theatre International, 2018), 90.

²⁴⁶ Brickman, Elice, & Lippa, *The Addams Family*, 66-67.

²⁴⁷ Ahrens & Flaherty, *Seussical*, 3.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 71, 103.

In general, licentiousness, bawdiness, and ‘adult themes/content’ are generally considered deviant sexual expressions, both within more conservative expectations of mainstream MT and particularly for the teenage/high school domain.²⁴⁹ Most of these shows sanitize romance (i.e., ending with a kiss) or pepper in subtle innuendos aimed at adults. However, *The Addams Family* has its fair share of blue humor: says Grandma, “Call me Cougar, but five’ll get you ten there’s a couple of 90-year-old hotties out there just waiting to chow down on a Grandma sandwich.”²⁵⁰ Gomez’s passionate lusting after Morticia gets occasionally graphic: “my luscious wife...dress cut down to Venezuela,” or calling her “a gymnast in the bedroom.”²⁵¹ However, the way that their “risqué pulsating relationship” defies notions of a typical American heterosexual marriage aligns with the countercultural satire of the Addams Family brand; Gomez and Morticia were generally considered “the first television couple who gave the appearance of an active sex life.”²⁵² The most risqué title of the high school MT canon, hands down, is *Mamma Mia!*—featuring discussions of pregnancy, jokes about threesomes, and a bevy of songs which portray sensuous seductions and celebrate sexual desire (e.g. “Does Your Mother Know?”, “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)”). This last show is truly subversive and empowering in its female licentiousness: in the words of a music director, “They have sexual histories but their sexual histories have come out of their own appetite...it didn’t come out of being an object.

²⁴⁹ Chapman, “Knowing Your Audience”; Valerie Strauss, “The School Play Is about WHAT!? Controversy on Stage and Why It Matters.,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/07/the-school-play-is-about-what-controversy-on-stage-and-why-it-matters/>.

²⁵⁰ Brickman, Elice, & Lippa, *The Addams Family*, 68. The script even includes three optional dick jokes which may be removed at the discretion of the director.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1, 36.

²⁵² Patrick Sauer, “The Cultural History of ‘The Addams Family,’” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/cultural-history-addams-family-180973315/>.

And I think that's really empowering for women to see that."²⁵³ How this might bear out for squeamish family audiences and teenage girls is another story, however.

B. Gender

As for deviant gender expression—which may be especially influenced by performance elements—it's useful to consider examples which are 1. Baked directly into the script, 2. Strongly informed by source material, and/or 3. Based on original, historical, and iconic performances. The vamping sea witch Ursula is a grotesque parody of a *femme fatale*, whose signature look—resembling a bawdy octopus with heavy makeup—was modeled after the overweight male drag performer known as 'Divine.'²⁵⁴ In "Daddy's Little Angel," Ursula acknowledges that while her father's favorite daughter was "so feminine, so fresh, so fine" and "such a little frilly femme", the sea witch was "ugly as a slug" and "hideous to hug"; "Daddy found me loathsome and disgusting, I could tell."²⁵⁵ Yet Ursula derives some satisfaction, perhaps even solidarity in caring for other "poor, unfortunate souls," gaining strength from her outsider status.²⁵⁶ Still, in addition to her harsh criticism of the patriarchy and derogatory views of men, Ursula's deviant, 'un-feminine' gender expression and (sometimes lethal) notions of feminism further antagonize her from conventional notions of gender expression and 'goodness.'

In *Matilda*,²⁵⁷ Miss Trunchbull is the brutal and sadistic headmistress at the protagonist's school (whose Latin alma mater translates to "children are maggots"). Dahl originally coded Trunchbull as masculine, with "big shoulders," a "deep and dangerous voice," and "thick legs" to storm through the halls like a football player (Glenn, X). She wears breeches instead of a skirt,

²⁵³ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage*, 56.

²⁵⁴ Lassell, *The Little Mermaid*, 33. Producers even considered hiring a man for the Broadway role.

²⁵⁵ Wight, Menken, Ashman, & Slater, *Little Mermaid*, 18.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 55.

²⁵⁷ Included in the top ten most-produced high school musicals of 2019-2020 (Nadworny 2020).

flats instead of heels, and flexes her athletic prowess—a former Olympic champion in the historically male-exclusive ‘hammer-throwing’ sport—as the feared P.E. instructor, tossing children by their pigtales. Trunchbull was originally portrayed on Broadway by the male actor Bertie Carvel in drag, who was critically lauded for his sociopathic, comedic performance (Brantley, X).²⁵⁸ To viewers like Barnes, the casting choice is “just another example of male derision and condescension towards women in British musical theatre,” a vulgar parody of femininity that appeals to the humorous tastes of straight men.²⁵⁹ Trunchbull is a foil—in name, appearance, character, and gender expression—to Miss Honey, Matilda’s encouraging school teacher and later-guardian. Honey is a “paragon of femininity: demure, motherly, gentle, but most importantly, slender and beautiful ‘like a porcelain figure.’”²⁶⁰ With Trunchbull’s masculinity as “both the source of her insanity and the medium of her cruelty,” Glenn argues that her positioning as an antagonist—plus the drag casting—threatens to paint the show’s story as a “fable about the hubris of being transgender.” It’s evocative of how the politics of representation deal with Ursula—linking her cruel antagonism to her deviant gender expression. It’s an ironic disclaimer to *Matilda*’s message of female empowerment: “Women should be ‘gutsy and adventurous,’ even intellectual and literary. But they should still be women.”

Occasionally, a progressive analysis may provide a liberating rereading of older source material, with the potential to influence future artistic interpretation. Such is the case in Leland Spencer’s (2014) innovative criticism in “Performing Transgender Identity in *The Little*

²⁵⁸ Ben Brantley, “Children of the World, Unite!,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/theater/reviews/matilda-the-musical-at-shubert-theater.html>.

While the original film featured a female-identifying actress as Trunchbull, many high school productions have replicated the Broadway cross-gender casting.

²⁵⁹ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage*, 117.

²⁶⁰ Eliot Glenn, “The Dangerous Transphobia of Roald Dahl’s ‘Matilda,’” *Salon*, October 27, 2013, https://www.salon.com/2013/10/27/the_dangerous_transphobia_of_roald_dahls_matilda/.

Mermaid: From Andersen to Disney.” Rather than interpreting the union between humans and merpeople as interracial like Neuffer (2019), Spencer uses a transgender reading to understand the show as a “story about [Ariel’s] struggles between her desire to perform a human identity and the societal and familial pressures she feels to perform mer.”²⁶¹ Ariel’s conflict may be a “body-mind dissonance” akin to when “transgender individuals’ desired identity performances are often at odds with familial and social expectations.”²⁶² She even “finds that she must be silenced for a short time on the way toward performing her identity fully.”²⁶³ Ariel’s collection of human artifacts and desires to be ‘part of that world’ mirror how “Many transgender individuals, early in their identity development, seek information and artifacts about the gender with which they relate and long to dress in clothes considered socially appropriate for that gender.”²⁶⁴ Thus, Triton’s xenophobia is actually transphobia, though both processes employ similar mechanisms of prejudice and othering. Through a transgender reading that is compatible with—yet discrete from—queer/feminist readings, Spencer argues that “Triton’s final act is more than something tantamount to walking his daughter down the aisle and giving her away; instead, his decision to turn Ariel back into a human is a sign of his acceptance of her desired identity performance.”²⁶⁵ In this respect, Ariel’s journey in *The Little Mermaid* can be understood as a “coming-out narrative of sorts.”²⁶⁶

Gender inflects both the narrative content and structural politics of representation of these high school musicals—specifically in ways that tend to limit, dehumanize, and denigrate the very

²⁶¹ Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity”, 119.

²⁶² Sarah W. Morgan and Patricia E. Stevens. "Transgender identity development as represented by a group of female-to-male transgendered adults." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 29, no. 6 (2008): 585-599, quoted in Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity”, 114.

²⁶³ Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity”, 123.

²⁶⁴ Morgan & Stevens, “Transgender identity development”, quoted in Spencer, “Performing Transgender Identity.”

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 124.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

people who form the majority of its participants, fans, and audiences. Despite opportunities to find liberation and empowerment through performance in a proudly ‘campy’ art form, the patriarchal stories themselves are normative and limiting. This approach impacts and hurts persons of any gender, and stands starkly against the imaginative and empathetic aspirations of MT itself.

Frames and Implications

Performance Elements

It always bears repeating: in addition to the inevitable presence and effects of the politics of representation within the story and structure of a libretto, performance elements (e.g., casting, artistic vision, design, acting, etc.) complicate the presentation and reception of identity. Wolf (cited in Rowley) goes so far as to argue that “it is the very corporeality of theater that accounts for audience attention, involvement, and identification,” and that the effects “have ‘less to do with characters and the narrative and more to do with the bodies shaped through song and dance.’”²⁶⁷ To whatever degree this is the case, the impacts of performance elements are complicated, circumstantial, and similarly enmeshed within history, power, and identity. For instance, casting a Black female student as Ariel and a white male student as Eric might subvert expectations about Western beauty standards, Disney princesses, and stereotypes of Black femininity, but it also may signal a historic racial power dynamic (e.g., a ‘lower status’ Black woman sacrificing her voice to appease a white prince). The audience demographics, community culture/values, and the high school performers’ own identities and relationships with audience

²⁶⁷ Wolf, “A Problem Like Maria”, 33; Rowley, “Let Me Be Part of the Narrative”, 29.

members (both uniquely familiar in a school setting) are other ‘authorial voices’ that can affect how a show is received. How and to what degree performance elements influence the politics of representations in a libretto is highly variable, but still essential questions to consider.

Satire

Through the ‘winking’ lens of parody and satire, problematic representations of identity tropes can instead be turned upside, becoming a vehicle for critical, reflexive commentary. Devices like clever humor and exaggeration allow audiences to receive a show from a pleasurable (but emotionally uninvested) distance, leaving them in a more heightened state of awareness from which they may directly engage and reflect upon the material’s meta-messages. From more of an activist, even Brechtian perspective, shows may mock the harmful systems which reproduce their representations and—in some cases—spur audiences to reconsider their views and motivate behavior change. In this regard, artistic direction, writer intention, and even geopolitical context can become hugely important factors. For example, *Little Shop* was written as a campy, melodramatic love letter to B-List ‘60s horror films, delightfully self-aware of its caricatures and offensive tropes.²⁶⁸ Crafted by Jews for a substantially Jewish creative industry, geographic ethnic enclave, and audience base, its success in downtown Manhattan all but ensured that its Semitic humor—exaggeratedly coded within Mr. Mushnik, whose performance is once described in the script as being “like a demented Jewish refugee from *Fiddler on the Roof*” —would be taken in good faith.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Mel Gussow, “A Cactus Owns ‘Little Shop of Horrors,’” *The New York Times*, May 30, 1982, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/30/theater/musical-a-cactus-owns-little-shop-of-horrors.html>. The original script’s description of Audrey reads: “If you took Judy Holiday, Carol Channing, Marilyn Monroe, and Goldie Hawn, removed their education and feelings of self-worth, dressed them in spiked heels and a low-cut black dress, and then shook them up in a test tube to extract what’s sweetest and most vulnerable—that’d be Audrey” (*Little Shop* 1986, 8).

²⁶⁹ Ashman & Menken, *Little Shop*, 46.

Yet as baked into a script as satire may seem, it's technically a performance element, and thus a variable within the politics of representation. Intentions are separate from impact, and the variability of geopolitical context is particularly germane to discussion of high school MT across America.²⁷⁰ If a piece were to come across as earnest and un-self-conscious, the satirical edge might become subtle to the point of disappearance; this might just prove artistically uninspiring,²⁷¹ but it certainly gestures to other concerning implications. On the one hand, critical audiences might demean, avoid, and even 'cancel' what they perceive as offensive propaganda. On the other hand, less discerning audiences might indiscriminately absorb the show as a charming, albeit slightly 'outdated,' story. Either way, the sabotaged satire could decrease opportunities for future criticism and allow heightened problematic representations to continue circulating.

Affective Power

However detailed and vivid one describes a musical, it cannot recreate the overwhelming, multisensory, and sheer *affective* power of MT. Problematic ideologies can circulate so subliminally *because* MT's performance elements are so emotionally pleasurable and beguiling. Unlike a Brechtian approach, MT doesn't just reinforce ideologies about the 'correct' societal order through plain intellectual discourse. It reinforces visceral *feelings* about the way things

²⁷⁰To return to the example of Mr. Mushnik, pollinating *Little Shop* across America means that new contexts may give rise to new code-system activations. Mushnik is a "profit-driven, greedy, and manipulative" business owner who's willing to emotionally exploit Seymour if it means making enough money (MTI 2015). Consider a high school production in a town with a negligible Jewish population, and how, with a less satirical frame or less tolerant political atmosphere, the character's portrayal affirms anti-Semitic stereotypes.

²⁷¹A reviewer of *Little Shop* wrote: "The problem with this subtle undercurrent of racism is not that it's racist, but that it's subtle. *Little Shop of Horrors* would be a much stronger show if it were a full send-up of 1960 race relations; after all, the flower-shop owner is just short of being a stereotypical, kvetching, stingy Jew. If you're going to be reckless enough to dabble in race-as-camp, you ought to go all the way. Instead, what we get is *Grease* arranged and delivered by mildly demented FTD Florists" (Reel 2004).

should be, which, in many ways are far more influential on cognition, beliefs, and behavior. From major and minor keys to the strategic use of comedy to control audience expectations, MT manipulates the emotional experiences of audience members, often to win hearts and minds. So while this project critically investigates the ideologies produced by the politics of representation, it also recognizes that there is an additional set of emotional codes “produced in the phenomenological, sensory experience one has sitting in a theater” or performing in a show.²⁷² This system of codes “works against the totalizing reading of the show as wholly problematic and oppression-supporting,” but often ends up totalizing in the opposite direction, emphasizing the ‘fun’ and pleasurable aspects of MT while obscuring problematic others.

“Children Will Listen”

The ideological power of MT is subliminal, insidious, and potentially deeply potent, yet insufficiently considered. As Hoffman (2014) asks of whiteness: “Do racial ideologies that remain hidden and unvoiced actually have more power because they are left to propagate their ideals in ways that are much more subversive because they go unchallenged and unquestioned?” (8). To quote a member of the top-10 most-produced musicals of the 2010s, *Into The Woods*, “children will listen.” Millions of young people perform and consume these shows at a key stage of psychological development. The stories, characterizations, and ideals they engage with have the power to influence their worldview, behaviors, values, and futures in a myriad of ways beyond our comprehension. Adolescent teenagers are essential to consider: they’re working through a complex and challenging period of personal growth, one in which they’re both highly malleable and developing their critical thinking, social relationships, awareness of society,

²⁷² Gallella, “Superman/Sidekick”, 38.

personal identity, and skills of articulation to thoughtfully engage the world.²⁷³ Their heightened propensity to absorb, grapple with, and produce knowledge means that a healthy critical awareness is an invaluable tool to thoughtfully manage that intensive processing.

For students who will go on to pursue careers in the performing arts and flow through the professional pipeline, how might the ideologies imparted in their formative adolescence impact the future work they create? How will that future work be passed down to the next generation of high schoolers? In reaction to a slate of shows for the 2018/2019 Broadway season that perpetuate retrograde gender stereotypes—*Kiss Me Kate*, *Pretty Woman*, *My Fair Lady*—MT writer Georgia Stitt asks, “Are these the shows I’m going to take my 12-year-old daughter to?”²⁷⁴ Glenn (2013) posits that the “One group of people [who] will not miss Dahl’s underlying message” of transphobia in *Matilda* are “Little girls who love sports and not dresses, who are tall or muscular, who are boyish or even perhaps identify as boys, who long someday to possess authority. All of these children will see themselves in the Trunchbull, and they will watch closely as these aspects with which they identify are shamed.” Might gender disparities in complexity, agency, and romantic trajectories “tell women in the audience that their lives are irrelevant in comparison with men’s lives, or that they are incomplete women if they do not have men by their sides”?²⁷⁵ What about people of marginalized identities who don’t see themselves in these shows? Or those who only see an essentialized version of their identity, fetishized for its aesthetics but not recognized for its humanity? To apply the theory of response-based practice to

²⁷³ Eric Hazen, Steven Schlozman, and Eugene Beresin, “Adolescent Psychological Development: A Review,” *Pediatrics in Review* 29, no. 5 (May 1, 2008): 161–68, <https://doi.org/10.1542/pir.29-5-161>; Patricia M. King and Karen Strohm Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults*. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series and Jossey-Bass Social and Behavioral Science Series (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 1994).

²⁷⁴ Michael Paulson, “The Problem With Broadway Revivals: They Revive Gender Stereotypes, Too (Published 2018),” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2018, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/22/theater/gender-stereotypes-carousel-my-fair-lady-pretty-woman.html>.

²⁷⁵ Barnes, *Her Turn on Stage*, 12.

the world of MT: how might the actions of characters, structures of narratives, and the attitudes and choices of theater practitioners producing these shows shape what we believe to be acceptable, appropriate, and ‘right’ in society?

The answers to these questions are unknown, but they must still be engaged. Critical education can serve both as an empowering tool and invaluable learning opportunity with which students can engage the politics of representation in MT.

Discussion: What Now?

Setting The Stage: The Current State of High School MT

Just as MT is interdisciplinary and multisensory, so too does arts education positively impact students across a range of academic, socioemotional, and creative domains.²⁷⁶ According to research, high school MT engages and improves students’ socio-emotional skills, personal development, and artistic abilities.²⁷⁷ Case studies identify key growth areas in self-confidence, pride, and a sense of accomplishment; assertiveness, perseverance, and an improved work ethic; emotion regulation; empathy (with characters); self-development; having fun; ‘growing as

²⁷⁶ Rekha S. Rajan, *Musical Theater in Schools: Purpose, Process, Performance* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019); National Task Force on the Arts in Education, “Arts at the Core: Recommendations for Advancing the State of Arts Education in the 21st Century” (The College Board, Fall 2009); James S. Catterall, *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies*. Research Report #55, National Endowment for the Arts (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED530822>; Bridget Kiger Lee et al., “The Effect of Drama-Based Pedagogy on PreK–16 Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Research From 1985 to 2012,” *Review of Educational Research* 85, no. 1 (March 2015): 3–49, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314540477>; Ellen Winner, Thalia R. Goldstein, and Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin, *Art for Art’s Sake?: The Impact of Arts Education, Art for Art’s Sake?: The Impact of Arts Education* (Paris Cedex 16, France: OECD Publishing, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264180789-en>.

²⁷⁷ Most ‘empirical’ research on high school MT is conducted through dissertations in the form of qualitative studies. They focus on a limited sample of students’ experiences during the rehearsals and/or performances of a particular show. Research approaches usually entail ethnographic vignettes, observations, interviews, and occasionally some surveys and/or quantitative measurements. See review in Davey, Debra Jo. *Musical theatre in secondary education: teacher preparation, responsibilities, and attitudes*. Arizona State University, 2010.

performers’; collaboration toward a common goal; and forming new friendships, community, and a sense of ‘family.’²⁷⁸ Educators I spoke with echoed these priorities, emphasizing the importance of creative self-expression; developing performance and public speaking skills; transcending social groups; and cultivating a space where students can “be themselves,” “shine,” and “belong.” Similarly, in describing the purpose and impact of high school theater, teachers in the Survey of Theatre Education in United States High Schools (2011-2012) rated the development of interpersonal [communication, collaboration], “intrapersonal [self-discipline, self-understanding]”, and creative skills highest—a trend consistent across four decades of survey collection.²⁷⁹ Thomas Schumacher—the president of Disney’s show licensing arm, Disney Theatrical Group—noted: “[The students] learn to literally walk a mile in someone else’s shoes. All the soft skills that you need, they’re learning.”²⁸⁰ In general, key stakeholder opinions suggest that the chief priority of high school MT is to develop socio-emotional and artistic skills. As one teacher put it: “As long as students walk out with a love of theater, themselves, and each other, I’m happy.”

But while these goals are valuable and conducive to adolescent development, what might we lose by focusing exclusively on the creative, socio-emotional, and personal aspects of MT? In lamenting what he sees as ‘fluffy,’ safe, and easy shows chosen for the school canon, Howard

²⁷⁸ Kary Thomas Haddad, “‘This Is How It Feels’: The Lived Experience of High School Musical Theater” (D.M.A., United States -- Massachusetts, Boston University, 2018), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2024228267/abstract/C6F639F4A41E46C0PQ/1>; Ryan John, “Part of It All: The High School Musical as a Community of Practice,” *Visions of Research in Music Education*, no. 24 (2014): 29; Reed W. Larson and Jane R. Brown, “Emotional Development in Adolescence: What Can Be Learned From a High School Theater Program?,” *Child Development* 78, no. 4 (August 7, 2007): 1083–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.01054>; Ric Lynn Watkins, “The Musical Theater Experience and the Extent to Which It Affects High School Students” (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2005), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/305001887/abstract/C718971B450F4D35PQ/1>; Nevine A. Yassa, “High School Involvement in Creative Drama,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 1999): 37–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356978990040104>.

²⁷⁹ Matt Omasta, “Special Issue: Survey of Theatre Education in United States High Schools, 2011-2012,” *Teaching Theatre* (Educational Theatre Association, October 1, 2012), 13-14.

²⁸⁰ Fierberg, “How Disney Shows.”

Sherman (2017) asserts that “while students unquestionably learn many things from being a part of school theatre and any show that’s chosen – rigor, structure, teamwork, and so on – they aren’t necessarily learning from the shows themselves.” Instead, high school MT tends toward a ‘pedagogy of performance.’ Cousins compares theater education in the U.K. and U.S., describing how the former incorporates history, analysis, cross-cultural performance traditions, and student-devised work into curricula, whereas the latter focuses on rehearsal, memorization, and reproducing a mainstream canon.²⁸¹ According to the 2011-2012 survey—which received responses from 1200 institutions—only “several” schools reported offering courses that didn’t explicitly train performance, such as directing, literature, history, and playwriting.²⁸² By teaching a “pedagogy of performance” and artistic reproduction, American schools uphold mainstream commercial theater practices, dominant ideologies, and a canon that fails to “reflect the values and experiences of the multicultural society in which we live.”²⁸³ Additionally, beyond its occasional interdisciplinary uses, American arts education has been historically deemed *extracurricular*, taught outside of and/or in support of central academic subjects.²⁸⁴ Research on the academic benefits of arts education emphasizes its correlations with reduced dropout rates and achievement in ‘school-day’ curricula, rather than within the arts themselves.²⁸⁵ The arts are often integrated as an ancillary module to an existing academic unit or else practiced in clubs or

²⁸¹ Heather Cousins, “Upholding Mainstream Culture: The Tradition of the American High School Play,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 85–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/135697800114212>.

²⁸² Omasta, “Special Issue”, 21.

²⁸³ Cousins, “Upholding Mainstream Culture”, 85.

²⁸⁴ A thread might be drawn as far back as the seminal report, *A Nation at Risk*, which greatly influenced the education reform movement for years to come. The arts are mentioned only three times in the “Recommendations” section; “these areas complement the New Basics”—the main curricula—“and they should demand the same level of performance as the Basics.” National Commission on Excellence in Education, “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” *The Elementary School Journal* 84, no. 2 (November 1, 1983): 113–30, <https://doi.org/10.1086/461348>.

²⁸⁵ E.g. Lee et al., “The Effect of Drama-Based Pedagogy on PreK–16 Outcomes.”

afterschool.²⁸⁶ Some flock to theater specifically for a learning experience without the demands of a formal classroom or typical homework.

Some educational practices in high school MT take a slightly more academic approach. Licensing companies sometimes distribute a study guide for a particular show, which “includes a plot synopsis, discusses historical perspective and provides topics for discussion, research projects and essays.”²⁸⁷ Directors may have actors analyze their characters and discuss the world of the show during tablework. Basic dramaturgy clarifies the who/what/when/where of a show, explaining unfamiliar terminology, cultural traditions, and historical context. Especially with more explicitly ‘issues-driven’ shows, teachers may facilitate cast discussions about controversial topics, connections to current events, and personal reactions. However, while these approaches are useful in many regards, 1. Educators are not guaranteed to apply them and 2. They do not explicitly make space for a self-conscious, reflexive approach to shows themselves, focusing instead on the surface thematic content of the show and relevant connections to the world beyond it. In turn, students might miss the opportunity to understand the musical not as some abstract biblical authority, but as a primary source, written by real people whose perspectives have been shaped by history, identity, and power. This may entail incorporating interdisciplinary frameworks from English and Social Studies, challenging students to “analyze the context of a setting, understand the main characters in a story, identify the author’s message, and determine the purpose of the setting.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ This also tends to exclude low-income students—who are often students of color—who may have work or familial caretaking obligations during that time.

²⁸⁷ Music Theatre International. “Study Guide”, September 24, 2015.
<https://www.mtishows.com/marketplace/resource/pre-performance/study-guide>.

²⁸⁸ Rajan, *Musical Theater in Schools*, 114.

As should be evident from the show analysis, it's imperative to consider the authorial, structural, and narrative dimensions of the politics of representation. Gonzalez argues that to “direct and teach” without some critical awareness of the political dimensions of storytelling “shapes passive consumers and popular conformists, and secures us within our own biases,” subtly reinforcing hegemonic structures of American society instead of cultivating a critical awareness of them within students.²⁸⁹ We continue to reproduce musicals that promote outdated and marginalizing ideologies, representations, and images through the politics of representation; these are shows which, in many ways, “validate the way we live”—or, rather, the ways that a select, dominant group of creators and audiences deemed the ‘proper’ ways to live, 10 or 20 years ago—“as opposed to challenging it.”²⁹⁰ Despite improvements in diversity, equity, critical reflection, and institutional change throughout the professional theater industry, these changes 1. Are far more prevalent in onstage representation than offstage (e.g., writers, leadership) and 2. Are not guaranteed to substantially and systemically trickle down to the education domain.²⁹¹ Teachers have a unique opportunity to capitalize on their influential position and unique pedagogical assets to work towards a bottom-up transformation.

A reflexive critical education—one which, in addition to addressing explicit thematic content, self-consciously engages the politics of representation *within* shows and MT storytelling conventions—need not be mutually exclusive with socio-emotional, creative, and personal development approaches. This approach aligns with and builds upon arts education recommendations/standards, and can inspire further engagement with existing pedagogical goals.²⁹² Further, it enriches the special kind of learning that's only possible through the

²⁸⁹ Jo Beth Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages. II, Critically Orientated Drama Education* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 51, 59.

²⁹⁰ Cousins, “Upholding Mainstream Culture”, 91.

²⁹¹ Cox, “When Will Broadway’s Onstage Diversity Carry Over Behind the Curtain?”

²⁹² “2016 Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Theatre Education” (Educational Theatre Association, 2016).

performing arts and irreducible to traditional academics. In the rehearsal space, students figure out who they're allowed to be in the world; what they're allowed to notice about themselves; how to empathize with others by embodying their perspectives; who values their voice; how to appreciate their own complexities; how to listen to and support others in their most authentic selves; and how to use art as a liberating language of personal expression. In turn, a reflexive critical consciousness might start to reconcile the inherent tension between MT's progressive aspirations and its conservative narrative habits. Theatre is a space "where students who may not fit some arbitrarily perceived model of 'typical' can find others who are like them at their cores."²⁹³ It provides solidarity in deviance, especially for queer youth.²⁹⁴ Students can explore identity and liberation both in expressing their authentic selves and escaping into the shoes of a different person. Yet how can MT be a liberating tradition when the identities, values, and behaviors of its characters and narratives tend towards normativity? If a lack of healthy communication, empathy, and understanding—and the possible presence of disrespect—around dimensions of identity cause tension and/or hostility in a rehearsal space, how is healthy socio-emotional learning supposed to happen? If educators only focus on the creative perspectives and contributions of a narrow group of artists and a mainstream canon of work, how might this limit innovation and creativity?

High school MT can—and *must*—be more. My criticism, insistence, and ambitious hope come from a place of love and respect. Though they may not share the same values or pedagogies, each educator I spoke with agreed that theater teachers are the most invested and caring educators out there, "busting their asses" —without much recognition—to bring culture, creativity, joy, and personal growth to their students. I know that an inspiring and supportive

²⁹³ Sherman, "Keynote."

²⁹⁴ Pascoe, "Dude, you're a fag."

educator can change a student’s life. By committing to more a reflexive critical pedagogy of MT, we invest in students’ critical thinking skills, emotional and intellectual empathy, expanded creativity, innovative artmaking, meaningful engagement with identity, and commitment to a more equitable world.

Here’s how we might begin.

Educational Recommendations for Teachers

A “Critical” Approach

Most definitions of critical inquiry/thinking describe a rigorous, holistic approach to problem solving. According to the National Core Arts Standards, critical thinking develops many essential habits of thought: “purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference.”²⁹⁵ A reflexive critical approach mirrors this, but also seeks to awaken a ‘critical consciousness’ by engaging socio-political discourses around shows themselves. A critical pedagogy can help students “learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions that surround them.”²⁹⁶ Just as critical thinking “builds contextual awareness as an indirect but fundamental aspect of artistic practice and appreciation,” so too must critical inquiry consider the impact of identity, history, and power when selecting, producing, and performing high school musicals. These factors and the ways they manifest through race, gender, and other dimensions of personhood have shaped MT—its canon, creators, storytelling techniques, and politics of representation. For example, this

²⁹⁵ “National Core Arts Standards: A Conceptual Framework for Arts Learning” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014), 21.

²⁹⁶ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), cited in Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 8.

approach considers the *purpose* of MT; the *assumptions* we make about characters based on their code systems; the *concepts* of characterization, arc, agency, and the difference between ‘normativity’ and ‘subversion.’ Especially relevant are *objections from alternative viewpoints* outside of traditional hegemonic perspectives of MT. Indeed, as hegemonic hierarchies tend to disproportionately “deny, reduce, and exclude” marginalized identities, taking a social justice-oriented approach within this education may be warranted.²⁹⁷

The conclusions of my critical analysis **need not be the exact same conclusions you arrive at.** My findings are informed by my identity, experiences, community, and education. Each high school production, too, “presents itself in its own context accompanied by its own politics.”²⁹⁸ The most important first step is to pay attention to those politics—specifically, how identity, power, and history manifest within and around the art you and your students make. In her Critically-Oriented Drama Education (CODE) approach, theater educator/director Jo Beth Gonzalez aims to “stimulate[] students, faculty, and audiences to question assumptions of privilege” through rehearsals and productions which “foster critical consciousness and simultaneously maintain[] standards of high quality.”²⁹⁹ She suggests paying attention to how power, authority, student artistry, change, privilege, and place manifest in creative spaces. The same might be asked of a show. For example:

- What is the source material for this show? What historical contexts, perspectives, and meanings are associated with that source material? (e.g., Dr. Seuss for *Seussical*, the

²⁹⁷ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 50.

²⁹⁸ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 60.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

music/band dynamics of ABBA for *Mamma Mia*³⁰⁰) How, if at all, do you think that influences the show version?

- How might this show have been received when it was first written/produced? How does that differ from the way it might be received now?
- How does gender/race/sexuality/etc. influence the ways that characters are named, cast, and described?
- How do representations of gender/race/sexuality/etc. in the protagonists differ from those of the antagonists? How about for the comic reliefs? How about romantic couples? What might this “say” about that aspect of identity?
- Musicals use songs to tell the audience what’s important and who the characters are. What do female characters sing about? What do male characters sing about? What does this tell us about their priorities?
- Which characters are “coded” as being a certain race/ethnicity? Do you think any characters are ‘coded’ as white? If yes, who? If not, why do you think this might be?
- Shows, and stories in general, send messages. They might be very obvious (e.g., morals, finales; Ariel marries prince Eric), but they can also be subtle and subtextual (e.g., the way that stories are told; she had to give up her voice to get him to fall in love with her). What do you think is the show’s “obvious” message? What do you think is the show’s “subtextual” message? How do those messages interact with each other?

These questions are inspired from those that guided my show analysis. It’s been a learning process: in order to develop my sense of critical consciousness, I’ve had to practice empathy and probe aspects of my identity (e.g., white, cis-male) that have given me comfort and power within MT—and life. This work can be inherently uncomfortable, but that doesn’t mean that it’s ‘wrong’ or unproductive. Paying attention to the politics of representation should be an educational process for students *and* teachers. Not only does learning belong to everyone, but

³⁰⁰ For an innovative—and reflexive—feminist analysis, see Malcolm Womack, “Thank You For the Music: Catherine Johnson’s Feminist Revoicings in ‘Mamma Mia!’,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3, no. 2 (November 1, 2009): 201–11, <https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.3.2.201/1>.

modeling a commitment to critical thinking, intellectual humility, and honest discourse can itself be instructive. Critical inquiry might form the basis of intensive discussions and rehearsal activities.³⁰¹ Especially in more social issues-driven shows with controversial content, it can productively promote nuanced learning and community building.³⁰² Teachers can practice “positioning self-identity in relation to others.”³⁰³ In turn, they can better commit to equitable support, which might mean “carv[ing] time to create space and participation for typically under-represented and marginalized students.”³⁰⁴

Sherman (2017) argues that school theater makes students “better people” and “better citizens,” by teaching them that “they should not be afraid to stand in the spotlight and say what must be said, or to shine a harsh light on transgressions, on injustices that must be stopped.” While theater educators may take an appropriately righteous oppositional stance against the problematic issues they uncover, remember that the central tenet of critical inquiry is thoughtful engagement with nuance and ambiguity. Teachers should aim to cultivate both intellectual humility and strengthen students’ ability to reflect, debate others, and collaborate thoughtfully. This approach positions students (and educators) as learners who can be curious about their blind spots and open to conflicting opinions. In this way, a reflexive critical MT education is just as important for students who don’t often consider socio-political dimensions as it is for informed

³⁰¹ For example, one high school production of the satirical romantic comedy *The Drowsy Chaperone* involved discussions of discrimination, bias, and social injustice in the script, comparing perspectives of the 1920s with those in today’s society. Students participated in a privilege walk and introduced each performance by sharing their experiences and growth during the rehearsal (PK Yonge 2017).

³⁰² Patrick Healy, “Connecticut School Will Perform Wilson Play Despite Official’s Objection,” ArtsBeat (blog), January 20, 2011, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/20/connecticut-school-will-perform-wilson-play-despite-officials-objection/>.

³⁰³ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 50.

³⁰⁴ A Midwest theater teacher shared a story from a rehearsal of *Seussical*. A student suddenly exclaimed, “This is a very racy show.” When asked why, the student explained: “She’s [Mayzie] had unprotected sex outside of marriage, she abandoned her child, she’s [Gertrude] doing drugs.” Many in the cast hadn’t considered these dimensions, focusing more on performance (they were “just playing Mayzie/Gertrude”). The teacher opened up conversations around these topics, addressing discomfort and building empathy. “How do you feel about this? Do you know where Mayzie comes from?”

students who are quick to dismiss ideas as ‘problematic’ and ‘wrong’ without first considering other perspectives and context.

It’s essential that students learn from these shows themselves, to struggle with the narrative techniques, subliminal messaging, and ideologies which exist beneath and around these musicals’ clear, simple, and surface themes and lessons. That said, while this kind of pedagogy should be accessible, teachers should seek out research, training, and advice from diverse authorities to ensure a culturally-responsive approach that is effective, respectful, and sensitive. Just ‘talking about things’ without purpose and awareness is not the answer, and might even be counterproductive or destructive.

Teaching Social Studies & History

While interdisciplinary MT curricula takes a social studies approach that considers identity, history, and culture (e.g. studying the rise of Naziism through *The Sound of Music* or *Cabaret*, corporate greed and climate change through *Urinetown*, the Revolutionary War through *Hamilton*), these more critical lessons are developed around ‘issues-driven’ and ‘serious’ shows—especially those grounded in a specific cultural/historical context.³⁰⁵ That isn’t to say that critical learning is impossible or trivial for ‘diversionary’ musicals. It may be that the approach is less intuitive—the ambiguous socio-political contexts and fantastical aspects precludes ‘obvious’ historical dramaturgy. However, one may locate “pockets for critical inquiry” by considering the “invisible” histories of a show’s narrative content, structural politics of representation, and authorship/development process.³⁰⁶ In Rowley’s (2018) study on *Hamilton* and national identity

³⁰⁵ Barry Donnelly, “Expanding the Educational Impact of High School Theatre,” National Federation of State High School Associations, May 9, 2018, <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/expanding-the-educational-impact-of-high-school-theatre/>; Keith Mason, “Hamilton, 1776 and Beyond: Musicals in the Social Studies Curriculum,” *Software Engineering 1* (n.d.): 11.; Rajan, *Musical Theater in Schools*.

³⁰⁶ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 57.

for ethnically diverse high schoolers—in which she found that “participation in the Hamilton Educational Program (EduHam), not attendance at the live performance alone, predicted heightened American identity”—she writes:

“Hamilton shows bodies “written into” the story—key to the argument that associative mechanisms would be at work to shift identity. But the argument against this is that the historical stories of minorities haven’t been written into the play. This could be a major reason why exposure to the EduHam materials—which do allow for exploration of other non-White historical figures such as Phyllis Wheatley and Crispus Attucks (see Fertig, 2016)—mediates American identification better than exposure to the show alone. The production shows only bodies of color in White stories whereas the EduHam program relates stories of minority figures to the founding of America itself.” (pg. 67)

A theater/history educator I spoke with—who’s pedagogical approach is to ‘put a spin’ on classic shows—similarly seeks to highlight ‘silent stories’ by tying thematic content and identities to relevant aspects of society. For the famously ‘fluffy’ romantic comedy *Hello, Dolly!*, his historical dramaturgy focused on women-owned businesses, strong female characters, and the suffragette movement. In the quaint classic *The Music Man*, Gonzalez sought to nuance students’ comfort with the majority-White, rural Iowan idyll of the show’s early 20th-century setting.³⁰⁷ She brought in a lesbian African-American playwright also from rural Iowa to teach a playwriting lesson and speak about her experiences growing up and facing harassment in her community because of her identities; Gonzalez hoped that it would help students understand that “the production we were staging painted a picture that was relevant to a privileged class of United States.” She dreamed up—though never actualized—discussions, readings, and field trips to learn about the discriminatory racial politics of the barbershop music tradition (a beloved feature of the show).³⁰⁸ These approaches offer new opportunities for student research and

³⁰⁷ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 57-60.

³⁰⁸ A more thorough analysis can be found in Oja, “West Side Story and The Music Man.”

teaching; performers might develop dramaturgy materials and give presentations on ‘silent’ stories, contemporary connections, and/or their own characters.

In addition to these practices, students can better understand and engage the ‘politics of representation’ in MT storytelling through an examination of the genre’s history. In her pioneering effort to develop a rigorous, standardized, high school MT curriculum, Snider stressed the importance of historical research and comparative analysis. Teachers should ask, “What similarities between <assigned show> and modern shows can you find? What differences?” and “Explain how <assigned show> was a product of its time, and could or could not work today.”³⁰⁹ More specifically, educators and students can explore the history of their own show: its creators (and their identities/backgrounds/past work), the original production, inspiring source material, production history (including adaptation decisions), reviews, and the sociopolitical context in which it was written and performed. These processual aspects allow students to understand MT not as some abstracted artifact from the mythical past, but as a historical ‘text’ with sociopolitical contexts and meanings, forged by the perspectives, creative choices, and labor of fellow artists.

Critically Conscious Show Selection

The awareness, empathy, creativity, knowledge and self-reflection that critical inquiry calls for has the potential to influence rehearsals *and* performances of a show. Gonzalez suggests exploring the seen and unseen power dynamics among characters through improvisation, and incorporating an element of their improvised work directly into the show—legally, of course.³¹⁰ While activities, lessons, and discussions are valuable and may be conducted at any point, what

³⁰⁹ Catherine Dana Snider, “Teaching Broadway: Musical Theater Pedagogy in the Classroom” (Master of Arts, San Jose, CA, USA, San Jose State University, 1995), 45. <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.u4tv-n322>.

³¹⁰ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 33.

about tangible action from raised awareness? What if critical discussions in the middle of the rehearsal process lead a cast to perceive ‘unfixable’ problematic representations in the show’s DNA, yet no (legal) creative recourse can be taken to change the libretto? While you can’t predict what will come up in a rehearsal process, I recommend capitalizing on transitional periods—pre-show preparation, the first rehearsal, the post-show interim—to hold critical discussions with students and teachers, where stakeholders can be honest and constructively reflect. Especially for a post-show ‘autopsy,’ a more democratic forum empowers students’ creative ownership and allows a more collaborative community to directly apply their critical consciousness to future show selection.

Show selection is a crucial decision juncture for a high school theater program. It’s an opportunity for a theater teacher, department, and even students to determine the critical and creative mission, values, and aspirations of their art. While there’s a litany of logistical, creative, and community-level factors to consider when picking a musical, considering how identity, power, and history influence those choices is important to consider. In selecting shows, one teacher asks himself: “How do we reflect more of our society? Who are the authors? Are there straight white guys? Is it a heteronormative play? Are there opportunities for diverse characters?” If one is to seriously engage these issues, a potential reaction might be to research and select shows which 1. Are written by writers with marginalized identities and/or telling non-mainstream stories, 2. Embody more principles of empowered representation (especially for POC, queer, and/or female/nonbinary characters who have historically been excluded from that in librettos), diversity, and subversion, and 3. Provide opportunities to interrogate and/or challenge the politics of representation through casting and artistic choices.

To more ‘directly’ engage the politics of representation, teachers might consider producing more “issues-driven” musicals which bring socio-political themes to the narrative forefront; even within the mainstream high school MT canon, top-10 yearly rankings include titles like *Legally Blonde*, *Newsies*, *Hairspray*, and *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.³¹¹ However, shows that are ‘edgy’ and subversive in some regards can still perpetuate hierarchical power dynamics through the politics of representation. For example, groundbreaking rock musicals like *Hair*, *Spring Awakening*—even *Hamilton*—still “present conventional and conservative gender roles that often demean or diminish women,” for example.³¹²

Selecting shows with critical consciousness gives a high school theater community the opportunity to thoughtfully evaluate their past work, grapple with the sociopolitical dimensions of their art, and figure out how to make theater that is personally impactful, intellectually challenging, innovatively creative, *and* equitable.

Devised MT

Reimagining an outdated MT canon through innovative performance elements and critical inquiry activities, while important, is just one step in striving for equity, deep student engagement, and creativity. Cousins (2000) sees the reproduction of a mainstream canon as the most pressing systemic issue in American theater education, and advocates for more student-developed shows. Devised MT allows for more creative freedom, artistic ownership, and opportunities for students to explore issues relevant to their lives and the current world. As an inherently collaborative process, devised MT offers students the opportunity to further develop social skills through collaboration, refine their ability to give and take constructive feedback, and

³¹¹ Nadworny, “The Most Popular High School Plays and Musicals.”

³¹² Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 64.

spur creative imagination, empathy, and intellectual humility through collective theater-making. This approach is a central tenet of the Theatre-In-Education movement, a pedagogical approach that sees theatre “as a tool for social change, community building, and individual empowerment.”³¹³ While TIE practitioners tend to “dismiss the Broadway canon out of hand” for how its ‘pedagogy of performance’ “shortchange[s] students’ creativity and personal attachment to the material,” their own ethnographic research, however, reveals a more nuanced portrait of the benefits of extant MT.³¹⁴

Solely creating original MT need not and practically cannot be the only approach of a high school theater department. Still, devised theater is still a valuable practice, if underused. Only 26% of schools in the 2011-2012 survey offered faculty-directed, student-written works—and even fewer student-directed ones.³¹⁵ To be sure, this highly student-centered approach is an advanced creative and educational endeavor, one that calls for highly skilled, multidisciplinary teachers and eager, collaborative students. Not every school may feel that they have the resources for it. However, there are training programs, online resources, and practitioners available. Additionally, students can focus on the component disciplines of MT before building up to original material being a central focus of a theater program. Educators might collaborate with other departments to offer playwriting, songwriting, and choreography workshops/classes, and put up small showcases of original work.

³¹³ Ibid, 102.

³¹⁴ Nicole Gallagher’s research team compared the experiences of students in two classrooms—one which was putting on a devised play based on students’ own stories, experiences, and imaginations, and another that was rehearsing Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Although the former aimed to use drama to engage ‘social-issues’ and the latter aimed to hone performance craft and professionalism, the researchers found that “the divisions between the social/political and the aesthetic/artistic” blurred in both cases. Students were still able to find meaningful personal engagement through MT rehearsals (Gallagher 2014, 170).

³¹⁵ Omasta, “Special Report”, 24.

If students are to seriously understand how the politics of representation are facilitated by MT narrative structures and storytelling techniques, what better way than to make your own show? If a student artist finds problematic trends in MT, why not experiment by subverting them? What would it mean to ask *and* answer the question: ‘How would you do it differently?’ Devised theater provides an opportunity to bring out the authorial voice of student authors, which may be especially valuable for individuals who might not see themselves represented (respectfully, or at all) in mainstream MT. Educational MT experiences can catalyze a trajectory into a performing arts career. “If we, as a society, would like a theatre which is exciting, one which is constantly changing, constantly raising consciousness and making us think,” writes Cousins, “we must ensure that our future theatre practitioners understand the full extent of its powerful potential.”³¹⁶ Otherwise, we risk perpetuating mainstream, hegemonic culture and furthering systems of oppression by our complacency.

Innovative Hiring Practices

With exception and variation, some of these aspirations—particularly devised MT—may be overambitious given the abilities and expectations of theater educators. When assessing theater teachers’ educational skills and experiences, the 2011-2012 survey asked only about performance, technical, and administrative responsibilities.³¹⁷ Most responding administrators listed (in order) “strong interest/desire to teach theatre,” “effective overall teaching abilities,” and “experience teaching” as minimum requirements for hiring theater staff. Less than half required a bachelor’s degree in theatre or theatre education, and postgraduate training and professional

³¹⁶ Cousins, “Upholding Mainstream Culture”, 92.

³¹⁷ Omasta, “Special Report”, 19-20. While this could theoretically be attributed to biased survey design, it’s likely a reflection of educational realities, especially given the EdTA’s vast community network and past survey data.

experience were the least-reported minimum qualifications. Many theater educators have backgrounds in performance and/or directing, which helps to explain the prevalence of the “pedagogy of performance.” Additionally, music teachers are frequently tasked with putting on shows, and often feel unprepared to facilitate the more ‘theatrical’ elements of MT.³¹⁸

Beyond encouraging training in critical education, schools should expand their theater recruitment to writers, lyricists, composers, dramaturgs, and other artists involved with MT development. Many MT artists are multi-hyphenates, and can likely also deliver a high quality performance-based education. Especially in terms of playwriting, show analysis, and literary aspects of reflexively critical MT education, the groundwork may already be there; a majority of theater educators in the 2011-2012 survey reported holding bachelor’s degrees in English.³¹⁹ Diversifying the theater educator talent pool can open up countless opportunities for critical and creative learning, while showing students different perspectives in addition to tech, design, and performance to engage theater (which might be instructive and inspiring for students interested in developing their own work). Further, as the MT industry continues to gear shows toward student populations,³²⁰ schools, licensing companies, and professional creators might collaborate to workshop material with actual high schoolers. This is a common practice at the collegiate level, and could give students an exciting ‘behind-the-scenes’ experience in new MT development, as students share influential ideas to ‘co-author’ a show with professionals. By engaging with the politics of representation up close, bringing the worlds of high school MT and

³¹⁸ E.g. Haddad, “This is How it Feels”, footnote 135.

³¹⁹ Omasta, “Special Report”, 17-18.

³²⁰ E.g. Logan Culwell-Block, “Concord Theatricals Releases School of Rock Musical for Professional Licensing,” Playbill, July 16, 2020, <http://www.playbill.com/article/concord-theatricals-releases-school-of-rock-musical-for-professional-licensing>.

writing/new musical development closer opens up new possibilities for more constructive, holistic, and transformational engagement through—and *of*—high school MT.

Concerted efforts must also be made to diversify the theater teaching force—particularly by training and hiring more teachers of color. Theater educators tend to be majority white and female, a historic pattern which has not substantially shifted over time even as racial/ethnic student demographics have become more diverse.³²¹ Increasing and supporting a diverse teacher force is not only crucial for the purposes of critical education, but also for ensuring equity, uplifting marginalized teachers’ voices, and preparing students to be thoughtful, empathic, and capable citizens.

Education and Community

The high school musical is a civic space, full of implicit (and sometimes explicit) public discourses on identity between students, schools, and community. Play selection can be “a site for public debate about the community's values and can serve as the vehicle through which a community can understand and articulate its changing identity.”³²² Moreover, especially when MT brings an entire town together, the stories, representations, and aesthetics onstage “pose [] questions to the community about who is valued, and who is visible.” In this regard, public-facing productions can stir contradictions. For example, “although popular texts for community and high school musical performance capitalize on heteronormative assumptions and gender stereotypes, the production itself may potentially serve as a medium for inclusion,” perhaps by

³²¹ Omasta, “Special Report”, 16; Zippia. “Drama Teacher Demographics”, January 29, 2021. <https://www.zippia.com/drama-teacher-jobs/demographics/>; “New Report Shows Increased Diversity in U.S. Schools, Disparities in Outcomes,” National Center for Education Statistics, June 20, 2019, <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/new-report-shows-increased-diversity-in-u-s-schools-disparities-in-outcomes>.

³²² Chapman, “Knowing Your Audience.”

allowing queer students to take a turn in the spotlight.³²³ As high school MT interacts with the sociopolitical dimensions of audience perspective, it is another educational domain in which to critically engage the politics of representation.’

Despite the chief socioemotional, creative, and entertainment purposes of putting on musicals, some educators envision MT as an opportunity to engage and challenge audiences’ perspectives. “My students are so passionate and critical about the world around them, and they want their voices to be heard,” said one teacher. Stirring critical consciousness and sharing new perspectives may take shape as a ‘social impact’/’artist-activist’ approach. For example, a production of *Seussical* innovated upon the Whoville subplot to highlight the refugee crisis around the world, employing a framing pre-show scene, messages of support and solidarity in the playbill, and post-show opportunities to donate to relevant nonprofits. “Some people feel that shows shouldn’t be touched, but I think there is a way to relate what is on stage to what is going on in our everyday lives,” said one student. “It reminds people there is something beyond this.”³²⁴

Another avenue to spark public discourse is written/playbill materials. Although there’s plenty of controversy surrounding the racial casting of *Hairspray*,³²⁵ what’s less discussed is its narrative choice to perhaps ‘palatably’ position a white woman as a central leader/unifier of the Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore. In one student-produced version, high schoolers sought to uplift the show’s less visible histories by “turning the playbill into a document featuring a

³²³ Van de Water, Manon, and Annie Giannini. "Gay and Lesbian theatre for young people or the representation of ‘troubled youth.’" *We will be citizens: New essays on Gay and Lesbian theatre* (2008): 103-122, quoted in Chapman, “Knowing Your Audience.”

³²⁴ Jonathan Phelps, “‘Seussical’ Takes on New Meaning at Hopkinton High,” *MetroWest Daily News*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.metrowestdailynews.com/news/20171113/seussical-takes-on-new-meaning-at-hopkinton-high>. This is a more ‘outward-facing’ example of critical inquiry, but still a valuable demonstration of the kind of thoughtfulness students can bring to MT.

³²⁵ See Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 18-21.

comprehensive history of black feminism and structural racism, complete with suggested reading material on transphobia and homophobia.”³²⁶ Additionally, productions can create student-created, pre-show lobby displays to contextualize a show and spark audience thought. One production of *Urinetown* presented student-curated videos about water conservation.³²⁷ A teacher I spoke with makes posters showcasing historical dramaturgy and thoughts from cast/crew discussions. A production of *Seussical* could explore the complicated racial politics of Dr. Seuss, or the counterculture satire of *The Addams Family*, for example.

Further, post-show talkbacks with the audience provide an opportunity to *literally* continue the discussion beyond the show. Casts can speak on their process and production experiences, sharing their personal growth, creative learning, and critical perspectives. Teachers can invite community members to lead discussions debating the history and issues of—and embedded within—the show itself. Students can additionally grow as educators: at Barry Donnelly’s school, high school productions host student previews for middle schoolers, and develop educational materials for visiting classes to complete after the show.³²⁸ Students can tie their critical consciousness to financial action, choosing an organization to collect donations for after each performance.

Caveats

A reflexive critical MT pedagogy offers exciting and challenging learning opportunities for students, teachers, and communities. The approach aligns with and builds upon arts education

³²⁶ Marissa Miller, “Ithaca High School Students Perform ‘Hairspray’ After Calling Out Previous Musical for Whitewashing,” *Teen Vogue*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ithaca-high-school-replaces-whitewashed-musical-hairspray>.

³²⁷ Donnelly, “Expanding the Educational Impact of High School Theatre.”

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

standards, yet simultaneously allows for more teacher flexibility as an extracurricular subject. It has the potential to supercharge the socioemotional, creative, academic, and personal priorities of MT, inspire innovative and meaningful theater-making, cultivate awareness, empathy, and equitable attitudes, and help to shape teenagers into thoughtful artists and citizens.

As incredible as teachers are, however, the education sector cannot be the only domain responsible for critical engagement. The penultimate section considers two important caveats: the responsibilities of MT's professional and licensing industries, and teacher reservations to this critical approach.

1. The Responsibilities of the Professional and Licensing Industries

As a note: While I do not intend to push a particular 'political' agenda through this work—instead seeking to raise critical consciousness by directing attention to sociopolitical contexts and dimensions of identity—I have found that 1. Doing so reveals oppressive hierarchies (e.g., racism, sexism heterosexism) within the canon, writing approaches, and historical MT tradition and 2. Commitment to equity and a social justice-oriented response is not a 'political' stance, but a righteous one. I make no apologies for this.

As Gonzalez (2012) reminds us: "the practices modeled in mainstream professional theatre trickle into high school theatre; inadequate opportunities for marginalized students is an unfortunate example" (pg. 51). Although school theater is the 'lifeblood' of Broadway/professional MT, this relationship is dominated—especially in terms of creative control and ideology—by the industry side. Powerful Broadway producers, reputed writers, and theatrical corporations develop the stories, representations, and ideologies that feed the canon, defining the available and 'acceptable' shows from which teachers choose. For youth, media

imparts a significant “moral education.”³²⁹ “Rather than being viewed as a commercial venture innocently distributing pleasure to young people,” Giroux and Pollock note, “the Disney empire must be seen as a pedagogical and policymaking enterprise actively engaged in the cultural landscaping of national identity and the ‘schooling’ of the minds of young children.”³³⁰ By 2018, an estimated 38% of the U.S. population had “engaged with a licensed Disney show either as part of the cast, crew, or audience.”³³¹ The onus of structural and large cultural change, then, falls upon those with the greatest power. The industry cannot be, as one teacher put it, one that “prioritizes profit and bigotry over humanity and empowerment.”³³² Entertainment producers and media giants like Disney must be held—and hold themselves—accountable to disrupt the “images, representations, and values offered by [their own] teaching machine” *and* to cultivate “up-to-date reflections of contemporary society so that young people can feel part of the world, and thus stage and film representations may be able to affect change.”³³³

Uplifting marginalized voices and stories is integral to critical education. The lens of whiteness, for example, retains its invisible, defining power through its monopoly on storytelling; by supporting creatives of color, we can question assumptions and biases of the ‘conventional,’ commit to rectifying inequities, and cultivate a more diverse, nuanced, and

³²⁹ Rodosthenous, “Introduction.”

³³⁰ Henry A. Giroux, and Grace Pollock, *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 114, quoted in Rodosthenous, “Introduction.”

³³¹ Fierberg, “How Disney Shows Are Changing the Landscape of the American Musical Theatre.”

³³² It’s important to note that, although this project focuses on the pedagogical approach of MT critical education itself, ensuring access to quality arts education is also a fundamental part of cultivating equity, diversity, and critical consciousness. Across myriad domains, opportunity gaps within arts education have likely compounded disparities for racial/ethnic representation in MT. That said, Wolf identifies the inherent tension of ‘socially responsible’/liberal corporations in the push toward equity. She assesses the Disney Musicals in Schools program (DMIS), which brings MT programming and resources to underserved public schools. Despite the warranted criticism of Disney’s sexist, racist, heteronormative, and other culturally-oppressive representations—and its failure to “unfix commodified images of the world”—Wolf admits, “I suspect that any chance of a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse musical theatre is here, enabled by the organizational machinery, the adaptable repertoire, and the money of one of the richest corporations that owns Broadway” (Wolf 2019, 273-276).

³³³ Rodosthenous, “Introduction.”

empathetic approach to making MT. These changes cannot merely occur onstage: it is the industry's responsibility to produce, revive, and support the production and development of shows written by POC, women, non-binary people, and artists whose identities have been marginalized within MT; showcase work that challenges and subverts hegemonic structures and regressive narrative tropes; promote a diverse array of artistic leaders and gatekeepers; and reduce financial barriers (which inevitably covary with racial disparities) in production, professional training, applications, writers workshops, and other areas of MT development.³³⁴ Some of these initiatives are already being undertaken, but there is much work to be done. While these are only a few suggestions, many—particularly POC and women/nonbinary people—have written extensive evaluations and recommendations, especially in the past few years.³³⁵ In an era of political mobilization in support of marginalized individuals, raised consciousness of and protest against systemic racism, and the debilitating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—especially for the performing arts—the MT industry has a unique opportunity for critical reckoning and transformational change.

³³⁴ Additionally, while schools cannot legally rewrite musicals, industry professionals can. Asian-American writers have been brought in to reimagine problematic and orientalist musicals—even those that might be considered ‘fun’ and ‘fluffy’—like *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (Healy 2014; Levitt 2019). After Black cast members of the 2011 smash comedy *The Book of Mormon* recently expressed concerns over the show's depiction of northern Ugandan characters to the original writers, the producers invited principal actors from around the world to a workshop with the creatives. The goal of the workshop would be “to go through the show, line by line and thrash out any problematic issues” (Bamigboye 2021). While the internationally-produced show was written “for a snooty liberal New York crowd” and intentionally not politically correct, the writers insist that “no one is going back onstage until they feel great about it.”

³³⁵ E.g. “AMERICAN THEATRE | The Changing of the Guard,” accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.americantheatre.org/category/special-section/the-changeover/>; Jackson, “Unpacking ‘Diversity’ In Musical Theatre”; Helen Shaw, “Building Trust After Inclusivity Failed: Lessons for the Theater,” *Vulture*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/race-whiteness-black-lives-matter-lessons-for-theater.html>; Tim Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us, Employ Us: Broadway’s Women of Color on Confronting Racism—and Reshaping Theater,” *The Daily Beast*, August 29, 2019, sec. arts-and-culture, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/broadways-women-of-color-on-confronting-racismand-reshaping-theater>.

MT licensing companies (e.g., MTI, Samuel French, iTheatrics, etc.) are at a critical juncture between the industry and education domains. These companies earn half of their gross revenue from non-Equity and amateur licensing; even before high school, Wolf—citing the *NYT*—writes that “from 2008 to 2018, the number of elementary and middle school musical theatre productions more than doubled, growing their share of licensing companies’ income from around 10 percent to almost 25 percent.”³³⁶ The licensing companies’ financial power is only matched by their educational influence. MTI—which licenses seven of the ten most-produced musicals of 2019-2020—has pioneered wildly successful initiatives in collaboration with educators. Their “Broadway Jr” program (grades K-9) develops “condensed, author-approved versions of classic musicals, Disney favorites and modern works, custom-tailored to the needs of young people and schools,” while their “School Editions” (grades 9-12) make slight adjustments (e.g., key changes, the removal of “some adult language and content”) on a show-by-show basis.³³⁷ Licenses come with rehearsal resources, including study guides with plot summaries, historical context, and discussion prompts. Further, MTI acts as a gatekeeper by categorizing recommended shows to educators; titles include “Timeless Favorites,” “Small Budget-Big Reward,” “Sure Fire Hits,” “Tailor-Made For Teens,” and “Pushing Boundaries.”³³⁸

Given their immense financial, educational, and cultural power, licensing companies have a number of unique opportunities to foster equity and critical awareness. They can more seriously commit to transmitting industry-level innovations and contemporary shows (especially those which further diversity and equity in terms of the politics of representation, thematic

³³⁶ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 46.

³³⁷ Music Theatre International. “Education/Advocacy,” October 15, 2014. <https://www.mtishows.com/about/educationadvocacy>.

³³⁸ Music Theatre International. “How To Choose Your High School Musical,” August 26, 2019. <https://www.mtishows.com/news/how-to-choose-your-high-school-musical>.

content, and/or writer identities). They can exhume lesser known works and commission new musicals by POC, women, non-binary people, and other marginalized writers within MT.³³⁹

Additionally, only ‘serious’ musicals and/or those set in a specific cultural/historical context tend to come with study guides, which focus on the show’s ‘visible’ dramaturgy of the piece.³⁴⁰

Especially for educators who may feel uncertain about how to take the reflexive critical approach I recommend, critical Study Guides could be a useful gateway resource to cultivate discussions, activities, and a critical consciousness within students.

2. Teacher Reservations

Despite the educational opportunities of this pedagogical approach, teachers might have some reservations about incorporating it. Here, I address some common concerns.

1. **There’s already so much to do.** MT educators—who often also teach other subjects — already have many creative and logistical responsibilities. While a reflexive critical education pedagogically pairs with the socio-emotional and artistic skill-building of MT, the decision to incorporate this work hinges on how educators choose to marshal their priorities. Even Jo Beth Gonzalez, a champion of critical consciousness, didn’t have time for challenging discussions and historical dramaturgy of the ‘invisible.’ “With complicated rehearsals in progress and a deadline looming, would bringing [these topics] up have strengthened the show? Possibly not,” she admits. “Would bringing [these

³³⁹ According to Ted Chapin, former president of R&H Theatricals (a key MT licensing company), another prominent licensing company—Samuel French—is in the process of acquiring materials from diverse writers, and is going through their back catalog of less-popular shows, looking for texts by POC, and seeing which one can be “brought out” today.

³⁴⁰ Only two of the ten most popular-produced high school musicals of 2019-2020 (*Into the Woods* and *Little Shop*) come with study guides, likely because they contain more ‘serious’ themes and, in the case of *Little Shop*, take place in a specific cultural/historical context.

topics] up have opened a pocket for critical reflection and perhaps made room for students of color? Yes!”³⁴¹

2. **The artistic quality would suffer.** From a zero-sum perspective, a reflexive critical education tends to focus on process *over* product, learning *over* performance, and may mean that students produce a less ‘polished’ final presentation. Additionally, in democratizing learning and development through devised theater, the question remains: “can students develop artistic quality when the skills they learn for making that art come from each other rather than from professionals?”³⁴² Devised theater can have an “unpredictable quality,” lacking the assured aesthetic strength of an extant, well-oiled piece.³⁴³ Disney shows, for example, are “failproof, kid-friendly, and guaranteed for success. The stories are clear, the characters are winning and easy to play, the music is infectious, and the total effect is charming.”³⁴⁴
3. **I feel unprepared and unable to do this kind of work.** Plenty of educational resources are available to spark this critical consciousness. I hope that my own approach, too, is instructive and inspiring. Additionally, building critical consciousness and empathy is possible for groups of any demographic composition, and it’s just as important for those who may not hold many marginalized identities engage in this work (in a respectful, sensitive, and researched way). Further, the list of recommendations is optional, flexible, and not in linear order. Each idea can be a different starting point; perhaps a post-show ‘autopsy’ feels most appropriate, or a lobby presentation. That said, in deciding whether

³⁴¹ Gonzalez, *Temporary Stages*, 64.

³⁴² Ibid, 13.

³⁴³ Helen Nicholson, *Theatre, Education and Performance* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2011), 51, quoted in Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 272.

³⁴⁴ Wolf, *Beyond Broadway*, 273.

to select works by marginalized artists or ‘edgier’ or lesser-known shows, teachers may feel that 1. It’s not possible given student demographics and 2. It may hurt ticket sales, a particularly important factor for programs which rely on show revenue to finance the next production.³⁴⁵

- 4. This particular approach and the issues it uncovers don’t resonate with me, my students, or my community.** Some teachers may not find the nuanced issues that critical inquiry seeks to address to be problematic ‘enough’ to warrant rehearsal time and interventions. When it comes to controversial casting, for example, one educator in Indiana told me that she “throws racism and gender identity objections and requirements out the window,” arguing: “Everybody has a story, and you have to look at that story from their perspective. You need to step into those shoes.” While the approach earns her some rebuke from educators online, her community supports the work and her students appreciate it. Some might deride her approach as insensitive and problematic, but 1. It is ultimately context-dependent and 2. Her focus on character perspective and empathy through performance still echo aspects of a critical approach. While this kind of critical awareness is important for any community, you must make the call as to how you wish to introduce it in a culturally-responsive way.

I acknowledge these caveats. I also repeat that this reflexive critical approach can work to affirm, enrich, and expand the skills already cultivated by high school MT education. The potential value of this approach is essential, given the insidious ideological messaging that these shows are subliminally circulating through the politics of representation.

³⁴⁵ Two educators I spoke with taught in communities at over 80% poverty level—with many students on Free and Reduced Lunch—and relied on ticket sales to keep the department afloat.

Before I finish, here's one more recommendation—perhaps the most important one.

Conclusion: “Use pleasure as a way in”

This is also Wolf's last recommendation in her seminal “In Defense of Pleasure: Musical Theatre History in the Liberal Arts [A Manifesto]”—a piece instrumental in justifying the critical study of MT in college. Perhaps in tribute I have included it last, too, that it should be considered reflexively with all that came before. She explains that as MT educators, “it is our duty to respect and draw out students' preferences and passions and to consider their feelings as being socially contingent [and] historically grounded.”³⁴⁶ By considering those lenses, Wolf argues, “we can foster students' attentiveness to the ideology of aesthetics.” But she never loses sight of that special magic and ‘fun’ of MT. “After spending much time and effort dissecting a musical,” she writes, “put it back together as a ‘total artwork’ and enjoy.” Wolf concludes: “Pleasure motivates.”

In the same way, both this project and a reflexive, critical MT pedagogy begin with ‘fun.’ Neither approach aims to devalue it—quite the opposite. I have aimed to highlight the immense diversionary power of ‘fluffy’ MT as an immense source of entertainment, joy, creativity, and personal meaning for those who engage it, but also as an insidious diversionary mechanism that enables the politics of representation to subliminally perform their ideological work. MT can and in many ways *should* be fun, but it shouldn't come at the expense of others. Nor does it *only* have to be fun. This project begins the work of exploring the sociopolitical dimensions of MT through the “ideology of aesthetic,” specifically by locating “pockets of critical inquiry” through

³⁴⁶ Wolf, “In Defense of Pleasure,” 55.

a reflexive pedagogy that might allow for a more holistic, creative, and transformational engagement with the high school MT of today and the new work of tomorrow.

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