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Scott McMillin The Musical as Drama

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Chapter One

INTEGRATION AND DIFFERENCE

INTEGRATION: FROM WAGNER TO BROADWAY

THE American musical has been accompanied by a theory easily believed so long as it remains unexamined. The theory is that of the “integrated musical,” according to which all elements of a show—plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting—should blend together into a unity, a seamless whole. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were articulate proponents of this idea, and the historical moment when integration arrived on Broadway is often said, not least of all by Rodgers and Hammerstein, to have been the opening of *Oklahoma!* in March 1943. As Rodgers later put it, “when a show works perfectly, it’s because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together. No single element overshadows any other. . . . That’s what made *Oklahoma!* work. . . . It was a work created by many that gave the impression of having been created by one.”¹ Hammerstein’s version of the theory concerned the unity between music and libretto: the composer/lyricist “expresses the story in his medium just as the librettist expresses the story in his. Or, more accurately, they weld their two crafts and two kinds of talent into a single expression. This is the great secret of the well-integrated musical play. It is not so much a method as a state of mind, or rather a state for two minds, an attitude of unity.”²

There was nothing new about those statements insofar as they pertained to the action and character of what had long been called musical comedy. In 1917 Jerome Kern said that

¹ Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, p. 227.

² Hammerstein, *Lyrics*, p. 15.

“musical numbers should carry on the action of the play, and should be representative of the personalities of the characters who sing them,” and in 1924 Hammerstein refused to list the numbers in *Rose Marie* because he did not want to detract from the close fit between book and number he thought the show possessed.³ The best composers and librettists have always wanted that close articulation. The statements of Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1943 pushed the idea further. Read closely, they are about the unity of the collaborators who made the musical rather than about the unity of the musical itself. They have a “two minds as one” air about them.

Although the collaboration of Rodgers and Hammerstein is one of the high points of American drama, the musical has always depended on teamwork among composer, lyricist, librettist, choreographer, stage director, music director, designer, costumer, orchestrator, and others. When a show put together by so many creative minds takes to the stage via the creative minds and bodies of the performers and actually works, even comes across the footlights as something special, an experience for an audience to remember for the rest of their lives (as happened with *Oklahoma!*), one knows that the efforts of many have produced an extraordinary event. Great elation accompanies the run of a hit musical, and everyone involved knows the feeling. But that does not mean that the product of all this cooperation has been smoothed out into a unified work of art. When a musical is working well, I feel the crackle of difference, not the smoothness of unity, even when the numbers dovetail with the book. It takes things different from one another to be thought of as integrated in the first place, and I find that the musical depends more on the differences that make the close fit interesting than on the suppression of difference in a seamless whole. *Difference* can be felt between the book and the numbers, between the songs and dances, between dance and spoken dialogue—and these are the elements that integration is supposed to have unified. Sometimes the elements *are* integrated,

³ The Kern quotation is in Bordman, *Jerome Kern: His Life and Music*, p. 149. For *Rose Marie*, see Bordman, *The American Musical Theatre*, p. 392.

but I still feel the difference. When the orchestra introduces a tune that causes characters who have been speaking dialogue to break into song or dance, the music has changed the book into something different—a number—and the characters acquire a different dimension, the ability to perform that number.⁴

The disparity between speech and song was a problem long studied in opera, where integration became the governing aesthetic in the nineteenth century. “The passage from one to the other [speech to song] is always shocking and ridiculous,” Rousseau wrote in the eighteenth century. “It is the height of absurdity that at the instant of passion we should change voices to speak a song.”⁵ Recitative in the place of spoken dialogue was an attempt to avoid this problem. Let the dialogue be sung in melodic recitative, let the recitative lead into the aria, and music of one sort or another will be the single register of expression throughout. Nineteenth-century opera intensified the musical register by abolishing recitative and turning the entire drama into formal song. The through-sung operas of the nineteenth century thus had a basis of musical unity to build on, which Wagner further developed into the theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its titanic realizations in *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Ring*.

Wagner’s influence in American culture ran deep in the twentieth century. The leading aesthetic theory at the time Rodgers and Hammerstein were becoming popular was the new criticism, which sought an organic wholeness in works of art, including poetry, drama, music, dance, and novels. Organic wholeness meant that the work of art should grow like fruit on the vine. Radically discordant elements could be yoked

⁴ I am not the first to voice doubt about integration theory. For skeptical readings of integration in Rodgers and Hammerstein, see Mast, *Can’t Help Singin’*: *The American Musical on Stage and Screen*, pp. 201–18; Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater*, pp. 29–34; and Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, pp. 12–31. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us*, pp. 1–6, looks beneath integration and finds a “deeper formal discontinuity” between music and drama which he brings to bear on the experience of growing up gay in the era of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, pp. 32–43, connects the “fragmented form” of the musical to lesbian subject positions.

⁵ Quoted in Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry*, p. 54.

together in an integrated whole by the creativity of the artist, an operation that T. S. Eliot famously called “the amalgamation of disparate experience.”⁶ Eliot came in contact with musical theatre by way of Joseph Kerman, whose influential *Opera as Drama* was solidly based on the new criticism, said nothing at all about musical comedy, and took Wagner and the theory of unity as crucial concerns.⁷ Other influential books about drama at mid-century were Eric Bentley’s *The Playwright as Thinker* and Francis Fergusson’s *The Idea of a Theater*. Bentley took special delight in castigating the musical as “vacuous” (*Oklahoma!*) and half-educated (*One Touch of Venus*). Song and dance are only “embellishments” to drama, said Bentley, whose bias in favor of organic wholeness has a Wagnerian edge: “Every good play has a rhythmic structure and a symphonic unity.” Indeed, Wagner was one of Bentley’s four heroes of modern drama, along with Ibsen, Shaw, and Strindberg (although Bentley had a sharp eye for false Wagnerianism, too). In *The Idea of a Theater*, Fergusson wrote at length about the Aristotelian “unity of action,” ignored the musical, and devoted a chapter to *Tristan und Isolde*.⁸

Thus the best books on drama at midcentury took Wagner seriously and regarded him as a key figure whose influence extended beyond opera to nonmusical drama. They also disregarded the musical, a type of popular entertainment hardly worth study when unity of action was the important dramatic

⁶ In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” in *Selected Essays*, p. 247.

⁷ Kerman thought music a further intensification of poetry in the Eliot aesthetic: poetry was an enlargement of ordinary speech, creating nuances of feeling and a heightened sensibility. Kerman accepted that theory of poetry and argued for carrying it a step further into operatic music as an extension and heightening of poetry, but for both Eliot and Kerman, the range of expression was a unified continuum that gained its power by stretching into poetry (Eliot) and into operatic music (Kerman). See Kerman, *Opera as Drama*.

⁸ For Bentley on unity, see *Playwright as Thinker*, p. 112. The remarks about musicals are on pp. 6–8. Fergusson treats *Tristan* in chapter 3, on “univocal form” in Wagner and Racine. The Wagnerian connection with the idea of integration in the musical is sharply presented in Most, *Making Americans*, p. 9 and p. 225n7.

consideration.⁹ Rodgers and Hammerstein were aware they had a cultural bias to overcome. They did not mention Wagner (although they were well versed in opera) and did not pay much attention to new criticism. But they were among other serious practitioners of the musical who wanted to elevate the cultural status of the form (Gershwin had made the most notable gesture in this direction by writing the Broadway opera *Porgy and Bess* a decade earlier), and they were celebrating the achievement of *Oklahoma!* in ways that reflected the prevailing aesthetic of the mid-twentieth century. They were not alone. “A form which seeks to integrate drama, music, and dance,” the conductor Lehman Engel calls the musical, sounding the quasi-Wagnerian note that can be heard in every version of the theory.¹⁰ But the real cultural work being carried out by these writers and practitioners of the musical, I propose, was that of turning Broadway’s skill at song-and-dance routines into a new format in which the numbers had important work to do because they were being inserted into the book as a different element, a change of mode, a suspension of the book in favor of music.

My concern is to set the aesthetics of the genre into a perspective that includes earlier shows as well as later and that searches out the already existing principles that Rodgers and Hammerstein used so well. A new theoretical perspective on the musical is necessary now that the form is more than a century old and is proving to be a major form of American drama. The musical has a different aesthetic form from that of nineteenth-century opera. There are musicals today that try to become operatic, as though the musical were a lower form that should strive for an elevated state, and this strikes me as a confusion of genres. The line of achievement that runs from *Oklahoma!* to the musicals of

⁹ Wagner was not an unqualified success in new critical circles, and the uses to which Nazism had put him were well known. For the cultural milieu of midcentury criticism, a good retrospective essay is Savran’s on middlebrow culture in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*.

¹⁰ Engel, *The American Musical Theatre*, p. 76. Like Rodgers and Hammerstein, Engel was well versed in opera but did not mention Wagner in theoretical musings.

Sondheim in the second half of the twentieth century or from *Show Boat* to *Oklahoma!* in the first half is as important as the line of achievement that runs from O'Neill to Williams and Miller and then on to Shepherd in what is still sometimes called the legitimate drama. The musical is the illegitimate drama, and now that the illegitimate has taken its place as a major American artistic accomplishment, it deserves some theoretical thinking that holds true to its own history and form.¹¹

TWO ORDERS OF TIME

The musical's complexity comes in part from the tension between two orders of time, one for the book and one for the numbers. The book represents the plot or the action. It moves (in terms borrowed from Aristotle's *Poetics*) from a beginning through a middle to an end. This is progressive time, in the sense that the ending is different from the beginning—things are not going to be the same after this. Bobby decides to get married, or doesn't, Gaylord returns to Magnolia and sees his daughter on the showboat, two rival gangs act together to carry away Tony's body, Japan takes up a Western way of life. The change occurs somewhere in the middle—the middle makes change possible, keeps the beginning apart from the ending, and lays out the terms by which the two will differ. Middles are crucial to the order of time in the Aristotelian idea of action. Aristotle himself favored moments of "recognition" or "reversal" as turning points leading toward an ending. The books of musicals have turning points, too, and we will read them this way.¹²

¹¹ African-American drama, now reaching a new point of definition in the plays of August Wilson and reaching back to its own tradition in the theatrical side of the Harlem Renaissance, is the other form to set beside the musical as the high achievement in American drama so far. It too was illegitimate for a time. The aesthetic crossovers between the two are extensive and should be studied.

¹² Examples of recognitions and turning points in musicals are discussed in chapter 2. Aristotle was thinking of tragedy in his definition of dramatic action. Comedy is of lesser magnitude in Aristotle's terms, but for a structural analysis of all plots, with comedy equal to other types, see Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*.

What makes the musical complex is something the Greek drama had too—the second order of time, which interrupts book time in the form of songs and dances. The choral odes in the Greek drama were danced and sung, and if we knew how they were performed in any detail, we would find Greek tragedy more interesting. Aristotle recognized the need to incorporate the choral odes into the “unity of action” that he found in the best tragedies, but the extant text of the *Poetics* does not give considered thoughts on this problem. Song and Spectacle rank at the bottom of Aristotle’s priority list of tragedy’s components, as though they were separable from the top categories of Plot and Character. A theory of the musical cannot do this. It has to regard songs and dances as basic elements, equal to plot and character and influential on both.

The songs are stanzaic forms of verse against which the music asserts a broad repetitive pattern, and intricate smaller kinds of repetition occur within the stanzas. Characters who break into song are being enlarged by entering into the second order of time and displaying their mastery of repetitive, lyric form. Shaw’s Henry Higgins in the nonmusical *Pygmalion* cannot be imagined breaking into a song. He exists consistently in one order of time. The Henry Higgins of *My Fair Lady* acts in this order of time, too, but he breaks into song in his first scene, and he sings several numbers thereafter. He even dances once. He is not a freewheeling song-and-dance man, but he joins the fandango that develops out of “The Rain in Spain” number, and Eliza is struck by this (“I Could Have Danced All Night”). I am not interested in the question of which is the better form of drama, Shaw’s play or the musical based on it. I am interested in the difference between the two, for the change between the two orders of time involved in book and number makes Henry Higgins a different kind of character than he is in Shaw’s play, or a character caught up in a different kind of action, and the theory of integration overlooks that difference.

Integration theory would say that songs and dances advance the plot. I can think of songs and dances that do advance the plot, and every reader will think of others. “Marry the Man

Today,” near the end of *Guys and Dolls*, makes the two heroines aware of the solution to their romantic problems. Remove the song and the plot will need some new dialogue. The act 1 *fi-nale* in the Gershwins’ *Of Thee I Sing* conveys elements of plot, as does “A Weekend in the Country,” at the end of act 1 of *A Little Night Music*. These are special occasions. But most songs and dances do not advance plots. Usually the book sets forth the turn of plot and the number elaborates it, in the spirit of repetition and the pleasure of difference. Most songs and dances do not further characterization, they change the mode of characterization—difference again. These are the aesthetic principles that all songs and dances follow, including the special occasions that do advance plot and character.

When Sweeney Todd holds his razor over Judge Turpin’s throat for the first time and is about to take his revenge (in Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*, 1979), he pauses to sing a number, “Pretty Women.” It is an astonishing moment, the would-be murderer pretending to a bit of male bonding with the rapist he is about to slaughter. Sweeney is lingering over his big moment, changing the mode of expression, caught up in the sardonic delight of idealizing womanhood with the man who has destroyed one woman, Sweeney’s wife, and is about to force another, Sweeney’s daughter, into marriage. The Judge responds to Sweeney’s tune. He sings along—it is a duet between the rapist and his would-be murderer! Then the young lover Anthony breaks in and ruins Sweeney’s revenge.

This number gives its own dimension to the scene. It suspends the progress of events, formalizes the relationship between Sweeney and the Judge, turns it into melody and rhyme. Integration theory would say that “Pretty Women” arises out of the situation and is part of Sweeney’s delay. It is what ruins the moment of revenge, allowing time for Anthony to arrive just as the razor is about to descend. That is technically true, but it does not account for the effect of the song, which is to add harmony, melody, and rhythm to the ghastly relationship between the revenger and his intended victim. The dimension of song suspends book time in favor of an incongruous moment of lyric time. These two have no business singing with

one another, especially not singing so well. In Christopher Bond's *Sweeney Todd*, the source play for the musical, there is no such interplay between the men at this point. Todd draws out his revenge a little, talking as though he were about to reveal his identity. This is dialogue moving toward its goal, then Anthony bursts onto the scene to interrupt the revenge. There is no change of mode, no shift of perspective. It is a good scene, that is all.

The song inserts a lyrical moment into the cause-and-effect progress of the plot, a moment that suspends book time in favor of lyric time, time organized not by cause and effect (which is how book time works) but by principles of repetition (which is how numbers work). There is the repetition of the four-note musical phrase on "pretty women" itself, heard ten times. There is the metrical repetition of four syllables by which "pretty women" matches up to "fascinating," "sipping coffee," "are a wonder," and so on, always in four sixteenth notes compressed into the first beat of a measure. There is the strophic repetition of stanzas by which the song is cast in one of the traditional formats for popular tunes (ABAB'). There is the underlying repetition of a harmonic ninth in the orchestra, established against the tonic and then beating through the chord changes as a hint of something that cannot be resisted until the music itself comes to an end.¹³

This kind of insert is the heart of the musical, any musical. It is lyrical, it gives the pleasure that follows from rhyme, melody, and meter, and it takes effect not because it blends into the plot in the spirit of integration but because it stands apart and declares that there is another order of time in the theatre, not just the cause-and-effect sequencing of plot but the lyrical repetitions of song and dance. I am not saying anything that would have surprised Jerome Kern in 1917, when he made the comment I quoted earlier about songs being suited to the action and the mood of the play, or Rodgers and Ham-

¹³ To be exact, I am describing Part II of "Pretty Women." Part I establishes the musical interaction of the two men over the pleasure of "catching fire from one man to the next." It leads into Part II along its own patterns of lyric repetition.

merstein in 1943, when they spoke of the unity of minds that had brought about *Oklahoma!* Kern sought a closer articulation of book and number than many musical comedies of his day provided. Rodgers and Hammerstein wanted the closer articulation, too. Book-and-number formats can be used as license to put anything into a show, and Kern and Rodgers and Hammerstein were not interested in licentiousness any more than Sondheim is. They knew they were making advances in a serious kind of drama, but they knew that the kind already existed—in need of reform to be sure, but already established and ready to be improved upon.

FORMATS: REVUE AND OPERETTA

The musical comes from popular forms of entertainment that sharply maintain the difference between book and number. Indeed, many of the forerunners of the musical do not have a book in the first place. These are the burlesques, the vaudevilles, the extravaganzas, the travesties, the music hall shows, the variety shows, the minstrels, the burlettas—a large and varied group that I will group together as revues, in order to separate them from the other forerunners, the ones with books, which can be called operettas (so long as the name is not taken to mean that they are a form of opera).¹⁴

The revue might have a story line or a theme, but it does not have a plot. It draws its energy from the one-thing-after-another, now-for-something-entirely-different spirit of the numbers, which are arranged in a running order. The running order calls for a big number at the end of act 1 and a surefire crowd-pleaser as the second number in act 2 (to convince everyone, including the stragglers from the bar, that the second act will be better than the first). If there is a theme or story

¹⁴ For a recent and thorough account of these antecedents, see Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, chapters 2 and 3, which also have good bibliographic endnotes. Operetta has recently been covered by Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre*. A good older survey is Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History*.

line, it is likely to be absurd. An early revue in London, *Under the Clock* (performed at the Royal Court in 1893), had Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson showing Emile Zola around the theatres of the day, all of which were subjected to satire.¹⁵ Or the organizing device might be a satirical revue of the headline events of the year. That was how the original revues, in France, were set up, and the tradition carried over into the “passing shows” of London and New York later in the nineteenth century. Spectacular revues featuring lavish scenery and chorus girls in scanty costumes to go with the songs and dances and comedy sketches also took hold in the later nineteenth century, most famously at the Folies Bergère in Paris from 1886 and in the Ziegfeld *Follies* in New York from 1907. Kern in 1917 and Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1943 (and others at other times) were drawing their kind of theatre away from this tradition, but it would be a mistake to suppose that the rambunctiousness, sexiness, impiety, and occasional beauty of the revue tradition were drained out of the musical as the revue gradually waned and the book show became dominant. All of these qualities remain alive in Kern, in Rodgers and Hammerstein, in the musical generally speaking. (And there still are revues. *Cats* is a thematic revue, and so are the *Forbidden Broadway* satires that appear every so often as parodies of current Broadway shows.)

The revue was the kind of show that depends on a succession of performance numbers rather than on a succession of narrative events. Operettas, by contrast, depended on a succession of narrative events, a plot. Operettas exhibited many different kinds of plot, but they were all book shows. They came to Broadway from London, Paris, and Vienna in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. The reason why they should not be regarded as offspring of opera is that they depended on two elements not central to nineteenth-century opera: satire (especially in the French tradition) and popular social dances such as the polka, the march, and, especially in the Viennese tradition, the waltz. The impudence of

¹⁵ See Mander and Mitcheson, *Revue: A Story in Pictures*, pp. 14–16. Noel Coward’s foreword to this book has an account of the running order.

the satire and the scintillations of the waltz, thought to be risqué at first, gave the operetta a broad popular appeal, and its relation to grand opera was largely one of antithesis. Indeed, grand opera is one of the things satirized in operettas.

In New York, by the time the Ziegfeld Follies was launched as a spectacular form of revue, everyone who followed the entertainment scene knew about the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, Offenbach, and Johann Strauss. They would soon know about the operettas of Kalman, Lehar, Stolz, Friml, Herbert, and (where the future took shape) Kern. The English Gaiety-type “musical comedies” of the turn of the century were decisively influential on Kern, so I am being brisk in linking him with operetta. But Kern’s early shows and the English musical comedies connect with the operetta tradition by being book shows and thus in having a different emphasis from the various kinds of revues we have named, and that distinction is the one that matters here.¹⁶

Operettas had elaborate plots, usually involving disguise and mistaken identity. The Viennese model emphasized exotic romance in its plots, whereas the French and English models emphasized topical satire, but all used the device of putting one or two leading characters into disguise or settling a mistaken identity upon them. Song is not hard to attain in a plot hinging on disguise or mistaken identity. Disguised characters play a role within a role, and singing is a way of creating the inner role. For disguises as for mistaken identities, the true persons become apparent in their songs, although not necessarily to themselves. Often the characters burst into song *because* they are disguised, literally or psychologically. Or they are in love,

¹⁶ For distinctions between operetta, revue, and musical comedy in the early years, see Mordden, *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s*, chapters 1–4. Norton, *A Chronology of American Musical Theater*, and Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, detail the different kinds of American musical entertainment. For Kern’s connection to English musical comedy, see Bordman, *Jerome Kern*, and Lamb’s pamphlet, *Jerome Kern in Edwardian London*. The Viennese operetta has recently been studied in Crittenden, *Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture*. The term *review* was first used in New York for *The Passing Show* of 1894, then quickly changed to the French *revue*. See Mander and Mitcheson, *Revue*.

and song is the concentrated way to get to the point. Or they are in a carnival spirit and want to sing and dance in groups—or captured by gypsies who want to sing and dance in groups. If you are in love and at a masked ball, no one knows who you are or everyone thinks you are someone else, and gypsies are waiting to steal you away to their camp where everyone sings and dances, you are in a Viennese operetta, and who could fail to sing at times like these?

But these operetta plots always made room for comic routines and other kinds of show business, and they did not take integration of music and book as a main issue. A theory of integration was not needed for the operetta, although the matter did come up. Johann Strauss, with the example of Wagner near at hand, worked his way into writing through-composed operas. When these proved relatively unsuccessful and he returned to writing operettas, he was heard to complain that the form was rubbish. Sullivan sought higher forms of composition and had bouts of embarrassment over writing music for what he sometimes regarded as Gilbert's silly plots. Operettas appeal to just about everyone and thus can seem lowbrow to a composer yearning for something grand.

The desire to elevate the genre runs through the history of the musical, as though there were something shameful about the operettas and the various kinds of revue that lie behind the form. Integration theory is one product of the desire to elevate the form. My argument is that the principles of disjunction between book and number, and between one number and another, that organized the revue and operetta formats still inform the musical, and there is no point to being ashamed of it. The desire to elevate the form drives the musical of today toward a through-composed form, toward opera manqué, and because the grandiosity of the result fits with the expanding technology of the later twentieth-century theatre, a sumptuous and to my mind overblown kind of musical is created which we can call the integrated musical. I am thinking of the stunning technology required by *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, and *The Lion King*. The genre to which shows of this sort belong is certainly not opera, but they reside uneasily if not

unprofitably in the category of the stage musical, too. The aesthetic basis of the Disney and Lloyd Webber kind of musical is technological fantasy. Later I suggest that the genre bearing kinship to these shows is the film musical. But the urgent need, in my opinion, is for a poetics of the stage musical—first, because the stage musical tends to be absorbed into the technological and film musical in the general shuffle of integration theory, and second, because once the stage musical is separated out from integration theory and recognized as a different kind of drama, the genre can be seen to hold fast to its origins in American popular culture. It has the potential to become the kind of socially relevant theatre that Eric Bentley despised it for not being in the age of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Bentley despised the musical for refusing to acknowledge the drama's political responsibilities. He may have been right about the genre as it existed in the mid-1950s. There had been socially responsible musicals and revues in the 1930s, and Bentley knew these, but he was looking to the mainstream of a form that had been politically innocuous during most of the century. Rodgers and Hammerstein did not write left-wing musicals. Hammerstein was politically progressive, and he did work spots of political awareness into his shows, but when it comes to Indian Territory and what really happened there, *Oklahoma!* is a crying shame.¹⁷ Rodgers and Hammerstein were not writing political drama, but they were setting in motion a further history of the genre in which social and political issues would come to be prominent even in the mainstream. *West Side Story* is about the violence of a younger generation with nothing productive to do. *Cabaret* is about fascism in an urban society caught up in heedless entertainments. *A Chorus Line* is about sexuality in the theatre, which means to an important extent gay sexuality. *Sweeney Todd* is about injustice and the pressure for revenge among the powerless in industrialized cities. People who find these issues unimportant do not pay attention to politics, and the shows I have named are among the most revivable American dramas of the past half-century. They are

¹⁷ See Knapp, *The American Musical*, pp. 122–27.

also among the musicals that connect with the broadly popular forms of song-and-dance entertainment that gave rise to the genre in the first place. Rodgers and Hammerstein are the pivotal figures who turned those popular forms into a genre with a future, and that future has political and social relevance.

THE BETTER BOOK

What happened by the time of *Oklahoma!* was not the integration of musical numbers into a unified whole with the book, it was a better book. Many of the successful earlier shows had scanty plots—mere scaffoldings, really, for hanging songs and dances on. They enjoyed the air of the ridiculous in the first place—flappers flapping about at a rich man's birthday party while one of them sallies forth and falls in love with the local cross-Atlantic aviator. This is the first act of the Gershwins' *Funny Face* (1927, book by Fred Thompson and Paul Gerard Smith). The rich man having the birthday party was played by Fred Astaire and the flapper meeting up with the aviator was played by Adele Astaire, Fred's sister. The characters played by the Astaires in the early shows could have crossed over from one book to another with not much more than a change of name. The Astaire characters were multiple characters, I hasten to add, characters doubled because of their extraordinary penchant for song and dance. Their book selves were forgettable, ditzy and inconsequential excuses to give the number selves a chance to shine when they were enlarged into song and dance. The enlargements into song and dance were stunning pieces of theatre. They demanded hours of rehearsal, and when the songs caught on, they emerged out of the show in the form of recordings, by the Astaires and others. Some are still being recorded today.

The books of the standard shows were always comedies, romantic comedies in their conclusions and would-be farces in their pacing. Often they contained a kind of inner revue—a nightclub scene, a ballroom scene, a garden party scene, a theatre scene—episodes that allowed singers, dancers, and comics



FIGURE 1. Fred and Adele Astaire in a pose from *Lady, Be Good*. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

to take the stage as part of the narrative. This device has never ceased to be useful, and it developed into the backstage musical—*On Your Toes*, *Kiss Me*, *Kate*, *Follies*, to name just a few examples. The best early example is the Jerome Kern/Guy Bolton/P. G. Wodehouse show *Sally* of 1920, a vehicle for the Ziegfeld star Marilyn Miller and a very good show. But it is the kind of show that would give way to shows with a better book.

Sally begins in a Greenwich Village nightclub where an orphan girl hired as a dishwasher gets a chance to show her talent as a dancer. It then moves through a grand party on a Long Island estate, where the orphan girl disguises herself as a Russian ballerina and performs for influential persons, and ends at the New Amsterdam Theatre on 42nd Street, where influential persons hire the orphan girl to star in a Ziegfeld show and the best-looking influential person offers to marry her. *Sally* was first performed in the New Amsterdam theatre itself, home of the *Follies*, so the final set stood for part of the theatre itself. This is about as metatheatrical as drama can be, but the basic formula at work was used in hundreds of Broadway musicals, and that formula combines revue elements with operetta elements so that just about any kind of number can be called upon in the nightclub, garden party, or Broadway settings of the plot.

A plot like *Sally's* also depends on unlikely coincidence, the driving convention of farce. Operettas always had a farce lurking in their romantic sentimental stories. Gilbert and Sullivan drew out this potential and made it work. By the time Bolton and Wodehouse were teaming up with Kern for their shows at the Princess Theatre (1915–1918), the British penchant for farce was becoming the standard for the book show. Some wonderful musicals arose from this tendency, but a good farce is tightly made, its unlikely coincidences following one another quickly and relentlessly. The farce interrupted by numbers is rarely good farce, for the principle of interruption basic to the musical becomes an impediment. Numbers must appear at regular intervals. Guy Bolton kept his own kind of running order in mind as he plotted and planned spots for numbers

every-so-many pages.¹⁸ One reason most early book shows seem unstageable today is that they are second-rate farces. Another is their excessive topicality, a carryover from the revue tradition, which thrived on up-to-date commentary. In the first fifteen minutes of *Funny Face* there were references to Babe Ruth, the Four Horsemen, Gene Tunney, Cal Coolidge, Jimmy Walker, Henry Ford, H. J. Heinz, Regal Shoes, Armour Meats, Kuppenheimer Buttons, the Hearst newspaper chain, and Paul Swan. Like the revue, the early books were meant to be for-the-moment exercises in nonchalance—Edwardian throwaways, bits of the Jazz Age as casually tossed off as the side kicks and shimmies of the Charleston. (The degree of hard work needed to give this impression of casualness is another matter.) They were busy with topicality, totally up-to-date, and certainly not meant to last down the ages.

Now that it is from down the ages that we view them, the early shows seem dated, and we stage them mainly for their numbers, which are sometimes repackaged into new books. In some cases the abundance of famous songs allows us to preserve the original books, as in *Sally* (where one can watch a rich scion of the Long Island aristocracy sing “Look for the Silver Lining” with the orphan girl tired from washing dishes in the nightclub, and then watch the orphan girl, weary no longer, tap-dance her way through the same song with the disguised Duke of Czechogovinia).¹⁹ Most musicals of the 1910s and 1920s did not have songs as good as “Whip-Poor-Will” or “Wild Rose” or “Look for the Silver Lining” (all from *Sally*). They were urban, breezy, gag-filled comedies about sophisticated zanies who could break into song and dance, and the problem with their books—“one more bit of fluff dealing with flirtations among the ‘Tennis, anyone?’ Long Island social set,” Rodgers complained, after collaborating on a number of them himself—was that they were second-rate, stop-and-go farces

¹⁸ Davis, *Bolton and Wodehouse and Kern: The Men Who Made Musical Comedy*, is a mine of information.

¹⁹ Revivals of the original version of *Sally* are rare, but they do occur. I am grateful to the Drama Department of the Catholic University in Washington, D.C., where I saw *Sally* in January 2000.

carried out by characters who were silly, charming, and relentlessly alike.

Oklahoma!, by contrast, concerns women having to run a farm on their own, it concerns a farmhand capable of violence if he cannot have one of those women, it concerns Indian Territory and whether the land will be used for farming or for cattle ranches. (It does not concern the Indians, who are left out of the picture entirely.²⁰) Most of the plot owes to Lynn Riggs, who wrote the play on which *Oklahoma!* is based, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. What Rodgers and Hammerstein took over from Riggs was a heroine who has a hard time admitting she has fallen for the hero, not because she is coy and flirtatious and busy with boys at the country club or because she is worn out by washing dishes at a nightclub where she knows she could become a headliner but because she is immature and self-centered—and because she is farming, the hero is a cowboy, and cowboys don't use the land the way farmers do. One reason she *does* commit herself is that she is terrified of the hired hand who has designs on her and is capable of violence if he doesn't get what he wants. The cowboy-hero handles a gun so well that even the hired hand has to worry about him—that is one of the hero's desirable attributes.

I am leaving the numbers out of this description, which sounds more serious than the show itself. The numbers change the tone and make these people sound happy and funny. But the book of *Oklahoma!* does have a serious line, and the challenge taken up by Rodgers and Hammerstein was how to interrupt a potentially serious plot with songs and dances that would not collapse into ridiculousness. The same challenge had been faced by Kern and Hammerstein in *Show Boat*, by Kurt Weill and Paul Green in *Johnny Johnson*, by Weill, Moss Hart, and Ira Gershwin in *Lady in the Dark*, and by some little-remembered composers and librettists of the 1920s and 1930s in whose hands the enterprise *did* collapse into ridiculousness. Challenging book shows were written before *Oklahoma!* But

²⁰ See Most, "‘We Know We Belong to the Land’: The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*"

Oklahoma! ran through the war years, and by the time Rodgers and Hammerstein followed with another challenging book show, *Carousel* the Depression was a thing of the past and post-war prosperity was soon to become apparent. The Rodgers and Hammerstein era owes much to the enterprise of two veteran writers, but it also owes much to American economic conditions after the war, conditions that allowed serious composers like Kurt Weill, Frank Loesser, and Leonard Bernstein to look for collaborators who would continue the musical's advance into challenging plots with a hope of mainstream profitable runs.²¹

The wider range of plot resulted in a wider range of character, but the important effect of breaking into song remained the same as it had been when the range of character was narrow. The effect of breaking into song (or dance) is to double the characters into the second order of time, the lyric time of music, so that they gain a formality of expression unavailable to them in the book. Characters like Billy Bigelow and Julie Jordan in *Carousel* have numbers that seem specific to their

²¹ See Roost, "Before *Oklahoma!*: A Reappraisal of Musical Theatre During the 1930s." Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'*, pp. 88–93, argues that the "musical play" replaced the "musical comedy" in the 1940s and makes a strong case for the revised *Show Boat* of 1946 as a sign of the change. For good accounts of Rodgers' decision to collaborate with Hammerstein and of their work together, see Mordden, *Rodgers and Hammerstein*, pp. 17–40; Fordin, *Getting to Know Him: A Biography of Oscar Hammerstein II*, pp. 184–190; and Secrest, *Somewhere for Us: A Biography of Richard Rodgers*, pp. 235–242. John Lahr's way of describing the change brought about by *Oklahoma!* is useful. In a review published in the *New Yorker*, he wrote, "the musical's job description changed, virtually overnight. Anarchic, freewheeling frivolity that traded in joy—in other words, in the comedian's resourcefulness—was renounced for an artful marriage of music and lyrics that traded in narrative. . . . Big names were no longer needed to carry the show; the show itself was the star." Lahr, "O.K. Chorale: An English Take on Rodgers and Hammerstein." Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, p. 95, shows that the innovation in *Oklahoma!* was to reprise parts of its earlier songs almost immediately, as though the number could double back on the intervening dialogue: "the dialogue interrupts the song as much as the song interrupts the dialogue." This seems accurate and is related to the technique of underscoring, which sustains a number even while dialogue takes place. The Bench Scene in *Carousel*, the finest example of reprised number and underscoring, is discussed in chapter 6.

characters, but the effect of the numbers is not so much to advance characterization as to double characterization, by turning Billy Bigelow and Julie Jordan into new versions of themselves, musical versions. Their book versions are one thing, but their musical versions enlarge them into lyrical power. They are said to be the same characters, but clearly they are different, and the incongruity is theatrically arresting. This is the same principle by which Fred and Adele Astaire changed from trivial book selves into interesting song-and-dance selves, only now the book selves aren't trivial. This is a complex and sophisticated kind of dramatic characterization. Behind *Carousel* lies Molnar's *Liliom*, a good play from "legitimate" theatre's modern tradition. The Molnar characters are better drawn than their counterparts in the book of *Carousel*, but they do not have the doubling effect of the songs in *Carousel*. They are more convincing as realistic characters, but the musical gives its characters a dimension that lies beyond realism and increases the range of their presentation. The numbers in the Rodgers and Hammerstein version do not advance the characters or further the book so much as they change the characters and the book into new versions of themselves that play against our normal sense of identity and story. The numbers interrupt our normal sense of character and plot with song and dance, and what we are left with is not the "one" but the "multiple."

I will take up the Rodgers and Hammerstein shows in more detail later. For the moment, the point is that their status in the history of the genre depends on the enlargement they gave to the kinds of book the musical could take up, and not on a transformation of the musical into a quasi-operatic form. There are crossovers between opera and the musical, of course. Opera has always been able to borrow elements of popular music and dance without losing its character as opera. The musical has always been able to borrow elements of opera without losing its character as musical—usually in the spirit of parody in the earlier musicals, but sometimes in the spirit of imitation in the later ones. Opera was always fair game for the musical, and after Rodgers and Hammerstein expanded the range of the book show to include episodes of violence and

grief, operatic singing became one of the ways characters could break into song. Opera singers took lead roles in musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, although they played off against musical comedy performers—they were one element of the principle of difference that has always driven the form. Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin together formed an astonishing combination in *South Pacific*. Their musical styles did not belong together, but that was the point. Impudent and eclectic, the musical made the clash of styles into a selling point, with a book that also involved a clash of styles between these two unlikely lovers. This is not the musical becoming the opera. This is the musical expanding its capabilities.²²

THE CONCEPT MUSICAL

After Rodgers and Hammerstein, it seemed that any kind of plot could be turned into a commercial musical. In the mid-1950s, three Maurice Pagnol plays were turned into one show, the Harold Rome/S. N. Behrman *Fanny* (1954), and Homer's *Odyssey* became the Jerome Moross/John LaTouche *Golden Apple* (1954). The key figure in the wake of Rodgers and Hammerstein was Leonard Bernstein, who took on Voltaire's *Candide* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, creating two recordable scores for two revivable books. The Bernstein shows line up with another radical experiment in book writing that is sometimes referred to as the concept musical. The book of a concept musical is often controlled by a theme or a metaphor. Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* (1966) is one of the earliest concept

²² Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is operatic throughout, demanding a company of classically trained voices. Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* deliberately turns the Rodgers and Hammerstein example in the direction of opera, with several roles calling for operatic singers and giving one of them, the lead soprano, a genuine aria, but it retains the book-number alternation of the musical and inserts popular song formats at will. Frank Loesser's *Most Happy Fellow* brings an operatic singer into contact with musical comedy performers in the *South Pacific* style and goes further toward being through-sung, but no one confuses it with opera.

musicals. Rodgers and Hammerstein had earlier tried highly unusual book shows that smacked of the concept musical, *Allegro* and *Me and Juliet*, and so had Alan Jay Lerner and Kurt Weill in *Love Life*, but these experiments depended on complex and sprawling plots, whereas *Cabaret* knew how to condense an idea into metaphor—the rise of Nazism seems to take place in a seedy Berlin nightclub. (The metaphor was largely created by director Hal Prince.) The heroine, Sally Bowles, leads two lives, one as the girlfriend of the male lead, which is about where she stands in the Christopher Isherwood story and the John Van Druten play on which the musical is based, the other as a singer in a nightclub, where she belts out tunes like the title song. “Life is a cabaret, old chum,” she sings in her musical version, celebrating the destructive hedonism she and the others live by in their book selves. Sharpen this doubleness by making her aware of her divided selves, let her become a commentator on the self-destructiveness of her life, and this would be a Brechtian drama. That does not happen, but the song-and-dance formats inserted into the Isherwood story about the rise of Nazism jostle the show into political connections between fascism and popular entertainment, and since audiences at *Cabaret* are themselves watching popular entertainment, the metaphor opens out into the show’s performance itself. The concept musical often has such a metadramatic or mirroring effect, a matter discussed in the concluding chapter of this book.

Kander and Ebb went on to another metaphorical concept show, *Chicago*, where vaudeville routines laid out by director and choreographer Bob Fosse comment on the system of justice and imprisonment in Chicago in the 1920s. (Fosse was developing an idea from the play *Chicago* by Maureen Watkins, on which the musical is based.) Roxie Hart, who has ambitions to become a nightclub singer, murders her lover in “real” life and is imprisoned, where she finds that the legal system is already a vaudeville show. By the end, she has teamed up with another murderess/songstress and returned to civilian life, where they also become vaudeville stars. Kander and Ebb and Fosse and Prince were advancing upon the convention by

which characters have two modes of existence in musicals. They were taking the convention literally, putting show business settings next to “real” settings in Berlin and Chicago and letting the two overlap.

Cabaret was the turning point for the concept musical. A long run on Broadway was followed by a successful film version directed by Fosse. *Chicago* then caught up. It seems to have been ahead of its time in the original production of 1975, but two decades later it became a Broadway long-running musical, too, and, like *Cabaret*, it was turned into a successful film.

The film of *Cabaret* was made early in the history of the concept musical—1972. In the years just preceding, Sondheim was teaming with Hal Prince on *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), two concept shows that, in different ways, look back to the revue tradition without losing contact with the sophistication of the modern book show. Then, in the same year that *Chicago* tried to make its way on Broadway, 1975, Michael Bennett took up the brilliant concept of making a musical, *A Chorus Line*, about the audition and rehearsal process that lies behind the musical itself, and Sondheim and Hal Prince mounted *Pacific Overtures*, which used Kabuki stage techniques to deal with the westernization of Japan. Thus, by 1975, the concept musical had arrived. It had received a jolt of British energy in 1971 with the Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice rock treatment of Scripture in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and it would receive another jolt when Lloyd Webber was inspired to put T. S. Eliot’s book of poems, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, into a revue of numbers for the cats themselves—a concept musical that threatened to run forever.)

Cabaret, *Company*, *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Chicago*, *A Chorus Line*—these concept musicals are avant-garde Broadway book shows. Even when they recall the revue tradition, the leading characters remain throughout the show and their lives change. The plots of the concept shows are unpredictable and original. They are driven by confidence that the book has become a narrative art in itself, requiring new ways of relating book to number. Some would say the musical became an important

form of drama in the age of Rodgers and Hammerstein, when the book became integrated with the music. I wish to say that the musical was already an important form of drama by the time of Rodgers and Hammerstein, that it never depended on the integration of book and number so much as on the alternation between them, that Rodgers and Hammerstein greatly enlarged the kinds of books that could be used for musicals, and that the age of the concept musical carried this advance in book-and-number formatting to the point that there is virtually nothing that cannot be imagined an effective topic for a musical. The ferment of ideas behind the concept show combines innovation with a strict sense of the musical's history (the revue as called to life in *Follies*), the musical's procedures (the audition and rehearsals of *A Chorus Line*), and the musical's relationships to other forms of theatre (the Kabuki methods in *Pacific Overtures*). The past and the future of the theatre are at issue in the best of them, which one could also say of Elizabethan drama and of other periods of greatness in the theatre, and this could not have happened without the advances made in book writing on Broadway from the time of *Show Boat* through the time of *Oklahoma!* and beyond, to our own time. The musical is arguably the major form of drama produced so far in America.

BRECHT AND THE DRAMA OF DISJUNCTION

It is the difference between book and number that gives the musical its potential as major drama. The European theorist who understood this aesthetic of disjunction most fully and who should stand in the place of Wagner as a challenging and instructive figure for the musical was Bertolt Brecht. That he cannot stand there is a sign of the amalgamation that has always existed between the Broadway theatre and the commercial interests of American show business. Brecht seized on the interruptive quality of the musical number as one means of "alienation" or "estrangement" in drama—the idea that audiences

should be held at an emotional distance from the action, able to evaluate what is before them.²³ Indeed, one of Brecht's aims was to repudiate the Wagnerian aesthetic and recognize forms of drama that broke open the assumption of unity as the aim of the action. "When the epic theatre's methods begin to penetrate the opera, the first result is a radical *separation of the elements*," Brecht wrote. "The great struggle for supremacy between words, music, and production . . . can simply be bypassed by radically separating the elements." This "radical separation of the elements" had long been built into the revue formats described in this chapter, which had great attraction for Brecht. When he saw *Oklahoma!* on Broadway in 1946, he praised its plot as providing "scaffolding" for the "inserts" of the numbers, which is a better metaphor than a seamless whole, and when his version of *The Duchess of Malfi* failed in New York, he complained that the cast lacked the technique of the American musical. Zero Mostel and Elsa Lancaster, both trained in vaudeville theatre, were approached by Brecht for leads in his plays. To be sure, he also called the musical an empty form of drama for its political vacuity, but he knew that the song-and-dance format of the musical and the revue was one American source of technique for what he termed Epic Theatre.²⁴

The musical is imbued with the capitalistic economic system that Brecht despised. In one of his earliest theoretical statements, appended to his and Kurt Weill's opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, Brecht noted that the capitalist apparatus of opera made fodder of the intellectuals who wrote the libretti and the music. The writers think they are producing the artwork, Brecht said, but in fact they are caught up in a system that is controlled by financial interests and is devoted to reproducing the successful formats of the past. The financial

²³ The idea is frequent in Brecht but is succinct in "On Music in Drama," in Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre*.

²⁴ Brecht saw *Oklahoma!* on September 30, 1946, accompanied by Ferdinand Reyher, whose diary is the source of information. See Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, 148–49. A dancer featured in *Oklahoma!*, Joan McCracken, later played Galileo's daughter in the New York production of Charles Laughton's *Galileo*, although Brecht may have had no hand in this bit of casting.

system on Broadway fits Brecht's complaint closely enough, yet innovation has proved to be entirely possible in the musical. The distance the genre has traveled from the early shows of Berlin and Kern through the Rodgers and Hammerstein era of mid-century and then down to the musicals of today shows that the musical is open to change, even though it belongs to the centers of modern capitalism, New York and London.

Certainly there is an enormous amount of formulaic writing in the history of the genre, but one part of Brecht would have understood why a spirit of innovation and experiment was able to push the musical into new territory in every decade of the twentieth century. The musical comes from subversive sources. The spirit of satire and travesty ran strong through both the revue and operetta traditions I have reviewed. More directly, the performers, composers, and lyricists of the early New York musicals came from the Lower East Side, the neighborhood of the Gershwin brothers, Irving Berlin, and Yip Harburg, while much of the music that gave the distinctively American feel and danceability to the early shows, ragtime and then jazz, came to New York from the South and the Midwest by way of Harlem. Broadway, which actually goes some distance toward connecting the Lower East Side and Harlem, found itself in the middle, a thriving ground for the spirit of license and parody so strong at either of its extremes.

That spirit was not enough in itself. It required a formal structure that could be learned and varied by performers as different in training and backgrounds as, say, Irving Berlin singing in Bowery restaurants and Eubie Blake playing piano in Harlem nightclubs. Kern and Gershwin were song pluggers on Tin Pan Alley. The popular song was learned on the job, and it was learned as a crowd-pleaser, but it was also learned as a formal structure. In part the formal structure came from the nineteenth-century parlor song with its verse-chorus format and its sharply defined stanzaic patterns within the chorus. March and polka rhythms crowded in on this format, then especially ragtime crowded in. Berlin, Blake, Gershwin, Kern and, hundreds of other composers, lyricists, and performers of the early twentieth century caught the new rhythms and

learned how to produce tunes and verse in the standard formats. The most important thing they learned was how to connect the formats to the idioms of normal speech. When the elevated diction of the nineteenth-century song gave way to the “some of these days” vernacular of common experience, and when the syncopation of ragtime charged the tunes with fresh danceability, the way was open for putting groups of these tunes into stage vehicles of sufficient length to last the evening. The European revue and operetta formats outlined earlier provided the stage vehicles, both uptown and downtown. The result was a new theatrical genre trendy enough to change and tough enough to survive, an aesthetic with staying power.²⁵

The musical connects with Brecht more clearly on the aesthetic side than on the political side. It is a matter of aesthetics that the practitioners of the musical wrote the language of ordinary people into popular songs and wrote the songs into stage entertainments that would draw crowds. When the crowds proved large enough to fill theatres, theatres were already waiting, and more could be built. Capitalism thrived on the opportunities for investment that were becoming apparent in the early twentieth century, and those entertainers and composers and lyricists from downtown and uptown were not interested in challenging the system expanding before them. There is no squaring the musical with Brecht’s political economics. But the aesthetic basis of the musical is energized by the spirit of disunification that Brecht called for. This spirit can be captured and contained by capitalism, as the history of

²⁵ Sousa’s marches, which have their own kind of syncopation, played a part in the advent of the modern American song. Sousa’s turn-of-the-century operettas, overlooked in accounts of the musical but fully apparent in the listings of Norton, *Chronology of American Musical Theater*, and Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, were important in bringing his march-syncopation style into touch with musical theatre. For a historical treatment of song in America, see Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*. For an aesthetic view, see Hamm; see also Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924–1950*. The development of vernacular song lyrics is covered in Furia, *Poets of Tin Pan Alley*. Brecht’s own songs were cut to European strophic patterns different from the Tin Pan Alley models, but the similarities outweigh the differences. See Kowalke, “Brecht and music: Theory and practice.”

the musical has no trouble showing. But the aesthetic of disunification also has the potential for resisting structures of wealth and power. It is a tough aesthetic, originally rooted in black and immigrant culture and capable of turning the established pieties into song-and-dance routines fraught with social criticism.

The chapters that follow are not about Brecht and political drama until the end of the book. I am concerned with the aesthetics of the form, and I want to base my argument on specific examples from the leading musicals themselves. First I turn attention to a well-known scene from *Oklahoma!*, a scene that possesses the attributes of integration, to show that the difference between book and number is clear-cut and decisive. Then I consider another well-known scene from *Oklahoma!* that has none of the attributes of integration in order to show that the book-and-number aesthetic is working there, too. I look at several turning point or recognition scenes from good musicals in which the book-and-number disjunction is again what counts. Subsequent chapters take up the most obvious phenomena of musical theatre—the characters break into song, they often sing in ensembles, there is an orchestra, the crowd applauds, there is a set—for it is in the conventions we take for granted that the aesthetics of theatre are most firmly rooted. I compare a famous show by Andrew Lloyd Webber and one by Stephen Sondheim, because the aesthetic perspective I offer suggests that Sondheim is doing the kind of theatre work that promises an innovative future for the musical genre, while Lloyd Webber is doing another kind of work. There is little if anything of Wagner and Brecht in these chapters, but the contrast between their theories that I have sketched here is in the background. Then, when the aesthetic work is done, a final chapter asks, What kind of drama is this? and taps into political theatre for a final remark. Sondheim will be prominent there, for I believe Sondheim opens the way to political drama, although he makes no claims to that kind of writing himself. And with Sondheim, Brecht returns to the picture. Sondheim has little time for the Brechtian, but theory makes for interesting alliances, and Sondheim and Brecht are an attractive pair, no

matter what either would have thought of the idea. I do not argue that Sondheim is a Brechtian dramatist; that would be pointless and wrong. But I do wish to say that Brecht's theory was right about the artistic form of the musical no matter how rigorously the Broadway musical refuses to answer up to his economic and political beliefs, and I do wish to say that Sondheim, who also refuses to answer up to Brecht, works with aesthetic characteristics that Brecht formulated in his own way, and imagines new variations for them.