Transposing Broadway

Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical

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1. Introduction: Broadway as a Cultural Ellis Island

Coming to America

From the 1910s on, America’s Broadway musical was developed primarily by Jews. Reflecting their own adjustments to American life, and that of their increasingly Jewish audience, these artists shaped the musical into a form that illustrated their concerns, promoted their values, and, above all, provided a setting for the ongoing discussion of how outsiders might gain access to America and its “Dream” of acceptance and success.

Broadway is identified with New York City. In the years that the musical evolved, Jews formed an increasing percentage of the city’s population, in large part due to the great wave of immigration from Eastern Europe that begun in the 1880s. In 1870, 60,000 Jews lived in New York constituting 4 percent of the city’s population; in 1900 there were 580,000, representing 11 percent. By 1920, 1,643,000 Jews lived in New York, forming fully 29 percent of the city. Furthermore, as the Encyclopedia Judaica notes:

> It is safe to say that from the 1920s on Jews formed a disproportionately high percentage of New York’s theatergoers, music listeners, book purchasers, and art collectors. One rough estimate placed Jews at 70% of the city’s concert and theater audience during the 1950s.¹

Consequently, the Broadway musical reflected a primary audience that was increasingly composed of Jews. It makes sense that Jewish issues and tastes be found in shows leading up to, and including, what is regarded as the musical’s “golden age.” This dynamic was accentuated by the fact that the vast majority of Broadway’s leading creative lights were predominantly Jews, who in many ways understandably shared their audience’s values and concerns.
2. Hello, Young Lovers: Assimilation and Dramatic Configurations in the American Musical

PART ONE: WINNING COMBINATIONS

Oscar Hammerstein is rightfully applauded for his life-long contributions to the American musical theatre. From his earliest efforts as librettist and lyricist working with the likes of Sigmund Romberg and Jerome Kern, through to his last phase when he teamed with composer Richard Rodgers, Hammerstein enjoyed enormous prestige, acceptance, and respect. He is also rightfully remembered for his proclivity for forming believable characters and promoting a humanistic agenda, be it the anti-prejudicial statements found in *South Pacific* or the political and social dilemmas faced by the King of Siam. And while he is sometimes lampooned for his overly folksy depictions and sometimes awkward or sugary wordplay, the underlying integrity of his work endures, as witnessed by the regular revivals of his and Rodgers’ shows, as well as his masterwork with Kern, *Show Boat*.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II have regularly been credited with the complete integration of the musical, creating the “musical play” out of what had been “musical comedy,” initiating the dominance of book musicals and the musical’s corresponding “golden age.” Beginning with *Oklahoma!* (1943) this era lasted roughly for twenty years, only to be eventually toppled by the emergence of rock and roll and later the so-called concept musicals of the 1970s. However, if you place Rodgers and Hammerstein within the larger context of their times, other patterns emerge, as evident in their works, which in turn influenced not only the content but the form of the book musical itself.
3. The Melting Pot Paradigm of Irving Berlin

Voice of the Immigrant Generations

Songwriter Irving Berlin epitomized the immigrant experience. He was the immigrant who made good, who, in Horatio Alger’s terms, made the most of his “luck and pluck” to rise out of poverty and attain riches. He was a self-made man, a shining example of the so-called American Dream. To whatever degree the American musical reflects the immigrant experience, it can be found in Irving Berlin’s long and prolific career and the ever-evolving nature of the work he created.

Born Israel Baline, the son of a cantor, one of Berlin’s earliest memories is of his house being burned down in a Russian pogrom. His father packed up the family for America and ended up impoverished in New York City’s Lower East Side. Ashamed of his small earnings, Izzy went “on the bum.” He earned pennies singing on street corners and in saloons. In time, he became a singing waiter at the Bowery’s rough-and-tumble Pelham Café, making up dirty lyrics to popular songs. When a competing saloon’s waiter published a song, Pelham’s boss insisted the still-teenage Berlin and another waiter do the same. “Marie from Sunny Italy” became Izzy’s first published song, introducing both a new career and a new name: the sheet music cover read “Lyrics by I. Berlin.” By age twenty-four Irving Berlin had become America’s most successful songwriter: a career that would last for six decades.

Berlin’s rise corresponded with the rise of immigrants in America, particularly in New York City. With barely a grammar school education, and with English as his second language, Berlin wrote lyrics and music that reflected the growing assimilation and increased sophistication of his coreligionists. This was particularly true of second-generation immigrants, eager for acceptance and upward mobility. Berlin’s songs expressed their disappointments and joys.
4. How to Succeed

As the twentieth century progressed, the overall work situation for immigrants and their children changed. Many of those who arrived in the mass migrations between the 1880s and mid-1920s settled in New York's Lower East Side. Theirs was a hard-scrabble life, packed into densely populated tenements, scrambling to make a living, hoping to educate their children so that they could move up and out.

While each person's experience differed, Jews of each consecutive generation sought ways to advance, to improve their lot. This was reflected in a number of significant Broadway musicals, which, perhaps unwittingly, chronicled each new phase. Though the characters and situations depicted in this succession of shows were rarely ethnic, they consistently preached assimilation as a conditional step toward achieving fiscal success and personal happiness. These shows thus proclaimed the concerns of Broadway's predominantly Jewish composers, lyricists, librettists, producers, directors and corresponded to those of their New York audience.

An examination of business-themed musicals reveals the obstacles and travails experienced by Jews and others as the century progressed. They chart how outsiders gradually made their way, revealing the variety of strategies used in order to get ahead. Each show demonstrates up close issues of risk and reward, the negotiation between outsiders and insiders, the relative rewards and cost of assimilation. Together they collectively present the shifting definition of what constituted American success.

This chapter is organized chronologically, not so much play by play, but rather according to shifts in occupations and attitudes. Shows from the first quarter of the century celebrate street smarts as key to success. Shows later depicted how the pressures to assimilate manifested itself in a variety of improving work settings, reflecting the gradual rise and integration of ethnic peoples (whether defined as "ethnic" or simply as "outsiders") into mainstream America's work life. Ultimately the Dream was largely realized, but at what cost?
5. Cinderellas

PART ONE: WELCOME IRENE, SALLY, NELLIE, AND FANNY—ACCULTURATION AND THE CINDERELLA MUSICAL

In 1957, CBS broadcast a made-for-television Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, Cinderella. The production was a straightforward, musical adaptation created specifically to star Julie Andrews, who had just won recognition for her work in My Fair Lady, and featured book and lyrics by Hammerstein with music by Rodgers. Performed live, it was viewed by over 100 million Americans, or 60 percent of the population. In 1997, Walt Disney Productions similarly aired a revival of the same show, this time produced by Whitney Houston and featuring a racially mixed cast headed by the African American pop singing star Brandy in the title role. Seen by over 60 million viewers, it was “the highest rated television musical of a generation.” Clearly, this reception indicates a welcoming of diversity, at least in the portrayal of a familiar fairy tale. Yet it is important to note that the mixed casting does change the way in which an audience might view the story; the all-white 1957 version allows one to focus on this modern-day operetta entirely as a fairytale, operating entirely in a self-contained world apart from our own. The 1997 version, because of its mixed cast, reminds us more of the world in which we ourselves inhabit, situating the familiar story in contemporary America as we self-consciously point out that it does in fact still work, despite the then-unorthodox casting. What had been “just” a musical adaptation of a fairy tale, with seemingly little meaning beyond that, had become an inadvertent statement about how far America had come on issues of homogeneity and race, in addition to what we will accept as theatrical convention.

It is also interesting to note the enormous popular success of the Cinderella broadcasts (including the 1965 Lesley Ann Warren version). American audiences responded enthusiastically even though the show itself is not regarded as amongst Rodgers and Hammerstein’s better work.²

There seems to be a certain resonance between the Cinderella story and the cultural ethos of America itself to which this story speaks, perhaps
6. Turns of the Century: Dreams of Progress, Dreams of Loss

PART ONE: WHEELS OF DREAMS—RAGTIME AS MUSICAL MIDDLE PASSAGE

Oh Sarah, it's more than a promise,
It must be true.
A country that lets a man like me
Own a car, raise a child, build a life
With you.

Coalhouse Walker sings “The Wheels of a Dream”

The 1998 musical Ragtime is a study in transitions, a portrayal of early twentieth-century America as a world in flux. Almost every character in the play transforms himself or herself in terms of their social position, almost each of which is motivated by unexpected and unwanted forces beyond their own doing. Based on E. L. Doctorow’s 1975 novel of the same name, the musical examines social, cultural, racial, and ethnic changes in turn-of-the-century American culture. While the novel and the musical reflect late twentieth-century sensibilities, both rely heavily on the novelties that transformed American life during the early 1900s, particularly the explosion in every kind of travel—car, steamship, and train. These innovations sped up not only the pace of American life, but also the ability of its diverse diaspora communities to move, intersect, and occasionally collide. Thus the characters in Ragtime are shown not simply on a series of “middle passages” but often actually mid-passage, and the audience is offered insights into how the journey, whether by car, train, or steamer, is shaping the new identity of the travelers.

The ragtime musical theme is itself emblematic, marking a major shift in the demographic makeup and consequent values of nineteenth-century
7. Fiddler’s Children

Harold Prince has said that when approached with the idea to develop Shalom Aleichem’s stories into a musical, he felt ill prepared to do so. As a German American Jew he could not identify with the material. Better to ask Jerome Robbins instead, as his family had come from Russia and could better identify and hence work with the material more effectively.

Prince had done much to move forward the notion of what material could make for a musical. By the early 1960s his most significant production probably had been West Side Story, significant in that it portrayed New York City gang life. In another couple of years he would break through more doors by placing Nazi Germany on stage in Cabaret. Prince was a risk taker. But he had to relate directly to the material.

So it was that Jerome Robbins came to develop, choreograph, and direct Fiddler on the Roof. Robbins had always been an innovator, a classically trained ballet dancer, and world-class classical choreographer. Like his friend Leonard Bernstein, Robbins traveled easily between the worlds of classical music and musical theatre. Together they had collaborated to create On the Town and later West Side Story, each an attempt to blend together high art and popular culture, and thereby elevate the American musical to a new aesthetic level.

In many respects Fiddler on the Roof was the culmination of fifty years of American musicals as traced in this book’s first chapter. It brought ethnicity entirely to the forefront, creating not an American world, but rather a Jewish world on stage. Several Rodgers and Hammerstein productions had been set abroad, but always included at least one Western character with whom the audience could relate as either American (such as South Pacific) or as an American surrogate (as it could be argued is Anna in The King and I). No such cultural bridge characters exist in Fiddler on the Roof. Instead the oppressed Jewish milkman Tevye addresses us directly, assuming we can relate to him and his family.
8. Lovable Monsters: An Epilogue

The musical *Beauty and the Beast* opened in 1994 and musically reenacted the classic tale, its happy ending having the beast magically transformed to a handsome prince, the ideal suitor for our beautiful heroine. In 2008, the musical *Shrek* debuted and its happy ending had the beautiful princess magically transformed into a female beast, the perfect match to our ogre hero. This striking inversion signals values had suddenly changed.

Off-Broadway often featured the monstrous as sympathetic protagonists, but Broadway not. For instance, Off-Broadway’s *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), which became a cult hit, enjoyed a successful revival on Broadway in 2003. But *Bat Boy: the Musical* (1997), another Off-Broadway cult hit, has yet to reach Broadway audiences. And when a monster character did appear on Broadway its condition was considered grotesque: 1998’s *Carrie* famously flopped on Broadway; 1997’s *Jekyll and Hyde* succeeded, but at its end the monstrous Hyde and Jekyll were thankfully dispatched.

Things changed with the new millennium. A slew of shows appeared on Broadway with sympathetic monsters as their leads, inverting conventional expectations. Some have been cute, such as the Muppet-like creatures of *Avenue Q* (2003); some drawn from cartoons, like *Shrek* (2008) and *Spiderman* (2011). *Wicked* (2003) is a variation from the classic film, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Young Frankenstein* (2007) featured the monster dancing tap. But our list is not limited to the inanimate or the animated; there are also shows that portrayed monstrous people: witness *The Producers* (2001) and *Hairspray* (2002). The hallmark of all of these shows is that the audience’s initial view of each show’s protagonist is as frightening or distorted, yet, by the show’s end we come to view them as normal and cheer for their triumph. The trend reached a point where even the seemingly most conventional can be portrayed as abnormal: in *Legally Blonde* (2007) our heroine, every bit the standard valley girl, battles to gain acceptance