

# THEORIZING THE GOLDEN AGE MUSICAL: GENRE, STRUCTURE, SYNTAX\*

KIM H. KOWALKE

## I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE GOLDEN AGE MUSICAL

The quarter century separating the Broadway openings of the landmark musical play *Oklahoma!* (1943) and the antipodal rock musical *Hair* (1968) is generally, though not universally, considered the “Golden Age” of the American musical theater. During this period between “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” and the dawning of “The Age of Aquarius,” the American musical theater evolved from its various pre-war incarnations into a globally recognized form of “legitimate” theater with multiple generic subspecies and an expanding network of links to international commerce and mass culture. Emanating almost exclusively from the four dozen theaters then clustered in a compact rectangle, centered on Broadway between 39th and 46th Street in New York City, the Golden Age musical negotiated a treacherous cultural terrain. As an unsubsidized, high-risk commercial venture, it sought to balance escalating artistic aspirations with financial exigencies and attempted to gain enhanced cultural capital as the nation’s foremost indigenous theatrical art form (analogous to the national forms of opera that had evolved in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) without sacrificing the entertain-

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\* This is the first publication of the original English-language version of “Das Goldene Zeitalter des Musicals,” published as a chapter in *Musical: Das unterhaltende Genre*, Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert, vol. 6, ed. Armin Geraths and Christian Martin Schmidt (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 2002): 137–178. It is offered here as a “document of its time,” as I have not attempted to take into account any of the burgeoning literature about the American musical theater published in the interim. However, I have assessed nine of the most important of these books in an omnibus review-essay published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60/3 (2007): 688–714. Of particular relevance to the present essay is my critique (pp. 706–709) of Scott McMillin’s *The Musical as Drama: A Study of the Principles and Conventions behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).

ment values required to amuse and move a broad middle-class, family-oriented audience. Not all of the musicals of the age turned out golden. Of approximately three hundred new musical shows mounted on Broadway from 1943 to 1968, ranging from seven to seventeen per season (as opposed to a peak of fifty in 1928–29), less than one-fourth achieved “hit” status and the multi-season runs required to recoup the initial investment of their financial backers. (Figure 1 presents a season-by-season tabulation.) Those that managed to do so have subsequently been awarded canonic status as core works in a standard repertory of musicals, which are still frequently performed and studied. In contrast, no pre-Golden Age show—not even *Show Boat*—has been successfully revived on Broadway (and thereafter entered into the canon) without undergoing major revisions to bring it into closer conformity with the conventions of the post-*Oklahoma!* musical.

As the musical grew more sophisticated in musico-dramatic construction, more adventurous in its subject matter, and more serious in its social commentary, “integration” of its various components became the foremost desideratum. Concomitantly, the collaborative creative process evolved into a more rigorous and often perennial enterprise, expanded to include not only book-writer, lyricist, and composer but also producer, director, choreographer, and designers. In the Golden Age musical, each constituent element was expected to reflect and contribute to the overall style of the production, which was now dictated by its particular dramatic situation and content. “The orchestrations sound the way the costumes look,” as Richard Rodgers quipped.<sup>1</sup> The elevation of dance (from its traditional functions as novelty, spectacle, or mere occasion for displaying the legs of chorus girls) to near-equality with music, lyrics, and book in advancing plot and revealing character occurred only gradually, with George Balanchine, Agnes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975; reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 227.

**FIGURE 1.** The Golden Age of the Musical, 1942–68: Notable Productions

- The selective list below differentiates between new musicals and revivals: the latter appear after the semi-colon in each season’s list.
- An asterisk (\*) precedes the title of musicals which were “hits,” that is, their producers recouped their investments. “Flops” in this sense are shows that did not recover their initial costs of production, regardless of their artistic merits or lack thereof.
- The number of performances in initial Broadway runs is indicated in parentheses.
- Winners of the Tony Award for Outstanding Musical (which began in 1949) appear in **bold typeface**; winners of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical (after 1945) appear in *italics*; Pulitzer Prize Winners for Drama are underscored; Pulitzer Prize Winners for Music have a double-underscore.
- Note that this list does not include musicals that were produced “Off-Broadway,” and that sometimes two musicals were honored with Tony awards during the same season because of the timing of the annual awards presentations.

Season	New Productions/ Revivals	Notable Musical Productions
1942–43	17/7	*Star and Garter (609), *This is the Army (113), *Something for the Boys (422), *Oklahoma! (2248), Ziegfeld Follies of 1943 (533); *Rosalinda (521), The Student Prince (153)
1943–44	16/4	*One Touch of Venus (567); What’s Up? (63), *Carmen Jones (503), *Mexican Hayride (481), *Follow the Girls (882); A Connecticut Yankee (135), The Vagabond King (54), *The Merry Widow (322), Helen Goes to Troy (96)
1944–45	17/2	*Song of Norway (860), *Bloomer Girl (654), The Seven Lively Arts (183), *On the Town (463), *Up in Central Park (504), The Firebrand of Florence (43), *Carousel (890); The Gypsy Baron (11), Robin Hood (12)
1945–46	16/2	St. Louis Woman (113), Call Me Mister (734), *Annie Get Your Gun (1147); *The Red Mill (531), *Show Boat (418)
1946–47	13/2	Beggar’s Holiday (111), Street Scene (148), *Finian’s Rainbow (725), *Brigadoon (581), The Medium, The Telephone (211); *Sweethearts (288)
1947–48	12/2	*High Button Shoes (727), Allegro (315), *Angel in the Wings (308); The Cradle Will Rock (34)
1948–49	14/1	Magdalena (88), Love Life (252), *Where’s Charley? (792), *As the Girls Go (420), *Lend an Ear (460), *Kiss Me, Kate (1077), * <u>South Pacific</u> (1925); The Rape of Lucretia (23)
1949–50	16/0	Miss Liberty (308), Lost in the Stars (281), Regina (56), *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds (740), * <u>The Consul</u> (269), Peter Pan (320)
1950–51	12/1	*Call Me Madam (644), *Guys and Dolls (1200), * <b>The King and I</b> (1246), A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (267)
1951–52	8/5	Two on the Aisle (276), Paint Your Wagon (289), *New Faces of 1952 (365); Music in the Air (56) *Pal Joey (542), Four Saints in Three Acts (15), Of Thee I Sing (72), Shuffle Along (4)
1952–53	9/0	*Wish You Were Here (597), *Wonderful Town (559), *Can-Can (892), *Me and Juliet (358)
1953–54	8/0	*Kismet (583), The Girl in Pink Tights (115), <i>The Golden Apple</i> (125), * <b>The Pajama Game</b> (1063)
1954–55	12/1	*The Boy Friend (483), *Fanny (888), <u>The Saint of Bleecker Street</u> (92), *Plain and Fancy (476), *Silk Stockings (461), *Damn Yankees (1022); On Your Toes (64)

FIGURE 1. (continued)

1955–56	7/0	Pipe Dream (245), * <b>My Fair Lady</b> (2715), Mr. Wonderful (383), * <i>The Most Happy Fella</i> (678)
1956–57	9/0	*Li'l Abner (693), *Bells are Ringing (925), Candide (73), Happy Hunting (413), *New Girl in Town (432)
1957–58	11/0	*West Side Story (734), *Jamaica (558), <b>The Music Man</b> (1375)
1958–59	12/0	* <i>La Plume de Ma tante</i> (835), *Flower Drum Song (602), * <b>Redhead</b> (455), Juno (16); Destry Rides Again (472), *Gypsy (702)
1959–60	14/1	Take Me Along (448), * <b>The Sound of Music</b> (1443), * <i>Fiorello!</i> (796), *Once Upon a Mattress (460), * <b>Bye Bye Birdie</b> (607); Finian's Rainbow (12)
1960–61	15/0	*Irma La Douce (527), Tenderloin (216), *The Unsinkable Molly Brown (532), *Camelot (873), Wildcat (172), Do Re Mi (400), <i>Carnival</i> (719)
1961–62	17/1	Milk and Honey (543), * <b>How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying</b> (1415), *No Strings (580), I Can Get It For You Wholesale (300), * <b>A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum</b> (965)
1962–63	11/0	*Stop the World I Want to Get Off (556), Mr. President (265), Little Me (257), *Oliver! (774), She Loves Me (302)
1963–64	16/0	*110 in the Shade (330), * <b>Hello, Dolly!</b> (2844), What Makes Sammy Run? (540), *Funny Girl (1348), Anyone Can Whistle (9), High Spirits (375)
1964–65	16/2	* <b>Fiddler on the Roof</b> (3242), Golden Boy (569), Baker Street (313), Do I Hear a Waltz? (220), *Half a Sixpence (512), Flora, the Red Menace (87), *The Roar of the Greasepaint, The Smell of the Crowd (232)
1965–66	14/0	On a Clear Day You Can See Forever (280), * <b>Man of La Mancha</b> (2329), *Sweet Charity (608), It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman (129), *Mame (1508)
1966–67	11/0	The Apple Tree (463), * <b>Cabaret</b> (1166), *I Do! I Do! (561), Illya Darling (320), * <b>Hallelujah, Baby!</b> (293)
1967–68	11/0	How Now, Dow Jones (220), Golden Rainbow (385), George M! (435), *Hair (1750)
1968–69	14/0	Zorba (305), *Promises, Promises (1281), Celebration (110), Canterbury Tales (122), Dear World (132), * <b>1776</b> (1217)

de Mille, and Jerome Robbins establishing a foothold with tenuously interpolated ballets of the late 1930s and early '40s. Following close on the heels of *Oklahoma!*, Robbins's adaptation of his Bernstein ballet *Fancy Free* as *On the Town* demonstrated that a new type of musical comedy could be built as sturdily around dance as the older type had wrapped itself around a collection of songs. How fully dance was ultimately integrated into the fabric of musical theater through the efforts of "Mr. Broadway," director George Abbott, and the next generation of Broadway choreographers whom he mentored (including Robert Alton, Michael Kidd, Gower Champion, Donald Saddler, Bob Fosse, Onna White, Peter Gennaro, and Joe Layton) is evinced by the fact that

virtually all of them eventually went on to assume full directorial responsibilities. By the end of the era, when the “concept musical” was threatening to displace the integrated musical play as the structural norm, directors such as Abbott’s principal protégé and producing partner Harold Prince assumed the central authority in the collaborative process, marshaling a cast, crew, and creative staff usually numbering more than a hundred and overseeing a gestation period that often spanned several years. After radio and the film industry had enticed many performers seasoned in vaudeville, operetta, and musical comedy to leave the stage during the 1930s, the Golden Age nurtured a new generation of talent who “integrated” in their own versatile performances the particular combination of acting, dancing, and singing that made the American musical theater so distinctive from other forms of lyric drama.

Of the popular songwriters (including George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and Ray Henderson) who had showcased their songs in the more casual musical comedies of the 1920s and ’30s (which were usually little more than a thinly plotted excuse for the presentation of an array of stars, spectacle, and songs), only Rodgers, in a new collaboration with Oscar Hammerstein II, managed to contribute consistently and innovatively to the mature “book” musical that would encompass new generic subtypes. As Rodgers and his chief rival in the 1940s, Kurt Weill, broke new musical ground by writing genuinely integrated musico-dramatic “scores” and expanding the standard thirty-two-bar “popular song form” into complex musical scenes fulfilling specific character and plot functions, the previously specialized roles of lyricist and book-writer often merged into the unified contribution of a single collaborator, who usually adapted his libretto from a pre-existent literary or dramatic (or, later, cinematic) property that had already been deemed sufficiently important to provoke the question of the very propriety of adapting it as a Broadway musical.

So taxing, time-intensive, and intimate was such collaboration that the most successful musicals of the Golden Age were the product of a remarkably small number of multiple-show creative partnerships: Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Adler and Ross, Arlen and Harburg, Dietz and Schwartz, Burrows and Loesser, Comden and Green with Bernstein and Styne respectively, Bock and Harnick, Kander and Ebb, Strouse and Adams, Jones and Schmidt—all working, often in rotation, with a similarly circumscribed cadre of producers, directors, designers, and choreographers. Sharing a dramaturgical model relatively stable in its generic conventions and resistant to radical alterations that might alienate audiences from the box office, these teams nevertheless explored a remarkably varied range of content, theme, style, character, and plot. Yet, just as the conventional scaffolds of *opera seria*, *opera buffa*, and *Singspiel* had previously allowed innovative elaboration, the rigorous craftsmanship of the most successful musicals of the Golden Age allowed room for idiosyncratic experimentation. “Taking chances,” Rodgers admonished, “was the only safe thing to do.”<sup>2</sup> But seldom did such risk-taking challenge the basic framework of the book musical: a drama of characters in conflict (usually with dramatic treatment of the principal couple, less weighty treatment of subsidiary characters) in two acts (with the second about half the length of the first).

In the 1920s, producers or writing teams had often managed to mount several musical comedies or revues a year. As purely commercial ventures, they were not built to last. Few had been compelled to run more than a year to pay back its investors. Single songs, stripped of their original dramatic identities, were often the only elements of a show to survive long enough to leave a mark on national culture. Therefore, as Hammerstein’s son James, himself a stage director, succinctly summarized the prevailing aesthetic: “you changed your story to allow for your

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<sup>2</sup> Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, 109.

best songs.”<sup>3</sup> But as unionization of theater practitioners and competition from Hollywood inflated wages, average production costs nearly quadrupled from \$60,000 in the 1930s to \$225,000 in the 1940s. Ticket prices could not keep pace (the top ticket price for *Oklahoma!* was \$4.40) and thus longer runs were required to break even. Few stars were willing to remain with shows for the entire run, so musicals had to anticipate and accommodate casting changes for principal roles. And before effective air-conditioning of theaters became commonplace, keeping a musical running over the summer (the peak tourist season for New York’s theater district) proved to be particularly problematic. Although the new media of radio and musical films had initially usurped the stage musical’s talent pool, generic prototypes, and audiences, during its Golden Age the musical theater utilized those same media, and then television, to familiarize national audiences with a musical as a “work” without—or well in advance of— their attending the “event” of its production.

In particular, the introduction in 1948 of the 33-1/3 rpm LP record enabled the scores of musicals to be recorded (usually on the Monday following opening night) almost complete with the original Broadway cast and orchestra, on a single, affordable disc. Such cast albums, coupled with the customary publication of scripts and piano-vocal reductions, conveyed musicals to audiences in absentia and whetted their appetite for touring, “summer stock,” and amateur productions. As the gulf between popular music and show music widened in the 1950s and ’60s, many musicals maintained their profiles primarily as musico-dramatic entities, “works” deserving of preservation and continued revival. Additional exposure through excerpts or adaptations broadcast on radio and television, and through the few relatively faithful screen adaptations of the 1950s and ’60s, also expanded audiences for musicals such as *West Side Story*, which had

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<sup>3</sup> James Hammerstein, quoted in Myrna Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *It Happened on Broadway: An Oral History of the Great White Way* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 94.

enjoyed only moderate success on Broadway. Recognizing the potential profits to be made from such “secondary rights” for musicals, record companies and film studios were quick to sign on as principal investors in Broadway productions.

During the Golden Age, twenty musicals enjoyed initial Broadway runs exceeding one thousand performances, previously unprecedented except for two revues in the late 1930s. More than fifty other book musicals from the 1950s and '60s surpassed the five-hundred-performance mark. Such hit musicals usually toured the United States with “national companies,” benefitted from a second life in the West End (London’s equivalent of Broadway), and then permeated American consciousness in productions by colleges, community theaters, and high schools across the nation. In the mid 1950s, the producing system expanded to an “Off-Broadway” annex of smaller theaters, where musicals considered too small-scale, experimental, or risky for Broadway production could be mounted at reduced cost. (These included such successes as Marc Blitzstein’s adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* [1954] and Schmidt’s and Jones’s *The Fantasticks* [1960]). By 1967, when the twenty-first annual “Tony” Award ceremony was telecast nationwide for the first time, the musical had become a matter of national ownership, pride, and identity, with the prize for “Outstanding Musical” becoming perhaps the most coveted and financially beneficial of all.<sup>4</sup>

No other art form reflects American culture in the post-World War II era so vividly, fully, or accurately. (Because there were no significant new contributors to the musical in England until well into the Golden Age, influences from British musical theater came late and were consequently limited.) During the period between the two world wars, as the United States had

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Alan Morrow, *The Tony Award Book: Four Decades of Great American Theater* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987). Established in 1944 in honor of the founder of *Billboard* magazine, the Donaldson Awards were discontinued in 1955, having been overshadowed by the industry-nominated Tony Awards. The New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, established in 1935, continue to be given annually.



become aware of its increasingly dominant role in global economics and politics, there was a shared perception that the nation needed to take on responsibility as a cultural leader as well, and the musical theater emerged as a site for a uniquely American contribution. In contrast to the transplanted institutions of symphony orchestra and opera, the American musical was largely a home-grown product. It reified egalitarian, secular, pragmatic, and anti-elitist values basic to the predominant American self-image. It had to be accessible financially and interpretively to a very broad audience. Virtually every American could understand and enjoy a musical, itself the end-product of a “democratized” collaborative process. Its music, lyrics, and dance were perceived as being idiomatically “American,” as was the utopian optimism that underlay even those musicals lacking the customary happy end. In its self-sustaining entrepreneurial practice, art and commerce managed to strike a pragmatic compromise. The musical’s collective audience itself served as the primary critical arbiter, even participating in the creative process through its reactions to out-of-town tryouts and previews. Usually the audience’s judgment was final, with only a handful of musicals managing to reverse initial failure by subsequent revision, revival, or critical reassessment. Like the populace of the US, the musical’s diverse European and indigenous components had only recently coalesced in a melting pot that enabled its urban, predominantly Jewish-American practitioners to assimilate African-American strains of popular music and convincingly bleach this amalgam for “Middle America.”

That the musical’s Golden Age is approximately delimited, from an American perspective, by the country’s entry into World War II and the escalation of its involvement in the Vietnam War should come as no surprise, for, like other popular arts, the musical theater matured in parallel with its host culture and participated in or echoed the major social issues that shaped the thought of its time. The conventions of the Golden Age musical were most persuasively set out in *Oklahoma!*, a musical that celebrated “a brand new state,” articulated a shared

heritage in terms of a common menace, and asserted the nation's faith in its own manifest goodness. After World War II, as the United States became the richest and most powerful country in the world (average household income tripled between 1940 and 1955), the musical theater confidently turned its attention to pressing domestic social issues, including racism and prejudice (*Street Scene*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Lost in the Stars*, and *South Pacific*), gang warfare (*West Side Story*), unionism (*Pajama Game*), moral and political decay (*Cabaret*), sexual politics (*Kiss Me, Kate!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*), abuse and dysfunction (*Carousel*, *Gypsy*), ethnic minorities and their traditions (*Flower Drum Song*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Hallelujah, Baby!*), corruption or loss of idealism (*Allegro*, *Camelot*), modern marriage (*Love Life*, *I Do! I Do!*), and the rites of capitalism (*The Music Man*, *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*). Although not all musicals tackled such topics so directly, even the most lighthearted among them, masquerading as mere entertainment (in particular, the self-reflexive shows about show business itself), embodied socio-political values and frequently offered implicit cultural critique by encoding issues of gender identity, class, race, and ethnicity.

After the mid '50s, the historical alliance between American popular song and show music failed to assimilate rock and roll and its successors, despite the efforts of such shows as *Bye Bye Birdie*. Eventually the success of *Hair* as a Broadway musical suggested a possibility for reconciliation, at least on the musical front. But this loosely structured, highly amplified, and gratuitously underclothed assault on the military draft, the Vietnam War, the work ethic, and "the Establishment" and its norms for behavior and dress, thumbed its nose at everything about the idealized America that *Oklahoma!* had exalted. *Hair*, of course, was but a symbol of a much broader cultural upheaval that would undermine the aesthetic and socio-economic foundations of the American musical theater that had sustained its Golden Age. Within several years, revivals of vintage musicals from the Golden Age and "revisals" of pre-Golden Age shows outnumbered

productions of new shows, and commentators were lamenting the death of the genre, self-consciously mourned in the deconstructive *Follies* (1971), a requiem for a whole theatrical era and its system of producing musicals—and the American self-image that it had embodied. Having learned their respective crafts respectively from Hammerstein and Abbott, Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince would subsequently radically reinvent the art form for an irrevocably altered cultural landscape, but the Golden Age of the musical had ended.

## II. THE MUSICAL PLAY AND ITS PRECEDENTS

The 1930s had been as bleak a decade for musical comedy as for the economy. In 1940, forty percent of American families were still living below the poverty level. Virtually every producer of musical theater had gone bankrupt, at least temporarily. The Great Depression had decimated theater attendance, and only *Pins and Needles* and *Hellzapoppin*, both revues rather than “book” musicals, had run for more than five hundred performances. As Weill observed, “when I arrived here [in 1935], the musical theatre on Broadway consisted almost entirely of revues and musical comedies and everybody thought I was crazy when I started with serious musical plays.”<sup>5</sup> Competing with radio and movie musicals, which had quickly purloined many of its stars and creative teams, the stage musical was searching for new form and function. Berlin, Porter, and the Gershwins had shifted their focus to Hollywood, whose hierarchical and specialized production system utilized and showcased their songwriting skills without requiring them to be the collaborative dramatists that Weill and Rodgers aspired to be, albeit without much success, in the film medium. By decade’s end, Busby Berkeley’s lavish extravaganzas for Warner Brothers, Jeanette MacDonald’s and Nelson Eddy’s operettas for MGM, and Fred

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Weill to Heinz Jolles, 27 May 1949; published in David Farneth, with Elmar Juchem and Dave Stein, *Kurt Weill: A Life in Pictures and Documents* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2000), 262.

Astaire's and Ginger Rogers's romantic comedies for RKO had all but rendered extinct their Broadway counterparts. Symbolically, Porter's *DuBarry Was a Lady* (1939), starring Ethel Merman and Bert Lahr, debuted on Broadway as the last book musical of the decade only after Hollywood had rejected it. Radio had already appropriated the sketches, comedy routines, and novelty songs that had been vaudeville's legacy and the basis for annual editions of revues such as George White's *Scandals* and Earl Carroll's *Vanities*, both of which closed up shop during the 1939–40 season. What was left to Broadway were the political satires, intimate revues, and vehicles for stage-oriented stars that the new media eschewed. By decade's end, George Gershwin was dead, Jerome Kern's Broadway career had ended with a whimper, Cole Porter's annual contributions had become increasingly formulaic, Oscar Hammerstein had been in the doldrums since *Show Boat*, Rodgers's and Lorenz Hart's collaboration was on its last legs, and Irving Berlin was all but absent from the Great White Way. One critic lamented, "the musical show by and large has in later years been standing still," with the formulaic musical comedy "surprisingly like that of the same species of entertainment so long as twenty or thirty years ago."<sup>6</sup>

That species of musical comedy had indeed changed little since the Gershwins' debut with *Lady, Be Good!* in 1924. In fact, its producer, Vinton Freedley, was still mounting Porter's latest shows in the late 1930s, and its book-writer, Guy Bolton, continued to wrap scenes and songs together with "the bright ribbon of a plot" (although his pre-eminence in this craft had been eclipsed during the 1930s by Herbert Fields, who authored the books for seven shows each by Rodgers and Hart, and Cole Porter.)<sup>7</sup> The custom of crediting book and lyrics as separate items rather than as a co-authored libretto—even if both were the work of one writer (as was

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<sup>6</sup> George Nathan, *Entertainment of a Nation; or, Three Sheets in the Wind* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 115–117.

<sup>7</sup> Bolton, quoted in Lee Davis, *Bolton and Wodehouse and Kern: The Men Who Made Musical Comedy* (New York: James H. Heineman, 1993), 282.

frequently the case in the Golden Age)—implied that the talent for fitting clever rhymes to music (which might not even have been composed for the show at hand) was not primarily a musico-dramatic one. Because a songwriter or songwriting team supplied all the lyrics as well as the music, there was seldom much continuity between what was sung and what was spoken. A musical comedy score was rarely more than a collection of self-contained songs of varied style and character arranged in a running order along narrative lines and attuned to the latest trends in popular music and dance (a Latin craze was sweeping the country as the decade came to an end). Cole Porter, for instance, often supplied twice as many numbers as a show needed; it was up to the rest of the production team to worry about which to use, and where. The “book” or, as P. G. Wodehouse defined it, “the stuff that kept the numbers apart,” usually had to have holes suitable for plugging with specialty songs, gags, comic routines, and other material tailored to the leading performers.<sup>8</sup> Even the best musical shows of the 1920s, Rodgers observed, displayed “an appalling monotony of subject matter.”<sup>9</sup> Audiences expected little more than entertainment; drama and music critics alike treated musical theater as an inherently inferior genre. (T. W. Adorno’s disdain for this brand of mass cultural merchandise arose from fleeting acquaintance with musical comedy at its ebb of musico-dramatic coherence.)

Nevertheless, by the late 1930s a handful of composers, lyricists, book-writers, directors, and producers were tentatively making bids for cultural prestige by attempting to raise musical and dramatic standards. Weill had persuaded two leading playwrights of the non-musical theater to work with him: Paul Green on *Johnny Johnson* (1936) and Maxwell Anderson on *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938). Produced outside the traditional Broadway system by playwrights’ cooperatives (The Group Theatre and the Playwrights’ Company), both shows utilized historical

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<sup>8</sup> P. G. Wodehouse, “The Agonies of Writing a Musical Comedy,” *Vanity Fair* 7 (March 1917), 39.

<sup>9</sup> Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, 105.

subjects to comment on contemporary issues, garnering critical but not popular success (except for the evergreen “September Song” in *Knickerbocker*). Abbott, who had made his directorial debut at the age of forty-seven in *Jumbo* (1935), introduced Balanchine to the book musical in Rodgers’s and Hart’s *On Your Toes* (1936), another Hollywood reject, but one that integrated ballet into the story line. The same team followed with *Babes in Arms* (1937) and *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), the first Broadway musical to be based on a play by Shakespeare (*The Comedy of Errors*). Although Rodgers’s and Hart’s penultimate collaboration, *Higher and Higher* (1940), sank like a rock, with a trained seal stealing the show, Abbott again produced and directed *Pal Joey* (1940), an adult musical comedy about bought love with a dancing heel as its anti-hero (Gene Kelly in his only Broadway role). Opening on Christmas Day, but as cold and cynical in its tone as it was sophisticated in its treatment of John O’Hara’s short stories, *Pal Joey* bothered and bewildered audiences and critics. Although it lasted only 374 performances in its initial run, *Pal Joey* demonstrated in its more successful 1952 revival (with script and score virtually unrevised) how closely it had adumbrated the principles of the Golden Age musical.

Less than four weeks after the premiere of *Pal Joey*, *Lady in the Dark* took even bolder steps. Weill and Moss Hart had consciously set out to write not a “conventional musical comedy,” but a serious, almost didactic, play-with-music about psychoanalysis. Convincing Ira Gershwin to return to the Broadway musical for the first time since his brother’s death, they took their cue from the structural use of Technicolor in *The Wizard of Oz* and restricted music to the heroine’s retelling of her dreams on the analyst’s couch, making the recollection of the song “My Ship” the resolution of repressed childhood experiences and the denouement of the plot. Ironically, by segregating rather than integrating musical numbers within the play, the score became essential to the spectacular drama, which cost an astounding \$127,715 to mount, with a cast of fifty-four and a crew of forty-one. “The finest score written for the theater in years,” according to *GAMUT* 6/2 (2013)

the drama critic of the *New York Times*, Weill's kaleidoscopic music for the three dream sequences comprised one-act mini-operas that "free-associated" an array of musical styles extending back as far as Gilbert and Sullivan, all orchestrated by Weill himself in a practice unique among Broadway composers of the Golden Age.<sup>10</sup> But *Lady in the Dark* proved to be unrepeatable in its idiosyncratic structure and unplayable without so charismatic a star as Gertrude Lawrence, who portrayed Liza Elliot in all 777 of its performances on Broadway and national tour. *Lady in the Dark* did, however, establish—at least for several astute critics—the distinction between "musical comedy" and "musical play" that would shortly be credited instead to *Oklahoma!*. In its shadow, *Pal Joey* and *Lady in the Dark* seemed to have been only isolated beacons toward the future within a dark period for the musical.

*Lady in the Dark* was the last musical of the 1940–41 season. By then, the long-running *Tobacco Road*, *Life with Father*, and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* had been joined on Broadway by *My Sister Eileen*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and *Watch on the Rhine*; Ed Wynn, Al Jolson, and Ethel Waters had attempted comebacks in musical shows; and *Panama Hattie*, starring Merman, became the longest running book musical since the 1920s and thereby proved that to "Make It Another Old-Fashioned, Please" (as one of its songs put it) was still the surest formula for success. Critics complained that the following season, 1941–42, was the worst in Broadway history, with the three musical hits—Rodgers's and Hart's last collaboration *By Jupiter*, Porter's *Let's Face It!*, and Abbott's *Best Foot Forward*—all seeming like steps backward. Midway through the season Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The impact on the theater was almost immedi-

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<sup>10</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Gertrude Lawrence Appears in Moss Hart's Musical Drama . . .," *New York Times* (24 January 1941), 14; reprinted in Farneth, *Kurt Weill: A Life in Pictures and Documents*, 205. Statistics concerning *Lady in the Dark* are drawn from Bruce McClung, "American Dreams: Analyzing Moss Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Kurt Weill's *Lady in the Dark*" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Rochester, 1994).

ate, as resurgent prosperity and a newly energized New York audience, crowded with soldiers and war workers, retreated from the topical and contemporary to a nostalgic rendezvous with an American past that was more invented than real. Of the twenty-four musical productions during the 1942–43 season, seven were revivals, eleven were revues, with only five new book shows. Porter and Merman presented *Something for the Boys*, and Irving Berlin joined up with an all-soldier cast for *This Is the Army*. Perhaps motivated by the recent success on the silver screen of the seven MacDonald-Eddy operettas, even the Viennese strain of operetta enjoyed a brief resuscitation on Broadway, with a reworking of *Die Fledermaus* as *Rosalinda* (conducted by Erich Korngold) lasting 521 performances. Close on its heels in subsequent seasons were revivals of *The Merry Widow*, *The Chocolate Soldier*, *La belle Helene* (as *Helen Goes to Troy*), as well as of such American descendants as Victor Herbert's *Sweethearts* and *The Red Mill*, Romberg's *The Student Prince*, and Friml's *The Vagabond King*, which even inspired such newly minted forays into the genre as *Song of Norway*, *Polonaise*, *The Firebrand of Florence*, and *Up in Central Park*.

This was the context for the debut, on the last day of March 1943, of a new collaboration, Rodgers and Hammerstein, representing a merger of the foremost practitioners, respectively, of the musical comedy and American operetta traditions. Based faithfully on Lynn Riggs's 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, set in "Indian Territory" at the turn of the century, directed by Rouben Mamoulian (who had staged both *Porgy* [1927] and *Porgy and Bess* [1935] as well as numerous Hollywood musicals), choreographed by Agnes de Mille (fresh from her *Rodeo* success), and produced by the Theatre Guild for \$75,000 with a cast of unknowns (including Alfred Drake and Celeste Holm), the show began life at its New Haven tryout as "a musical comedy" under the title *Away We Go*. "No girls, no gags, no chance," producer Michael Todd



had prophesied.<sup>11</sup> But by the time it closed its initial Broadway run five and one-half years later, *Oklahoma!* had racked up 2,248 performances, smashing the previous record of 670 for a book musical (*Irene*, 1919) and setting one that would not be surpassed for fifteen years, when *My Fair Lady* tallied 2,717. By 1948, *Oklahoma!* had attracted the largest audience in the history of the American musical theater (eight million people on both sides of the Atlantic), sold half a million cast albums, spun off two million copies of sheet music and hundreds of recordings of individual songs, toured nationally for a full decade, and earned a million dollars each for Rodgers and Hammerstein. It was widely hailed as the first fully modern musical, the first genuine improvement on *Show Boat*. Much ink has been spilled in enumerating the alleged innovations of *Oklahoma!*: the first “original cast” album on 78-rpm records (there had been several predecessors, including Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* [1937]); the first musical to dispense with an opening production number (*Anything Goes* [1934] and *Lady in the Dark* had both opened with spoken dialogue, the latter without an overture); the first musical to begin with unaccompanied off-stage singing (a device at least as old as Wagner and already present in Riggs’s play); the first “musical play” (besides Weill’s antecedents, even Hammerstein himself had used the term in the 1920s as a euphemism for operetta, to differentiate homegrown strains from European varieties); the first to incorporate a “dream ballet” (Rodgers himself had included one in both *On Your Toes* [1936] and *I Married an Angel* [1938]). Not even the exclamation point in the title was a first.

What *was* revolutionary about *Oklahoma!* is more subtle: its unity of tone, style, and content; the fusion of all its constituent elements into a drama characterized by a new earnestness, simplicity, and directness. As Rodgers himself noted, “it was a work created by

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<sup>11</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 139.

many that gave the impression of having been created by one.”<sup>12</sup> Understated lyrics continued where dialogue left off in advancing plot and enhancing characterization; songs and movement were tailored to specific characters living in a specific place at a specific moment in American history; music mirrored the form and intensified the content of the lyrics; dance helped to tell the story, especially in revealing its psychological dimensions; all of the musical numbers bore, as Rodgers said, a family resemblance to one another; the stylized painted drops, modeled on the regional American landscape art of Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, matched the vernacular ordinariness of Hammerstein’s diction and Rodgers’s melodies, many of which intentionally utilized then-anachronistic song forms; comedy grew out of character and situation; characters sang to each other rather than “presentationally” to the audience. Banished were the virtuoso performance “turns,” the specialty numbers and gags, the witty and rhyme-conscious lyrics, the artificial remoteness of operetta, and the promiscuous heterogeneity that had long brought audiences to American musical comedy. Instead *Oklahoma!* embodied the ideal of a “musical play,” which aspired to the integrity of legitimate drama and to the seamless union of music and words characteristic of opera—a uniquely American reformulation of *dramma per musica*, in which song and dance embed themselves so fully into the drama that they become an indispensable part of it.

But the success and impact of *Oklahoma!* cannot be explained only intratextually. *Oklahoma!* utilized a romanticized past to speak directly to wartime America, to articulate what values Americans shared, what the country was fighting for. *Oklahoma!* concerns itself, first and foremost, with the formation and defense of community: “Territory folks should stick together.” There are only three solo numbers in the show, and two of them have an onstage audience. Every

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<sup>12</sup> Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, 227.

scene but one takes place outdoors and involves the display of weapons, almost as if to enforce the show's explicit theme: "the farmer and the cowman and the merchant must all behave theirselves and act like brothers." Parallel principal and secondary love triangles mark the Persian (read Jewish) peddler Ali Hakim as an assimilable ethnic "other," but the "bullet-colored," sexually threatening Jud as a racially defined, unassimilable threat. The moral imperative to mobilize the American folk against such alien *Volk* demanded Jud's death, to cleanse the hard-won community of darkness.

Although *Oklahoma!* would gradually become the benchmark for the genre of the musical play, it took several seasons for its after-effects to manifest themselves fully. During the 1943–44 season, audiences could still opt for old-style operettas and musical comedies (Porter's *Mexican Hayride* and Charig's *Follow the Girls*) that ostensibly had taken no note of *Oklahoma!*'s example. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe made an inauspicious debut with *What's Up?*, and Hammerstein's pre-*Oklahoma!* adaptation of *Carmen* as the "musical play" *Carmen Jones* ran for 503 performances, with an all-Black cast singing "opera on Broadway." "The blood flows redder in *Carmen* than in *Oklahoma!*," Hammerstein said, "but essentially they are the same dramatic form."<sup>13</sup> Continuing his show-by-show rivalry with Rodgers, Weill conscripted the most sophisticated of American humorists, Ogden Nash and S. J. Perelman, as collaborators for *One Touch of Venus*, a very "New York" variation on the Pygmalion myth incorporating two lengthy ballet sequences choreographed by Agnes de Mille, who had quickly displaced Balanchine as Broadway's foremost choreographer. Starring Mary Martin in her first leading role and racking up 567 performances, *Venus* would be Weill's most successful Broad-

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Hammerstein by Otis Guernsey, Jr., "Hammerstein, a Broadway Stage Dynasty," *New York Herald Tribune* (12 December 1943); quoted by David D'Andre, "The Theatre Guild, *Carousel*, and the Cultural Field of American Musical Theatre" (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 2000).

way show—and the closest he came to writing musical comedy. Although critics were nearly unanimous in their judgment that “*One Touch of Venus* isn’t another *Oklahoma!* by a couple of country miles,” most also declared it to be “the best new musical show to have opened since that time.”<sup>14</sup>

The next season witnessed Romberg’s return to Broadway with *Up in Central Park* and Harold Arlen’s and Yip Harburg’s answer to *Oklahoma!*, *Bloomer Girl*.<sup>15</sup> But the most important events were *Carousel*, Rodgers’s and Hammerstein’s adaptation of Ferenc Molnar’s *Liliom*, which upped the ante of the musical play toward the operatic, and *On the Town*, Abbott’s groundbreaking new-style musical comedy. Integrating Robbins’s dance sequences from the ballet *Fancy Free* with an expanded score by Bernstein and lyrics by fellow Broadway neophytes Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *On the Town* was as brashly urban and vibrantly jazzy as *Oklahoma!* had been rural and homespun. With its advances extended to musical comedy,” *Oklahoma!* no longer risked standing alone as had *Show Boat*. A new generation of creative and performing talent was emerging. For the next two decades the musical would build upon the solid foundations of the integrated musical show. The Golden Age had begun.

### III. THE MUSICAL AND ITS GENERIC SUBTYPES

After *Oklahoma!* many an old-style operetta and routine musical comedy attempted to cash in on the cachet of its subtitle: “a new musical play.” Such marketing labels, of course, were

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<sup>14</sup> Wolcott Gibbs, “The Theatre: Pygmalion and Mary Martin,” *The New Yorker* 19 (16 October 1943), 44; Lewis Nichols, “One Touch of Venus,” *New York Times* (17 October 1943), X1. In *PM*, Louis Kronenberger noted: “*Venus*, like *Oklahoma!* breaks with musical comedy tradition. But where *Oklahoma!* has the smell of new-mown hay, *Venus* is like a trick perfume.”

<sup>15</sup> In her review of *Bloomer Girl* in the *New York Post* (6 October 1944), Wilella Waldorf complained that “we are in for several seasons of intensely old fashioned quaintness” because of the success of *Oklahoma!* [quoted by Steven Suskin, *Opening Night on Broadway: A Critical Quotebook of the Golden Era of the Musical Theatre, Oklahoma! (1943) to Fiddler on the Roof (1964)* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 92].

not subject to truth-in-advertising standards. Yet these subtitles generated certain expectations of audiences and critics, who gradually began to apply different standards to shows depending on their generic classification. In an attempt to distance itself from both *Oklahoma!* and the prevailing brand of musical comedy, *One Touch of Venus*, for example, had debuted without any such generic designation. Reviewers seemed perplexed, and they split in their decisions over whether to call (and judge) it “a musical play” or “a musical comedy.” However, most approached *On the Town* as the “new musical comedy” it claimed to be, according to musical comedy standards without any reference whatsoever to *Oklahoma!* or the musical play. By the mid 1940s critics, creators, and producers recognized several subtypes of current musical theater, including revue, operetta, musical comedy, and musical play. The newest, the musical play, came to connote a hybrid inhabiting the space between musical comedy and opera, displacing or absorbing the outmoded type of American operetta. As Bernstein characterized it, “a new strain has been cross-bred out of the past.”<sup>16</sup> But the lines demarking the borders between the various subtypes of musical theater were indistinct and constantly being redrawn as successful new models offered alternative paradigms and subtypes influenced one another.

Terminology remained fluid, yet gradually it became clear that certain creative teams, directors, producers, choreographers, and performers specialized in musical comedy, others in the musical play. Abbott directed, Feuer and Martin produced, Gower Champion choreographed, Porter and Fields wrote, and Ethel Merman performed in musical comedies, not musical plays. Rouben Mamoulian, Edwin Lester, Agnes de Mille, Lerner and Loewe, and Alfred Drake

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<sup>16</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 175. The label “musical play” had been utilized already in the 1920s as a euphemism for the new American strain of operetta. Following the success of the “musical play” *Rose-Marie* in 1925, its lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein, noted that the type of musical show “that shows the signs of ultimate victory, is the operetta—the musical play with music and plot welded together in skillful cohesion. These are the only kind that are revived years after their first presentation” (“Voices versus Feet,” *Theatre Magazine* 41/5 [May 1925]).

specialized in musical plays. Although some practitioners crossed back and forth, especially as second-generation hybrids combined attributes of several subtypes, the distinctions were sufficiently compelling that even Rodgers and Hammerstein deemed it necessary to recruit as director George Abbott and to designate their 1953 backstage musical *Me and Juliet* a “new musical comedy,” in contrast to all of their previous efforts, which they had billed as musical plays. In fact, for much of the Golden Age, self-proclaimed generic subtitles provided a fairly reliable guide for audiences and critics. *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, *Camelot*, and *Man of La Mancha* were musical plays; *Kiss Me, Kate!*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Wonderful Town*, *Call Me Madam*, *Can-Can*, *Pajama Game*, *Li'l Abner*, *The Music Man*, and *Hello, Dolly!* called themselves musical comedies. Producers of some other shows were more creative in their attempts to convince a potential audience that a new property was anything but routine: *Kismet*, A Musical Arabian Night; *Magdalena*, A New Musical Adventure; *Love Life*, A Vaudeville; *Lost in the Stars*, A Musical Tragedy; *Guys and Dolls*, A Musical Fable of Broadway. Perhaps the least truthful generic subtitles arose as euphemisms to avoid the dreaded word “opera,” which, producers believed, meant certain doom at the box-office: *Street Scene*, A Dramatic Musical; *The Medium* and *The Telephone*, Musical Plays; *Regina*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *The Consul*, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, Music Dramas. In 1945 producer Max Gordon utilized the more neutral and less specific designation, “a new musical,” to camouflage the ill-fated Weill-Gershwin operetta *The Firebrand of Florence*, and both *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Finian’s Rainbow* followed suit with that subtitle. By the mid 1950s the umbrella term “musical” had become the norm, perhaps evincing that the boundaries between subtypes of musical theater were becoming increasingly diffuse as many shows incorporated idioms, prototypes, and conventions from several subgeneric traditions. *Damn Yankees*, *Flower Drum Song*, *The Most Happy Fella*, *West Side Story*, *Fiorello!*, *Gypsy*, *Oliver!*, *She Loves Me*, *Carnival*,  
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*Fanny*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Mame* were all produced, attended, and critiqued as just “musicals.”

Rick Altman, in his influential generic study of the film musical, has pointed out the pitfalls of utilizing the terminology of genre history as a basis for generic theory and criticism.<sup>17</sup> Exploring the potential of various alternative approaches to generic definition (ideological, ritualistic, audience-based, industry-based, semiotic, structural, among others), Altman suggests that only a combination of a semantic approach (identifying shared content, character and narrative archetypes, themes, cultural paradigms) and a syntactical one (identifying shared structures, idioms, conventions, mechanics of presentation, narrative strategies) can do justice to “the necessarily dual nature” of the corpus of musical films. Altman proposes three subgenres of the film musical: The “fairy tale musical,” a descendent of the operetta tradition, is set in the exotic, imaginary kingdoms of palaces, resorts, and hotels with the restoration of order to a principal couple, overtly displaying sexual desire, paralleling restoration of order to the kingdom to suggest that “to marry is to govern” (his examples include *Love Me Tonight*, *Top Hat*, *South Pacific*). The “show musical” is set in a middle-class world of make believe, usually in the theater or magazine publication (most often in New York) with the central couple associated with the creation of a work of art, to suggest that “to marry is to create” (*42nd Street*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Singin’ in the Rain*). The “folk musical” is set in the rural or small-town America of yesteryear with the integration of two individuals into a couple paralleling the formation of a community linked to the land, to suggest that to marry is to build community (*Rose Marie*, *State Fair*, *Paint Your Wagon*). Altman refines these definitions in nuanced readings of individual films; he also recognizes that some musical films—*Show Boat* in particular—never “settle on a single

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<sup>17</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

subgenre” but rather move “from one semantic field to another, from syntax to syntax, . . . combine two modes in a new and meaningful way, graft an unexpected syntax on a familiar semantics or promiscuously mix one subgenre with another.”<sup>18</sup> Although this observation also obtains to the stage musical in the Golden Age, how problematic Altman’s three subgeneric categories prove to be for films deriving from Broadway musicals is easily perceived from a list of wildly disparate properties that he labels “folk musicals” (in order of their release): *On the Town*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Oklahoma!*, *Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story*, *The Music Man*, and *Hello, Dolly!*

Except in the cases where Golden Age musicals had already established their identities indelibly with a broad national audience, the film industry was seldom restrained from altering, even beyond recognition, their original stage incarnations—with notoriously inapt casting decisions based on box-office considerations rather than suitability for roles, which in turn mandated changes in character and plot to suit the casting, dubbing of voices, transposition, and substitution or interpolation of songs (sometimes by other composers). If the original score did survive, it was often re-ordered, with songs dropped or replaced, lyrics altered, dance music newly composed, and the varied palette of the Broadway score homogenized in the period’s, the studio’s, or the star’s image. However, such musical considerations seem to play as small a part in Altman’s generic taxonomy for the musical film as they did in the Hollywood production system itself. Yet the particular mixture and manipulation of musical idioms, styles, conventions, syntax, and modes of performance was the primary means whereby producers, audiences, and critics of Golden Age stage musicals differentiated their various subtypes. On Broadway, *West Side Story* and *The Music Man* danced to very different tunes, *On the Town* and *Oklahoma!*

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<sup>18</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 126–127.



inhabited sound worlds separated by more than geographical distance, and *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Porgy and Bess* were anything but “country cousins.” If, despite their profound syntactical differences, all of them can be lumped under the “folk musicals” category (apparently because they share some sort of abstracted meta-narrative archetype), Altman’s classifications would seem to be of limited critical potential for most Broadway musicals of the Golden Age. The syntactical devices and procedures of the Broadway musical and the Hollywood musical film are, in fact, so different—especially in the differentiation and usage of diegetic and non-diegetic modes—that Sondheim has suggested that they be considered distinct genres, despite their sporadic points of contact or overlap. (Nevertheless, scholars working on the musical have too often conflated the two media and presumed incorrectly that a Broadway musical can be studied from its film adaptation.)

The absence of a viable and comprehensive alternative to a historically based generic typology proved to be vexatious already at the dawn of the Golden Age, when the drama critic of the *New York Times* found the vague generic designation “musical play” insufficient to characterize *Oklahoma!*, which, he suggested, might be more accurately called “a folk operetta.”<sup>19</sup> What at first seems a contradiction in terms may, however, suggest yet another layer of meaning for Rodgers and Hammerstein’s much-heralded “integration”: the combination of, as another critic put it, “the best features of the ballet at the Met with some of the best features of the great tradition of Broadway’s own indigenous contribution to the theater.”<sup>20</sup> In *Oklahoma!* the integration within a single work of the generic conventions and expectations of several types of musical theater indeed helped to differentiate its “folk” elements from its “operetta” ones. For example,

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis Nichols, review of *Oklahoma!*, *New York Times* (1 April 1943), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Burton Rascoe, review of *Oklahoma!*, *New York World-Telegram*, cited by Suskin, *Opening Night on Broadway*, 501.

the principal couple, Laurey and Curly, sing in operetta mode with “legitimate” soprano and baritone voices, but the less self-aware, less educated subsidiary pair, Will Parker and Ado Annie, perform in a less “cultivated,” musical comedy idiom. “I want a bold, unedited farm-girl voice,” Rodgers had told Celeste Holm at her audition for the role of Ado Annie; she landed the part with her rendition of calling a hog.<sup>21</sup>

Syntactic use of conventions and idioms evolved during the Golden Age into a highly sophisticated code of signification, dependent upon their recognition by the audience and congruent casting by the producers. In *Kiss Me, Kate*, where the principal and subsidiary couples are again differentiated by singing style and musical idioms, the warring actors Fred and Lili are able to reveal their continuing affection for one another only in the doubly safe performative space provided by “Wunderbar,” a waltz duet from a Viennese operetta they had performed long ago. Filtered through their shared memory, the artificial world created by this musical idiom allows them to declare their love in the present as well as the past tense. And because they have been able to negotiate the duet’s vocal demands as professional performers, throughout the rest of the evening the audience accepts this elevated singing style as their own, backstage and onstage. In *South Pacific*, similar conventions are used for opposite ends. The audience does not need to eavesdrop on the interior monologues of the “Twin Soliloquies” to know that Emile is “a cultured Frenchman” and Nellie “a little hick.” The cultural, ethnic, and intellectual gulf separating the couple is obvious from the manners in which they sing. As “a cockeyed optimist” with “a conventional star in her eye,” Nellie, who hails from both Little Rock, Arkansas, and musical comedy, “belts” girlishly. Emile sings majestically in bravura operatic voice. They sing simultaneously only once in the show: immediately after Nellie declares them to be “the same kind of

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<sup>21</sup> Holm, quoted in Frommer and Frommer, *It Happened on Broadway*, 101.

people fundamentally,” they harmonize in “‘Sweet Adeline’ fashion” for a reprise of Nellie’s “A Cockeyed Optimist.” The effect is neither romantic nor convincing, but comic. (In the days before amplification, such a mismatched pair singing together also posed an acoustic problem.) Extrapolating from the romantic convention in musicals that couples who belong together sing together, the second-act finale turns on Nellie singing the French song that had opened the play—not with Emile, but with his Polynesian children as proxies.

The ending of *My Fair Lady* also depends on the frustration of conventional expectations. Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins are again an apparent mismatch; if they are ever to be a couple, she must learn to *speak* properly, and he must overcome his self-involvement and emotional detachment in order to *sing* properly. By the end of Act I, Eliza has mastered Higgins’s lessons and celebrated her transformation in the doubly elevated “I Could Have Danced All Night,” in which she also admits her fond feelings for her taskmaster. In a parallel moment of self-discovery in Act II, the confirmed misogynist Higgins realizes that he now misses Eliza, but he is incapable of singing a proper ballad expressing love (if only to himself). The best he can do is a self-absorbed monologue song, admitting “I’ve Grown Accustomed To Her Face.” The audience doesn’t really need the final line of the show, “Eliza? Where the devil are my slippers?,” to infer that any future for the couple will have to be on his unreformed terms. An inventory of analogous musico-dramatic devices deriving from genre-specific conventions and expectations would be nearly infinite, and a nuanced generic study of the stage musical in the Golden Age would be book-length. It must suffice here, therefore, merely to sketch the basic outlines of a limited number of subtypes of the book musical during this period.

The *musical comedy* offers a convenient entry point, as its evolution had been nearly continuous since World War I, when the Wodehouse-Bolton-Kern shows debuted at the Princess Theater. The central figure in its practice during the Golden Age was the director/producer/book-

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writer George Abbott, the Carlo Goldoni of the subgenre, who shepherded its evolution from a sequence of songs and comic routines within a contrived boy-meets-girl formula to a vibrant, coherent, yet lighthearted book musical, most often set in contemporary urban America and populated with larger-than-life but familiar character types: sailors, playboys, athletes, politicians, gangsters, and the women who loved them. Fast-paced, jazzy, upbeat, and bursting with energy, it valued dance and production number over legitimate singing and realistic characterization. Its style and sound tended to be synchronous with current trends in popular song and dance idioms. Clever lyrics with contemporary allusions matched the vernacular colloquialisms of its dialogue, and the distinction between speaking and singing was less marked than in the musical play, thus obviating the need for extended musical scenes to make the transition from dialogue to song. Comedy now grew out of character and situation. Its heroines (among them, Merman, Martin, Carol Channing, Lisa Kirk, Gwen Verdon, Judy Holliday) tended toward the brassy, with the “belt” voice favored not only for its correspondence with female performers’ speaking registers but also its capacity to deliver lyrics to the last row of 1200–1400 seat theaters over an orchestra with a large brass and reed section. Leading male roles were usually cast with baritones, but often they were “crooners” or “song-and-dance men” rather than trained singers. Comedic specialists occupied secondary roles, which preserved to a limited extent the more loosely structured “performative” space awarded “specialty acts” and “star turns” in the older type of musical comedy. Because beautiful singing was not a central aesthetic concern, musical comedy readily accommodated actors and performers from other media, especially film and television after the advent of amplification in the late 1950s had made it possible for untrained singers to be cast in leading roles. Division of labor between singing and dancing choruses gradually disappeared, as a pool of versatile performers capable of both (known as “gypsies” because they migrated from one company to another) were able to cope with choral arrangements less

complex than those of a musical play. Addressing the audience directly in presentational mode persisted, especially in musicals whose characters were themselves performers and therefore could sing diegetically in a show-within-a-show. Several signature songs of the musical comedy were usually routined into lengthy production numbers, which literally “stopped the show” without concern for their integration into the plot, the implied shift in metadramatic discourse, or the audience’s ability to suspend its disbelief.

Depending on house minimums and prevailing musician union regulations, the orchestra ranged in size from twenty-one to twenty-seven, with four or five “reed books” requiring a group of players who all could play saxophone and clarinet, with individuals doubling on flute/piccolo, oboe/English horn, and bassoon. Such versatility allowed the orchestrator to switch from a “classical” woodwind choir to a “big band” reed section, even within a single number. The small string section usually omitted violas and numbered six to eight violins, one or two cellos, and a string bass. Three trumpets and two or three trombones (depending on whether the French horn was excluded) gave the texture its characteristic “Broadway” pizzazz. The rhythm section usually comprised piano and percussion (one or two players, with trap set essential), and sometimes guitar/banjo. The craft of orchestration for such an ensemble was so highly developed that composers usually also entrusted dance and vocal arrangements, incidental music, and the compilation of the overture and entr’acte to one of a very small group of Broadway orchestrators: Hans Spialek, Philip Lang, Don Walker, Ted Royal, and Robert Russell Bennett. That Bennett, to take one example, contributed orchestrations to more than three hundred shows during his long career makes it all the more remarkable that so many musicals nevertheless acquired a characteristic sound appropriate for their particular subject matter. The heights to which musical comedy could rise in the Golden Age is perhaps most readily observable in the quintessential backstage musical *Gypsy*, directed and choreographed by Robbins, with music and

lyrics by Styne and Sondheim, book by Laurents, with Merman creating her last and greatest stage persona in *Mama Rose*.

The *musical play* was, at least in some of its musical aspects, a reformation of American operetta. Less artificial and more believable than its predecessor, the musical play strove for new dramatic weight and seriousness, with music and dance integrated into its narrative. More so than in musical comedy of the Golden Age, most successful musical plays adapted literary, dramatic, or cinematic works (Lerner's, and later Arthur Laurents's, attempts at original musical plays fared better than Hammerstein's). Lyrics were usually set, rather than fitted to pre-composed music, and the traditional gradations of musical rhetoric in operetta—spoken dialogue, underscored dialogue, recitative, arioso, and song/aria—were utilized to integrate narrative and song, often in lengthy scenes with nearly continuous music (which seldom served, however, as act finales). Legitimate voices and choral part-singing continued to be the norm, except for the subsidiary comedic pair, who, as in older operettas such as *The Desert Song* (1926) and *The New Moon* (1928), betrayed their origins with idioms deriving from musical comedy or even vaudeville traditions. The resulting stylistic contrast corresponded to a social one, as such secondary couples usually occupied a lower social niche than the principal pair. Classically trained heroic baritones, including Alfred Drake, John Raitt, Ray Middleton, David Brooks, Robert Goulet, and Richard Kiley, moved from show to show, assuming the top billing that their female counterparts usually enjoyed in musical comedy and easing the way for genuine opera singers to appear in such roles. (Tenors tended toward the juvenile, comic, or “character” rather than the heroic.) Decorative dance evoking local color persisted, but narrative ballet, usually in the form of a dream sequence, played a major role in the plot, even as late as “Somewhere” in *West Side Story*. The demands of the choreography and elaborate choral arrangements necessitated separate, specialized ensembles of singers and dancers. Set exotically in locales

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outside New York or in an idealized American past, the musical play was largely insulated from popular dance crazes and vernacular musical trends. Exotic or historical musical idioms, including the telltale waltz, helped to establish time and place. Although Rodgers and Loewe sometimes demanded an orchestra as large as forty players, the instrumentation for the musical play changed little from that of 1920's American operetta: it utilized a larger string section than musical comedy, including violas and harp, as well as a traditional wind section, comprising flute/piccolo, two clarinets, oboe/English horn, and bassoon. The brass section was usually balanced, with two horns, trumpets, and trombones. The remarkable range of content, style, and structure that could be accommodated within the musical play format (by changing the proportions and emphases of play, dance, and music) is apparent from four shows running simultaneously in 1957: *My Fair Lady*, *The Most Happy Fella*, *West Side Story*, and *The Music Man*.

The target audience for musical theater in New York during the Golden Age was broad enough that a small group of idealistic producers and composers managed to sustain more than a decade of *opera on Broadway*. Between the 1942 revival of *Porgy and Bess* and the brief run of Gian-Carlo Menotti's *Maria Golovin* in 1958, eighteen productions (about ten percent of the total number of shows produced during that period) either presented themselves as operas or were immediately perceived as such by critics (despite various generic disguises). The success of the streamlined "musical play" version of *Porgy and Bess* (with most of its original 1935 cast, many cuts, a reduced orchestra, and much of its recitative converted to spoken dialogue) and *Carmen Jones* paved the way for Weill's operatic treatment of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* in 1947. Although it was presented by the Playwrights' Company as "a dramatic musical," Weill called it his "Broadway opera," in that it represented a hybrid borrowing from both Broadway and operatic traditions but staking claim to higher ground than the terrain of the musical play.

Widely hailed by critics as the first wholly successful attempt at populist American opera (*Porgy and Bess* had hitherto met with a mixed reception), *Street Scene* managed 148 performances, won the first Tony Award for outstanding score, and ushered in a series of operas by Blitzstein, Menotti, Bernstein, and others, which attempted to balance the commercial and collaborative constraints of production on Broadway with their aspirations for the emotional power and musical proportions of opera. (When Weill died in mid-career at age fifty in 1950, he was planning several more Broadway operas, including one for famed baritone Lawrence Tibbett.) The most successful operas mounted on Broadway were, ironically, those least touched by its conventions and idioms: Menotti's *The Medium* and *The Telephone* (a double bill), and *The Consul*. The prospect of addressing a much larger audience than a repertory opera house could offer prompted such unlikely productions as Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (1948); even Igor Stravinsky entertained hopes that *The Rake's Progress* might premiere on Broadway. In 1953 *Porgy and Bess* returned again, in the celebrated Robert Breen production starring Leontyne Price, but this time with its full operatic regalia restored. This production, which ran for more than 500 performances on Broadway and then toured the world, established the work's reputation as an American classic. Later in the 1950s, *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, *Trouble in Tahiti*, and *Candide* fared less well and signaled the end for Broadway opera.

These works placed high demands on both performers and audiences, with sophisticated scores of wide-ranging stylistic and harmonic palettes. Most of them were serious, if not tragic in content, with dance seldom playing a significant part. In Broadway opera, if music was not continuous, it was so pervasive that the "books" of works such as *Street Scene* and *The Most Happy Fella*—both based on Pulitzer Prize winning plays—could be easily incorporated into their published piano-vocal scores. Although orchestras were limited to less than forty by the size of Broadway pits, conductors of the stature of Bernstein, Maurice Abravanel, and Thomas

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Schippers conducted world-class opera singers (many of whom were also on contract at the Metropolitan Opera), a resource thereafter available to the Golden Age musical whenever appropriate, as in *South Pacific* (Ezio Pinza), *Pipe Dream* (Helen Traubel), *The Most Happy Fella* (Robert Weede), and *Bravo Giovanni* (Cesare Siepi). Thirteen of the operas presented on Broadway eventually ended up in the repertory of the New York City Opera, providing a basis for vernacular American opera—in contrast to the nineteen operas by Americans premiered prior to 1958 at the Metropolitan, all of which have vanished from the repertory. Although only three of the operas presented on Broadway recouped their costs and turned a profit for their producers, Broadway opera explicitly evinced the high aspirations of musical theater during its Golden Age.

Although most long-running shows told the audience a falsehood it wanted to hear or a truth it knew already, a small number of *experimental musicals* challenged prevailing Broadway norms of both form and content. Employing non-linear metadramatic devices deriving from genres such as revue and vaudeville or even Greek lyric drama, these musicals de-integrated songs from the book by utilizing performative numbers as interruptions of or commentary on the plot. The unconventional books of these shows tended to be original: “what made it so much fun,” Lerner said, “was discarding a lot of old rules and making up our own rules as we went along.”<sup>22</sup> *Oklahoma!* was still running on Broadway in 1947–48 when Rodgers’s and Hammerstein’s first original book musical, *Allegro*, opened for a 315-performance run. Directed and choreographed by Agnes de Mille, *Allegro* chronicled in a series of vignettes covering thirty-five years the life and career of a doctor and addressed the theme of corruption of youthful idealism by monetary incentives. A Greek chorus commented on the action to both actors and audience, and the show used non-representational sets and multi-level performing areas. Hammerstein’s

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Jay Lerner, “Lerner’s Life and *Love Life*,” *PM* (14 November 1948).

young protégé, the seventeen-year-old Sondheim, worked as an assistant stage manager for the production.

Ultimately even more influential, Lerner's and Weill's *Love Life* boasted as illustrious a team of collaborators: producer Cheryl Crawford, director Elia Kazan, choreographer Michael Kidd, designer Boris Aronson, and Nanette Fabray and Ray Middleton in the leading roles. Weill described the effort as "an entirely new form of theater, a new mixture of diverse elements."<sup>23</sup> Subtitled "A Vaudeville in Two Parts," *Love Life* observed the effects on a non-aging couple and their two children from 1791 to the present as "Progress" and "Economics" (two of the vaudeville numbers) pull them apart. Scenes from their deteriorating marriage over the course of 150 years alternate with socially critical but highly entertaining vaudeville routines, staged "in one" (in front of a painted drop, but behind the main curtain line) and utilizing a kaleidoscopic array of popular idioms to parallel the passage of time and to comment on the corruption of the American dream. After 252 performances on Broadway, *Love Life* vanished. A union action had prevented its preservation on a cast album, neither script nor score appeared in print, and the authors did not release it for stock or amateur production. Yet its very obscurity encouraged the next generation of Broadway innovators to elaborate and improve upon it as a prototype of the "concept musical." Although Sondheim has suggested that "*Love Life* ultimately failed because it's more about ideas than about characters," Aronson asserted that "there were enough ideas in *Love Life* for twenty musicals."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Sondheim found it "a useful influence" on his own work, as did Prince, Bob Fosse, and Kander and Ebb.

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<sup>23</sup> Letter, in German, from Weill to his parents, 17 October 1948, included as #247 in Lys Symonette and Elmar Juchem (eds.), *Kurt Weill: Briefe an die Familie (1914–1950)* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2000), 413.

<sup>24</sup> Sondheim, quoted by Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 17–18; Boris Aronson, quoted by Frank Rich with Lisa Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 93.

So far ahead of its time was *Love Life* that its first direct descendant appeared only in 1966: *Cabaret*, designed by Aronson and directed by Prince, with Weill's widow, Lotte Lenya, in the cast. After a Boston preview performance, Lenya herself noted that *Cabaret* used the same basic framework as had *Love Life*: book scenes containing traditional non-diegetic songs alternate with diegetic commentary numbers performed in the Kit Kat Club. (In the film version, Bob Fosse omitted all the songs that had occurred in the book scenes.) Following close on the heels of *Cabaret*, *Hallelujah, Baby!* (Styne, Comden and Green, Laurents) presented vignettes about a non-aging interracial couple against the changing social background of American society and African American musical idioms. Fosse's *Chicago* borrowed *Love Life*'s vaudeville frame, and the finale of his autobiographical film, *All That Jazz*, modeled itself on the concluding minstrel show sequence in *Love Life*. However, with Aronson as designer for the first five of their collaborations, it was Sondheim and Prince who most fully mined *Love Life*'s potential in *Company*, *Follies*, and *Pacific Overtures*. By then Sondheim had already departed from the integrated book musical with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (a one-set, one-costume musical that reverted to pre-*Oklahoma!* uses of song) and *Anyone Can Whistle* (his first attempt to use the vernacular of musical theater in an ironic way, as commentary, in the manner of Weill-Brecht). Of course, traditional book musicals would continue to be written and performed, classics of the Golden Age would be revived more and more frequently, and parodies of the old-style shows of the 1920s, such as *Dames at Sea*, would further emphasize the advances of the Golden Age by their conspicuous absence. The continuing relevance of Lerner's and Weill's admonition, "today's invention is tomorrow's cliché," would manifest itself in the concept musicals of the 1970s and '80s.

#### IV. STRUCTURE, CONVENTIONS, AND SYNTAX

In his preface to *Brigadoon*, Lerner articulated the fundamental premise of the musical in the Golden Age: “The book comes first. That is a chronological fact, a philosophical imperative, and a practical principle.” If its musical sequences make a musical memorable, the book makes it possible, for it draws together the individual collaborative contributions of many artists and shapes them into a unified work. (Ironically, the Tony Awards did not establish a category for the “outstanding book of a musical” until 1971.) Although librettists have historically been relegated to a status far below that awarded playwrights, success within the highly specialized craft of book-writing has eluded all but a few dramatists of the spoken word who have deigned to write for the musical theater. The books of musicals in the Golden Age aspired to the legitimacy and coherence of spoken drama, but the two differ in kind rather than degree. Because it must leave space for music to articulate in song and movement what characters cannot otherwise express, the dialogue of a book is usually only one-third to one-half the length of a spoken play (*My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story* may be the extreme cases respectively of length and brevity of dialogue in a musical). The concision, economy, and pace of the musical book preclude its approaching the spoken play in dramatic weight, psychological depth, and complexity of plot. Instead, the book must work its way into the fabric of the songs and dances that it motivates.

A book is, by necessity, only a skeletal play, usually non-continuous and non-Aristotelian in its layout, more a carefully constructed sequence of fragmentary, interrelated episodes than a traditional dramatic narrative. Conceptually rather than chronologically ordered, one scene may not motivate the next, which may instead be simultaneous with or parallel to its predecessor. What a book omits from its source, therefore, is as crucial as what is preserved; some adaptations remain remarkably faithful to their sources, even replicating dialogue and stage directions, but others borrow only characters and situations. In contrast even to a typical nineteenth-century

opera or operetta, which usually changes sets only between acts or lengthy scenes, the episodic structure of a Golden Age musical often necessitated shifting locales and settings a dozen or more times within a single act. (One of the musical's contributions to other theatrical genres is the technical capability, developed during the Golden Age, to move scenery quickly and fluidly, using counterweight fly systems and motorized winch systems without visible stagehands and without closing the main curtain.) Yet within such a collage-like structure, the musical book must introduce characters in conflict and of sufficient interest to make the audience care enough to anticipate a resolution. Limitation of time for exposition requires these characters to be archetypal yet particularized, larger-than-life yet believable, already familiar but not merely caricatures. Casting of a musical, unlike opera, can seldom risk going against physical type: in a musical, heroes, no matter how tarnished, must look as well as sound heroic.

The key conventions of the musical book are binary opposition and repetition. Musicals are almost always about pairs, complementary halves of a whole, initially at odds because of age, race, ethnicity, customs, attitudes, values, backgrounds, social status, manners, prejudices, competence, work ethic, appearance, or desires. Musicals often treat courtship, the attempt to convince another to adopt one's attitudes or to adapt one's own actions to another, as a metaphor for life itself. Such coupling need not be restricted to romantic pairing: *Gypsy* privileges a mother-daughter relationship over a romantic one, *Fiddler on the Roof* explores a series of father-daughter relationships against the backdrop of Tevye's commitment to "Tradition," and *Man of La Mancha* turns on the fidelity of Cervantes/Don Quixote to his quest for "The Impossible Dream," his idealized Dulcinea. Because musicals depend on the resolution of the oppositions within these pairings into some sort of concordance, the outcome is often predictable from the start, and thus unfolding of plot is not the primary focus: characterization is. To avoid overt repetition and the monotony of the conventional coupling of just two principals (who are

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“fated to be mated”), most musicals require secondary dichotomies that parallel the primary one, a proliferation of couples to ensure alternation of plot and subplot.

These binary oppositions of characters manifest themselves structurally in a pervasive splitting of focus through paired songs; parallel scenes, locations, and situations; analogous activities; contrasting gender-based ensembles; complementary costuming; and binary thematics (freedom versus order, self-interest versus family, progress versus stability, pleasure versus responsibility, etc.). Individual characters further participate in such polarities as they negotiate between their exterior and interior selves, with the hidden, neglected aspects of personality (often revealed only in “I am” or “I want” songs) corresponding to the needs or attitudes of the other member of the pair. Even the audience must alternate between doubt and belief that everything will turn out right in the end. The first act of *Carousel* is virtually a catalogue of these dual-focus configurations: the Julie-Carrie sequence vividly characterizes the two women by playing them off each other; the Julie-Billy “park-bench” sequence uses the subjunctive “If I Loved You” to foreshadow that the couple will never “sing together” in life and thus will find resolution of their oppositions only after Billy’s death; the Carrie-Mr. Snow sequence ostensibly functions as comic relief but also provides the contextual norm (as they sing “When the Children Are Asleep” as a duet) for interpreting the dysfunctional relationship of Billy and Julie; Nettie Fowler leads “June Is Bustin’ Out All Over” before it breaks into a “girls’ dance,” and Jigger Craigin does analogous duty for the men in “Blow High, Blow Low”; Act I concludes with Billy’s “Soliloquy,” one of the longest monologue songs in the repertory, which is then paralleled in Act II by Julie’s “What’s the Use of Wond’rin.”

Golden Age musicals usually comprise two acts (*The Most Happy Fella* has three; *Man of La Mancha* plays without intermission), with the first lasting 90–105 minutes, the second 45–60 minutes. Virtually all musicals have a minimum of sixteen musical numbers (with at least ten

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in Act I), but because content dictates form in the book musical, no two shows have precisely the same internal structure—even *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* (whose six principal roles are so similar that they could be cast with the same actors) differ greatly in configuration. Most musicals begin with a potpourri overture, aurally preparing the audience for the time, place, and tone of the play while previewing the principal songs (which will be heard several times during the evening). Others, notably *Carousel*, *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, substitute a prologue (mimed, danced, spoken-sung respectively) that plunges immediately into exposition of the central conflict or theme of the evening. The compact form of the musical in the Golden Age necessitates that important characters be introduced in an opening scene establishing time, place, theme, and situation, presenting the conflict that will generate dramatic tension, and fixing the style of the production. It is the single most decisive moment in a musical: the audience must be immediately engaged by an intriguing and intelligible exposition of what the evening holds in store. (Robbins, for example, is credited with salvaging *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* by advising Abbott to replace its original opening with “Comedy Tonight.”)

There are at least three other critical spots in a musical: the close of Act I, the opening of Act II, and the final fifteen minutes of the show. Act I must end with sufficient dramatic tension to bring the audience back after intermission; the final musical number of the act is often a crucial turning point for a principal character, one that will set in motion the events of the second act (Billy’s “Soliloquy” in *Carousel*, Eliza’s test at the Embassy Ball in *My Fair Lady*, “Everything’s Coming Up Roses” in *Gypsy*). One of the few miscalculations of *West Side Story* was the decision to end Act I not with the “Quintet,” an ensemble finale pitting in counterpoint all of the principals’ expectations for “Tonight,” but with “The Rumble,” which brings the curtain down on Riff’s and Bernardo’s dead bodies and destroys, with the intermission break, the dramatic irony of its juxtaposition with “I Feel Pretty.” Act II must begin with a bang to re-engage the

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audience, usually with a song that turns into a full-scale production number (“The Farmer and the Cowman” in *Oklahoma!*, “The Chase” in *Brigadoon*, “Too Darn Hot” in *Kiss Me, Kate*). By far the more problematic of the two, the second act seldom introduces new characters or plot complications, but rather resolves the various parallel oppositions of the first. Therefore, the musical design of the second act is less dense, and it often incorporates several reprises of first-act material. Traditionally a final star turn occupies the “eleven o’clock slot,” a high point near the end of the show; many musicals of the Golden Age, however, give this spot to a rousing ensemble number that once again stops the show before the final denouement of the principal plot (“Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ the Boat” in *Guys and Dolls*, the title song of *Oklahoma!*, “Gee Officer Krupke” in *West Side Story*). Act II finales are seldom extended, often no more than an abbreviated reprise or series of reprises that bring the curtain down on the united pairs.

Within such a framework, the book-writer sequenced compact episodes and conceived crisp dialogue appropriate to character, situation, and the presentational conventions of the musical theater. Each scene had to build toward the moment when song or dance made its seemingly inevitable entrance. Motivating such musical moments was perhaps the book-writer’s toughest task: “catching the drama at the hilltops where it could ascend no further without the wings of music and lyrics,” as Lerner put it.<sup>25</sup> Because most musicals encompass both diegetic and non-diegetic music, the book-writer also needed to incorporate occasions when characters could burst into song or dance as a naturalistic expression of everyday activity (in the theater, at a religious gathering, in a nightclub, at an army talent show). It was more challenging to embed non-diegetic song, a character expressing his thoughts to himself or another character without him or the audience noticing that he is singing rather than speaking. From this imperative grew the extended

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Jay Lerner, *The Street Where I Live* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 44–45.



musical scenes of Golden Age musicals, where speaking spilled over into singing (as in *My Fair Lady*), singing into speaking (as in *The Most Happy Fella*), or dancing into both (as in *West Side Story*). Optimal preparation and placement of songs within the book determined their impact as much as their intrinsic qualities did.

Lyrics, as an extension of the spoken word, had to grow organically out of the book, preserving a given character's dialect, grammar, rhetorical patterns, and diction, conveying emotions that the character is inhibited from simply saying, finding a mode of unassertive poetic expression that is not so cleverly rhyme-conscious that it distracts from the dramatic moment. During the musical's Golden Age the verse-refrain format remained the principal, but by no means exclusive, module for the construction of song. A conversational verse, often tied specifically to character and situation, bridged from dialogue to the emotional heights of the refrain, most often organized as an AABA song form—or a variation or extension thereof. Usually confined to the space of 60–120 words, a lyric had to be concise in expression, dense with meaning, periodic in construction (completion of meaning occurs at the ends of structural units), escalating in its momentum, suggestive of what is not explicitly articulated (its subtext), and so character-specific that another personage singing it would be unthinkable. The lyricist had to accomplish all of this with the composer, performer, and audience in mind, with musical form already implicit in the poetry, open vowels at key points in the vocal line, and sufficient redundancy to guarantee intelligibility at first hearing. Many lyricists developed as individual a style as composers, with Hammerstein penning verses of disarming simplicity and ordinariness, Sondheim fiendishly clever and sophisticated ones with complex rhyming schemes and rhetorical devices, including internal and composite rhymes. Lyrics exploited various modes of discourse: descriptive, expository, narrative, persuasive, or inspirational; they also evolved their own generic subtypes: ballads (love songs), charm songs (expressing optimism and well-being), “I

am” or “I want” songs, comedy songs, list songs, patter songs, among others. Writing lyrics for a Golden Age musical became such a highly developed art form that even such brilliant word-smiths as Ira Gershwin, Porter, and Berlin found it difficult to meet the new expectations demanded of their craft. After writing both music and lyrics for *No Strings*, even Rodgers conceded that writing effective lyrics was more difficult than composing music.

Yet Golden Age musicals were most closely identified with their composers, as audiences usually left the theater humming melodies rather than reciting lyrics or quoting dialogue, and many individual songs outlived their original musico-dramatic functions. Sometimes, of course, composer and lyricist were one, but more often the duties of lyricist and book-writer fell to a single collaborator, and only rarely (notably Frank Loesser for *The Most Happy Fella*) did one person manage to wear all three hats. In all of these cases, however, the respective contributions were nearly simultaneous rather than successive, as established partners worked together from the outset, laying out the ground rules for the project, agreeing on matters of style, structure, tone, and casting, determining the placement and function of musical numbers. The composer of a successful Broadway musical had to be a collaborative dramatist.

The prime directive for a score was accessibility and comprehensibility to a broad audience, with purely musical considerations secondary to overriding dramatic ones. Musical language needed to be appropriate to the subject matter and could not exceed in complexity or novelty the capacity of the musical’s projected audience. Vocal writing could be only as demanding as a leading performer could reasonably negotiate eight times per week, fifty weeks per year. Orchestras were limited in size by both financial and physical restrictions. Because the dynamic process of collaboration extended beyond composition through rehearsals and tryouts, with continual revision the norm, boundaries between “work” and “event” remained fluid. Scores

could not be orchestrated until casting was completed and vocal ranges of principals known; dance arrangements or newly composed dance music seldom preceded their choreography; stars often insisted upon additional “specialty” material. If a musical number did not have its intended impact, it could be cut or replaced, whatever its intrinsic merits. Nevertheless, in some ways, the composer operated with the fewest formulaic restraints and the most artistic freedom, determining the sequence, generic patterns, pacing, and musical idioms of the show—its musical layout.

The challenge to the composer, according to Weill, was that each show, while encompassing a very wide variety of musical idioms, had to “create its own style, its own texture, its own relationship between words and music, because music becomes a truly integral part of the play.”<sup>26</sup> All the numbers of a score were expected to bear a family resemblance, yet each had to embody features particular to the character singing and the immediate dramatic situation, while still calling upon generic codes of signification common to the shared syntax of the Golden Age musical. *Oklahoma!* and *The King and I*, for example, both included charm songs (“Surrey with the Fringe on Top” and “Getting To Know You”), soliloquies (“Lonely Room” and “A Puzzlement”), ballads (“People Will Say We’re in Love” and “We Kiss in a Shadow”), defiant “I want” songs (“Many a New Day” and “Shall I Tell You What I Think of You?”), extended ballet sequences (“Laurey’s Dream” and “The Small House of Uncle Thomas”), and comedic numbers about cultural customs (“Kansas City” and “Western People Funny”). Yet the pairs appear in very different “slots” in the musical layout of their respective shows, and each seems more related in style to its own show than to the shared generic type of the pair, or even to the composer’s other efforts within that song type. In fact, manipulation of the conventions of song types and forms endowed the composer with his own narrative authority and autonomy. The

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<sup>26</sup> Kurt Weill, “Score for a Play,” *New York Times* (5 January 1947), X3.

musical layout of a score does not follow a set of inflexible rules, but rather evolves from the composer's creative response to the requirements of the particular show, to the tension between generic convention and original conception. No two scores of the Golden Age were constructed from the same set of blueprints.

Although the theatrical equivalent of American popular-song form remained the primary modular unit of musical construction, composers found numerous ways to embellish, extend, expand, combine, foreshorten, camouflage, and even—on occasion—to displace it by utilizing underscoring, recitative, arioso, choral interjections, instrumental transitions, leitmotivic techniques, and expressive deformation of musical structures. The standard thirty-two-bar song form was itself a product of binary opposition, with the bridge (the B section of the AABA form) venturing into different harmonic and melodic territory to accompany a contrasting lyric excursion. Although its harmonic vocabulary seldom strayed beyond the boundaries of late-nineteenth-century tonality, composers exercised surprising ingenuity of technique and variety of musical styles. Many theater songs appropriated dance idioms, both historical and contemporary, as their musical bases, and the composer's choice of idiom often functioned as a means of characterization or commentary, ranging from the merely evocative (“The Rain in Spain” in *My Fair Lady*) to the critically reflexive (“Me and My Town” in *Anyone Can Whistle*). Invocation of recognizable signifiers from such historical forms as vaudeville, burlesque, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Viennese operetta often provided audiences with an interpretive frame; the soft-shoe waltz and clichéd instrumental flourishes and tags of “Brush Up Your Shakespeare,” for example, instantaneously transformed two gangsters into lovable vaudevillians stealing the eleven o'clock slot of *Kiss Me, Kate*. Even the Broadway opera *Street Scene* utilizes the thirty-two-bar song form as the basis for seven musical numbers, but the extent to which each of them distorts that

form indicates the degree of depth, independence, and spontaneity of thought expressed by the character who is singing.<sup>27</sup>

Composers of the Golden Age frequently countered intratextual conventions with intertextual allusions, inviting associations with specific works, musical idioms, or stylistic conventions foreign to the show, or even the genre, thereby inviting the audience to pull back from the proscenium into a larger interpretive frame. The surreal, dissonant opening of “The Carousel Waltz” has nothing to do with Coney Island; *Guys and Dolls* begins with a three-part fugue sung by gamblers about horse-racing; the utopian vision of *West Side Story*’s dream ballet specifically invokes Aaron Copland’s “Somewhere” of wide-open American spaces. However, the centripetal force of so many diverse idioms, styles, and song types packed into a Golden Age musical threatened to make a score no more than a sum of its parts. A few composers (Weill, Bernstein, and Loesser, in particular) utilized all manner and scale of musical repetition, development, and transformation to unify the seemingly un-unifiable: reprise of large sections of numbers, refrains within musical scenes, generative motives, thematic reminiscence. There is probably no Golden Age musical so melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically unified across an extremely wide range of stylistic idioms as *West Side Story*, in which the unresolved dissonance of the C–F $\sharp$  tritone that ends its final funeral procession has generated the most important thematic material of the show.<sup>28</sup>

Given the pervasive convention of binary opposition within a musical, it is not surprising that the score’s center of gravity, its mechanism for telescoping the musical’s overall structure

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<sup>27</sup> See Kim H. Kowalke, “Kurt Weill, Modernism, and Popular Culture: *Oeffentlichkeit als Stil*,” *Modernism/Modernity* 2/1 (1995): 27–69.

<sup>28</sup> On this point, see Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 205–246; and Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 245–273.

into a single scene, was the duet, the coming together of a complementary pair in song, usually a ballad. In *Brigadoon*, for example, Tommy and Fiona sing three duets, which progress from first meeting (“The Heather on the Hill”) to cautious declaration of their feelings for one another (“Almost Like Being in Love”) to their reluctant parting (“From This Day On”). In each case, one of them sings a verse and refrain, then the other echoes both words and music, before they join to sing in unison or harmony. Their ultimate union is threatened not by disharmony between them but by the disconnection between the worlds in which they live. At the climax of the show, after hearing Fiona reprise portions of two of the duets, Tommy decides to leave his world (and fiancée) to return to Brigadoon.

In the Golden Age musical, duets assume a remarkable variety of forms and dramatic functions. In some, characters sing successively the same or closely related verse and refrain (“I’ll Know” and “I’ve Never Been in Love Before” in *Guys and Dolls*). In others, the two sing alternate lines of lyrics (“Anything You Can Do” in *Annie Get Your Gun* and “I Remember It Well” in *Love Life*, the lyric that Lerner recycled in the film *Gigi* and Sondheim echoed in *Saturday Night*). In still others, a pair sings contrasting music before compromising in unison or harmony (“Small Talk” in *Pajama Game* and “A Boy Like That”/“I Have a Love” from *West Side Story*). A virtuosic variation pits entire songs against one another in counterpoint without resolution beyond agreeing to disagree (“Old Fashioned Wedding,” which Berlin added to *Annie Get Your Gun* in 1966). Perhaps the most widely used, but camouflaged, form of duet is the reprise of one character’s ballad by his or her “mate” at a crucial moment of recognition, sometimes with new lyrics, other times with the same ones, signaling reconciliation (“So in Love” in *Kiss Me, Kate*). Although these “duets” are separated by both time and space within the drama, the audience hears them not merely as someone singing someone else’s song, but as the couple finally completing the duet implicit in the song from the outset. Even subtler “duetting”

incorporates elements of one character's song into a parallel song of the other ("Till There Was You"/"76 Trombones" in *The Music Man*).

An affirmative answer to "Shall We Dance?" is the choreographic equivalent to the vocal duet, the physical manifestation of binary coupling. Only in the safety of a ritualized polka can Anna and the King of Siam enact their mutual erotic attraction. "Completely lost in each other," Tony and Maria "drift into the steps of the dance" before they say or sing a word to each other in *West Side Story*. In fact, dance offered the musical as many variations on "coupling" as singing did: individuals try to outdo their mates on the dance floor; one teaches the other a new step; couples dance separately but in mirror fashion; one character dances ecstatically but with the "wrong" partner; only in the conventional embrace of the dance can partners admit their internal feelings. In fact, the integration of choreography into the fabric of the Golden Age musical, and the corollary that performers in the American musical theater must dance as well as sing and act, may be one of its defining features. The Golden Age musical preserved in the production number dance's capacity to overwhelm with spectacle, utilized narrative dance to replace dialogue and advance plot, drew upon as wide a range of styles and idioms as did music, developed its own repertory of comedic conventions, and, like music, exploited the possibilities of historical styles (especially tap) and intertextual pastiche. Unfortunately, dance is the least documented element of the Golden Age musical; original choreography was seldom notated and even more rarely survived transfer to the screen intact; revivals rarely recreate the original dances and often even discard the original dance music. Nevertheless, recent revues celebrating a repertory of Broadway choreography, such as *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* and *Fosse*, demonstrate the fundamental role of dance and its creators in the Golden Age musical.

In October 1956, with *Candide* poised to open on Broadway, Bernstein devoted one of his *Omnibus* television programs to a historical survey of the American musical theater, “an art that arises out of American roots, out of our speech, our tempo, our moral attitudes, our way of moving.” “The American musical theater,” he continued, “has come a long way, borrowing this from opera, that from revue, the other from operetta, something else from vaudeville—and mixing all the elements into something quite new.” After illustrating the carefree “naiveté” of musical comedy in the 1920s and its sober adolescence in the 1930s, Bernstein observed that “for the last fifteen years, we have been enjoying the greatest period our musical theater has ever known. . . . Each [new musical] is a surprise; nobody ever knows what new twists and treatments and styles will appear next.” But, in conclusion, he suggested that “we are in a historical position now similar to that of the popular musical theater in Germany just before Mozart,” and that “all we need is for our Mozart to come along.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps he already saw himself fulfilling that mandate. But, for whatever reason, Bernstein’s prescription for the next stage of the musical’s evolution proceeded from the premise that the Golden Age musical aspired to become a new type of opera, with the composer as the crucial figure in its future. Even if Broadway opera seemed feasible to Bernstein at that time, it was an odd view for someone then collaborating almost daily with Robbins, Laurents, Sondheim, and Prince on *West Side Story*. “The true *gesture* of the show,” Robbins maintained, was “finding out at that time how far we, as ‘long-haired artists,’ could go in bringing our crafts and talents to a musical.”

The rhythmic complexities, harmonic syntax, and organic interrelationships of *West Side Story* may indeed be as daring and sophisticated as any American opera of the period, but as Bernstein’s 1984 Deutsche Grammophone recording with Kiri Te Kanawa as Maria and José

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<sup>29</sup> Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, 174–79.



Carreras as Tony painfully demonstrates, its essence dissipates when the show is cast with opera singers incapable of meeting its non-vocal requirements. As many productions of *West Side Story* (and other classics of the Golden Age) in opera houses have also proven, something essential is lost when the musical is performed before an opera audience with opera singers upsetting the delicately balanced alliance of arts that the stellar collaborators had forged in many a contest for priority. The creation of a musical, unlike that of most operas, was a wholly collaborative effort and the result a complex mixture of components. The aspirations and achievements of the Golden Age musical were neither higher nor lower than opera's, but they were emphatically different. Even without a Mozart, the musical became the representative international musico-dramatic genre of the twentieth century.

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## ABSTRACT

In 1956 Leonard Bernstein opined to his *Omnibus* audience that “the American musical theater has come a long way, borrowing this from opera, that from revue, the other from operetta, something else from vaudeville—and mixing all the elements into something quite new.” Although he suggested that “each [new musical] is a surprise; nobody ever knows what new twists and treatments and styles will appear next,” at this midpoint in the Golden Age of the American musical theater (roughly the quarter century between *Oklahoma!* [1943] and *Hair* [1968]), the art form had evolved its own elaborate set of generic expectations, structural and syntactical norms, and stylistic conventions. As the various subgenres (musical play, musical comedy, Broadway opera) gradually coalesced under the all-encompassing umbrella term of “musical,” the classic musicals of the Golden Age collectively defined an elaborate “code of conduct” that allowed its creative collaborators to explore new ways of integrating music, drama, dance, and spectacle within the overtly commercial arena of the Broadway theater, wherein audience response functioned as the final critical arbiter. During its Golden Age, the American musical theater came of age, and in so doing became the representative international musico-dramatic genre of the twentieth century.

This article is part of a special, serialized feature: *A Music-Theoretical Matrix: Essays in Honor of Allen Forte (Part V)*.

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## HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

(An example based on a humanities-style note citation)

Kim H. Kowalke, “Theorizing the Golden Age Musical: Genre, Structure, Syntax,” in *A Music-Theoretical Matrix: Essays in Honor of Allen Forte (Part V)*, ed. David Carson Berry, *Gamut* 6/2 (2013): 133–184.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim H. Kowalke is Professor of Musicology in the Eastman School of Music and the Richard L. Turner Professor in the Humanities in the College Music Department, which he founded within the University of Rochester in 1987. His many articles and books on twentieth-century topics have won five ASCAP Deems Taylor Awards for excellence in writing about music, and two of these studies have been awarded the Society for American Music’s Irving Lowens Award for best articles on American music. He has conducted more than fifty productions of musical theater and currently heads the musical theater workshop at the University. As President of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music since 1981, he founded the international Lotte Lenya Competition for theater singing.

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