

“‘What’s that I Smell in the Air...’: The Musical and the American Dream

ATHE 2008 Seminar / Denver

“‘There’s A Place for Us’ – Are GLBT People Included in ‘Us’?”
by Bud Coleman

When Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents, Oliver Smith, and Tharon Musser created West Side Story in 1957, at some point in the creative process, there must have been a collective laugh when these talented homo- and bi-sexual artists mused at the musical they *might* have wrought if West Side Story were more autobiographical: Bernardo and Tony: La Vida Loca, or Anybodys (Broadway’s first musical about a transgendered man). Just as this team explored that most heterosexual of all love stories (Romeo and Juliet), most GLBT musical theatre artists – Howard Ashman, Michael Bennett, Lorenz Hart, Jerry Herman, William Finn, Tony Kushner, Terrence McNally, Jerry Mitchell, John Cameron Mitchell, Cole Porter, Marc Shaiman, Tommy Tune, Scott Whitman, Jeff Whitty, etc. – wrote and write about an American Dream that is very heterosexual. This paper will provide a brief overview of GLBT characters in musicals: from Gilbert and Sullivan’s Bunthorne (Patience, 1881) to Applause’s Duane (1970), to The Rocky Horror Show (1974), to Giulietta Trapani (Aspects of Love, 1989) and Enid in Legally Blonde (2007). Next, I will explore why gay men (show queens) have been drawn to an art form which for the bulk of the 20th century was decidedly heterosexual.

Just as Jewish writers of musical theatre avoided writing explicitly about Jewish characters until the 1960s, so to did gay and bisexual writers steer clear of GLBT

characters until after the Stonewall riots (1969) and the beginnings of the modern gay rights movement. Nevertheless, gay lyricists especially were known to sneak in language once and a while that certainly shook up the heteronormativity prevalent in the field.

Once of the first “flaming” characters to hit the musical stage was Reginald Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Patience (1881). A satire of the aestheticism movement in general and Oscar Wilde in particular, Bunthorne initially feigns devotion to aestheticism as a way to attract women, but in the end is caught in his own machinations and finds himself alone at the end of the operetta as all of the eligible women are paired with men. Another musical nod towards the conflation of the aesthetic movement, Oscar Wilde, and gay men is contained in this song Noel Coward wrote for Bittersweet (1929):

Pretty boys, witty boys,
You may sneer
At our disintegration.
Haughty boys, naughty boys,
Dear, dear, dear!
Swooning with affectation ...
And as we are the reason
For the Nineties being gay,
We all wear a green carnation.

Bunthorne was the first in a long list of effeminate, “swishy” stage characters who are punished for being a sissy. Case in point, Ira Gershwin wrote the lyrics for Girl Crazy (1930) which contains this gem: “on Western prairies we shoot the fairies or send them back East.” In 1938, Broadway producers forced Noel Coward to cut a verse in “Mad About the Boy” from Words and Music, one of the few positive songs about same sex desire. Particularly when performed by Coward himself, “Mad About the Boy” captures the giddiness and hopelessness of an infatuation with an unobtainable object of

desire.

It's pretty funny but I'm mad about the boy,
He has a gay appeal, that makes me feel,
There's maybe something sad about the boy.

In songs such as this, Coward both reveals and conceals the desire that cannot be named openly.

More typical is the flamboyant gay fashion photographer Russell Paxton – created originally by Danny Kaye – in the 1941 Moss Hart / Kurt Weill / Ira Gershwin Lady in the Dark. At one point he gushes about a male movie star:

Girls, he's god-like! I've taken pictures of beautiful men
but this one is the end – the end!
He's got a face that would melt in your mouth.

Homosexual caricatures like this were presented only for the sake of comedy in musical theatre, non-musical plays, and film. Their dreams – their place in the American Dream – is of no concern as they are presented as clowns, two-dimensional “pansies” just on stage for an easy laugh (and a way to reinforce the heteronormativity).

With the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the resultant achievements of the modern gay rights movement, fortunately it was not long before more three-dimensional gay characters started to appear in musical theatre. Applause (1970) not only featured an openly gay character (Duane, first played by Lee Roy Reams), it also contains a scene in a gay bar. A few years later Tommy Tune won his first Tony Award portraying a gay choreographer in Seesaw (Cy Coleman / Dorothy Fields / Michael Bennett). Unlike Applause's Duane, Seesaw's David not only has a solo number, he has the eleven o'clock number (“It's Not Where You Start, It's Where You Finish”). While the original Broadway production of The Rocky Horror Show (1975) only lasted 45 performances, it

was the largest assortment of gay men, lesbians, and cross-dressing characters on stage since Mae West's The Drag appeared in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1927.

Crafted out of hundreds of hours of interviews with Broadway performers, A Chorus Line (1975) was one of the early musicals to take place in the present, not in a nostalgic past. It contains two openly gay male characters – Paul and Greg – (Bobby was originally performed by Thommie Walsh but never outs himself as gay in the show) and while they are much more three-dimensional people than their lavender stage ancestors, neither one is picked to be part of the show-within-the-show. Greg fulfills the role of the cynically funny, witty gay clown:

My real name is Sidney Kenneth Beckinstein. My Jewish name is Rochmelev Ben Yockave Mire Beckinstein. And my professional name is Gregory Gardener.

A little of this, a little of that . . . very little of that. Well, after about an hour of this, she said, "Don't you want to do anything else?" I suddenly thought to myself, "No, I don't."

It was probably the first time I realised I was homosexual and I got so depressed because I thought being gay meant being a bum all the rest of my life and I said: "Gee I'll never get to wear nice clothes" – and I was really into clothes. I had this pair of powder blue and pink gabardine pants . . .

Paul is far more problematic. While he has the longest monologue in the show, it makes him an object of “pity and condescension” (Clum 203) as he recounts his embarrassment of performing in drag with the Jewel Box Revue. Zach, who spends most of the audition barking out order to the dancers from the back of the auditorium, comes on stage to put his arms around the sobbing Paul. As Clum fumes:

This gay chorus boy is ethnic other (Paul is Puerto Rican), effeminate (a drag performer), and physically too weak to complete the audition (a sissy), but he's courageous enough to tell us he's gay and respectable enough to be ashamed of it. (204)

While by 1975 musical theatre on Broadway might include homosexual characters who

could be pitied and tolerated, this acceptance did not go so far as to make them eligible for participation in the American Dream.

The conservative world of the Broadway musical certainly was stretched when Hair arrived at the Biltmore Theatre in 1968 with its rock score, anti-war stance, drug use, and nudity. But the sexual revolution (as envisioned by Gerome Ragni and James Rado) did not include homosexuals. The 1979 film took one more step and used “Black Boys / White Boys” to mock same-sex desire.

It was off-Broadway that same-sex desire was presented as equally acceptable and natural as opposite-sex desire. Al Carmines wrote the first gay musical to be professionally produced when The Faggot (1973) moved from Judson Memorial Church to a 203 performances run at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre. A series of musical sketches introduce the audience to Oscar Wilde and Bosie, Catherine the Great, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and a flash-forward to 1993 when “gay liberation has become a reality.”

1974 was a banner year when three gay-themed musicals played in New York. The first production of OSOS (The Other Side of Silence Theatre Company) was Lovers (by Peter del Valle and Steve Sterner), a musical revue featuring an all-male cast of six who worked their way through songs about S&M, cruising the piers, and gay pride (“Somehow I’m Taller”). One of the few early gay musicals to achieve multiple productions, Lovers is subtitled, “The Musical Hit That Proves It’s No Longer Sad To Be Gay.” Another popular revue was Fred Silver’s In Gay Company, which played at the Little Hippodrome; even cranky John Simon (New York magazine) liked it, praising Silver’s skill at writing “frivolously prankish or smilingly nostalgic” for a cast of four

men and one woman. Earl Wilson, Jr.'s Let My People Come ("A Sexual Musical") started in 1974 at the Village Gate (where it ran a phenomenal 1167 performances) before moving to Broadway's Morosco Theatre in 1976 for 128 performances. While not a gay musical revue, Let My People Come did contain two or three songs that were specifically gay or lesbian lyrically (i.e., "I'm Gay"). A review of the time said: "it broke all barriers – simulated sex, orgies, lesbianism, homosexuality, simulated oral sex, bisexuality, all celebrated, all hilariously carefree."

These three musical revues were followed by one of the first gay book musicals, Boy Meets Boy (Solly and Ward, 1975) which reimagines the 1930s as a time when two men might have an Astaire & Rogers-style romance. Gulp! (1977) was a musical look at the trials and tribulations of a gay lifeguard, co-authored and produced by John Glines.

While these gay 1970s musicals were very important in their time as they literally embodied GLBT experiences, they have rarely (if ever) been revived and only Boy Meets Boy's libretto is readily available. (In 1996, AEI Records released "Family Jewels: Gems of the Rainbow Stage," featuring songs from many of these productions.)

After Let My People Come disappeared from Broadway in 1976 (it actually never officially opened), it was not until 1983 that uptown had its first musical which contained a homosexual couple. Portrayed by Brent Barrett and Jeff Keller, who sang "Why Can't the World Leave Us Alone," by Charles Strouse and Alan Jay Lerner, Dance a Little Closer only lasted one performance. Another musical which opened that same year proved to have a much longer shelf life. Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein's La Cage aux Folles not only ran for 1761 performances in its original incarnation (the 2004 revival ran for 229 performances), it won six Tony Awards (including Best Musical). Much like

Fiddler on the Roof (1964) which proudly presented Jewish characters (in a musical written by Jews), so too did La Cage celebrate a way of life long denigrated on the stage, written and directed by gay men.

Despite the popularity of La Cage, many gay historians instead look to William Finn's work as the true beginning of the Golden (or is it Lavender) Age for the queer musical. The trilogy – In Trousers (1979), March of the Falsettos (1981), Falsettoland (1990) – were combined into Falsettos in 1992; it won two Tony Awards. This chamber musical loving looks at the joys and sorrows love can bring to one's life, and that even the "Lesbians from next door" are personally impacted by the scourge of AIDS.

Not only did Falsettoland put gay men and lesbian women on the same musical stage (which still rarely happens), it is notable for just having lesbians in its cast of characters. In 1979, London's Gay Sweatshop Women's Company produced one of the first musicals about women who love women: I Like Me Like This (written by Sharon Nassamer and Angela Stewart Park). In Search of the Hammer (1983) and its sequel, The Return of the Hammer (1985) – both by Cappy Kotz and Phrin Prickett – were two lesbian musicals staged by Front Room Theatre, Seattle. Like the off-Broadway vs. Broadway contrast between 70s / 80s gay men musicals, these two off-Broadway women musicals were positive depictions of lesbian life, while the long-suffering female "companion" in Grand Hotel (1989) is a sad sack of unrequited love.

Perhaps surprisingly, Andrew Lloyd Webber (along with Don Black and Charles Hart) brought to Broadway a well-adjusted bi-sexual woman and her lesbian lover, Giulietta Trapani in Aspects of Love (1989). Other victim-no-more lesbian characters in musicals include Cowgirls (by Betsy Howe and Mary Murfitt; 1996), Rent (1996), The Color Purple (by Brenda

Russell, Allee Willis, Stephen Bray, and Marsha Norman; 2005), and Legally Blonde (by Laurence O’Keefe, Neil Benjamin, Heather Hach; 2007).

As far as I know, the first musical about a transsexual is The Knife (by Nick Bicat, David Hare, and Tim Rose Price). Despite the presence of Mandy Patinkin as the lead, Frank Rich of The New York Times found this 1987 Off-Broadway musical either “embraces clichés or strains credulity.” A far more successful (and humane) story of a male-to-female transgendered person is Splendor (by Peter Webb, Stephen Hoffman, and Mark Campell), 1995. But certainly the best known musical theatre drag queen (besides La Cage’s Za Za) is Angel in Jonathan Larson’s Rent (1996). (Before you break out the champagne, remember Angel dies at the end; Mimi lives.) But it was the genius of John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask who combined Plato’s Theory of Love with a botched sex-change operation in Hedwig and the Angry Inch (1998). Even though Hedwig has met a lot of people on her way to the bottom, she asks the crowd during this concert-within-a-show, “How did some slip of a girly boy from communist East Berlin become the internationally ignored song stylist barely standing before you?”

It is clear that I must find my other half. But is it a he or a she? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complimentary? Does my other half have what I don’t? Did he get the looks? The luck? The love? Were we really separated forcibly or did he just run off with the good stuff? Or did I? Will this person embarrass me? What about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again? Or can two people actually become one again?

Just as Hedwig is trying to find herself, so to have GLBT audiences looked to the stage for realistic (re)presentations of themselves. Clearly during the twentieth century (and now into the twenty-first), GLBT characters have become more nuanced, and the tired stereotypes of yore pop up less frequently. For example, no where does Mel Brooks’ dated aesthetic show

more than in his portrayal of gay men, lesbians, and crossdressers in The Producers (2001).

But given the clichés, stereotypes, and pathetic GLBT characters who graced the stage for the bulk of the twentieth century, why were gay men as a group attracted to the musical?

In films Good Morning, Vietnam (1987), In and Out (1997), and Love! Valour! Compassion! (1997), men who like musical theatre, Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, etc. are immediately “outed” as gay.

Student: What are Queens?

Adrian Cronauer: Tall, skinny men who like showtunes.

Peter: What was Barbra Streisand's eighth album?

Howard: Color Me Barbra.

Peter: Stud!

Howard: Everybody knows that!

Peter: Everybody where? The little gay bar on the prairie?

Buzz: Just once I'd like to see a West Side Story where everybody gets it; the Jets and the Sharks, and Officer Krupke; or a Sound of Music where the entire Von Trapp family dies in a horrible alpine avalanche; or A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum where nothing happens, and it's not funny.

Mark Steyn's Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then and Now (1997) has a chapter entitled “Fags,” in which he asserts that “The Broadway musical encompassed everything except the one subject its creators were specifically expert in” (201). He suggests that most musicals are not about “conventional heterosexual romance” because “there are hardly any good strong, straight male roles in musicals,” noting only The Music Man and The King and I fit this bill (200). I would suggest that Steyn take another look at Man of La Mancha, Kiss Me, Kate, Ragtime, Fiddler on the Roof, Pal Joey, Show Boat, Damn Yankees, etc. but maybe I'm missing something. Instead, Steyn contends that homosexual writers have created “some of the greatest mothers ever created in American drama. There's a cartoon quality about Broadway leading ladies which

makes them the nearest thing to a female drag queen” (200). Setting aside how offensive this comment is to Broadway’s leading ladies, it is also untrue. For every Mame, Dolly Levi, and Mama Rose, there is a J. Pierrepont Finch (How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying), Benjy Stone (My Favorite Year), Tony (West Side Story), Rusty (Starlight Express), etc.: a young, Caucasian, heterosexual, able-bodied male who wants something more out of life, and generally ends up with a girl as well.

So why are a large number of gay men attracted to musical theatre? In Larry Kramer’s The Destiny of Me (1992), he suggests that Alexander’s “difference” is connected to his love of musical theatre. Certainly the world of make-believe has an immediate appeal to the adolescent whose home life is mired in poverty and a brutish father. Like Alexander, I think a lot of gay men are attracted to musical theatre because they perceive it as a way for them to be part of the American Dream. In musicals, characters are so full of emotion that they have to sing and/or dance, as mere words cannot express their feelings. For gay men who grow up sensing that their feelings towards other men are closer to “the love that dare not speak its name” than to a Hallmark Greeting Card, musical theatre gives them a space to at least live vicariously, or give them hope for their own dreams. After all, Mame didn’t let financial ruin destroy her spirit, and if the “fish out of water” Fanny Brice can make it, then I can to! Or maybe the gay Man in the Chair, from Bob Martin, Don McKellar, Lisa Lambert, and Greg Morrison’s The Drowsy Chaperone (2006) has it right:

Oh I love it so much. I know it’s not a perfect show. The spit-take scene is lame, and the monkey motif is laboured. But it does what a musical is supposed to do. It takes you to another world, and it gives you a little tune to carry with you in your head for when you’re feeling blue, ya know?

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