

DEVELOPMENT OF A STYLE OF ACTING
IN AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

by 1264

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INTRODUCTION

The style of acting in musical comedy, like the art form itself, is not static. It remains basically the audience centered presentational style, but it is continually developing, as musical comedy changes with the audience, with the period, and with new concepts of what life is. The very nature of the piece to be acted influences the style of acting. Therefore, a study of the development of a style of acting necessitates a study of the development of American musical comedy itself. For acting style, defined as a distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation or execution, is "not an embellishment of a set of mannerisms to be superimposed on the performance . . . not a separate element, but part of the fabric of the play."¹

Much discussion centers on the correctness of using the title "musical comedy" to refer to the musical theatre in America. More and more musicals are being written with serious themes, thereby giving significance to the term "musical drama," but since many elements are shared by both light and serious musical plays, it is difficult to categorize each, and the broad term musical comedy will be used in this paper. When critics began to dissent on what musical theatre is, Oscar Hammerstein II concisely summed up the situation in Variety:

It is nonsense to say what a musical play should or should not be. It should be anything it wants to be, and if you don't like it you don't have to go to it. There is only one absolutely indispensable element that

¹Jerome Rockwood, The Craftsmen of Dionysus (Glenview, Illinois, 1966), p. 20.

a musical play must have. It must have music. And there is only one thing that it has to be--it has to be good.²

It is also correct to speak of most American musicals as comedies if comedy is considered as a view of life, rather than a series of laughable situations. Susanne Langer describes the essential feeling in comedy as "the pure sense of life,"³ and comedy as "an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life."⁴

This sense of life or of continuity permeates all musical comedies whether they are of serious theme or are mere entertainment. In West Side Story, the lovers, Tony and Maria, cannot, we know realize happiness but the hope for life, for continuance, is given by the quiet voice singing

There's a place for us,
A time and place for us.
Hold my hand and we're halfway there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you there
- Somehow,
Someday,
Somewhere!⁵

In Porgy and Bess, Porgy starts on his long journey to New York to find Bess singing, "Oh, Lord, I'm on my way." And, in Man of La Mancha, even as Cervantes is led away to his probable

²Stanley Green, The World of Musical Comedy (New York, 1962), pp. 6-7.

³Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 327.

⁴Ibid., p. 331.

⁵Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, West Side Story, copyright 1957, 1959, by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. International copyright secured. G. Schirmer, Inc., and Chappell & Co., Inc., New York, publishers, pp. 199-200. Reproduced by permission.

death, the audience feels that Don Quixote's "Impossible Dream" will come true. So it is in all musicals. In fact, the musicals with serious themes presented with the "zest for life" are more lifelike (and this does not mean more realistic) and thus are truer art forms.

But whether of serious or light theme, they all qualify for the title of American

. . . musical comedy, on the grounds of one great unifying factor: they all belong to an art that arises out of American roots, out of our speech, our tempos, our moral attitudes, our way of moving. Out of all this, a new form has been born.⁶

Leonard Bernstein places this new form somewhere in the "middle of a vast Continuum" with the pure diversion of variety at one end and the enriching, ennobling opera at the other.⁷ He feels that American musical comedy has been steadily moving towards a historical position where its form will be perfected and a new kind of opera will be developed.⁸ Other men prominent in the musical comedy world, Kurt Weill and Lehman Engel among them, feel that a mature art form does exist in the present musical comedy form.

How could musical comedy evolve into anything but a new form with the unique kind of vital approach provided by American composers, choreographers, and librettists to the integration of a musical theatre that springs from such a varied background as the operetta melodies of Strauss, Offenbach, and Lehar, the banjos of Dan Emmett's

⁶Leonard Bernstein, The Joy of Music (New York, 1959), p. 178.

⁷Ibid., pp. 152-153.

⁸Ibid., p. 179.

minstrel shows, the folky humor of vaudevillian comics Harrigan and Hart, and the parades of Ziegfeld's beautiful girls?

The word "integration" is the key to the whole growth of both the art form of musical comedy and the acting style. The elements of song, dance, dialogue and music were present in its forerunners, but they were frequently insertions or disruptions of the plot rather than part of it. Today the dialogue, song, pantomime-dance and even to some degree the sets are inseparable components of the big and larger than life spectacle of musical comedy. They complement each other and "are fused to make the total effort a valid artistic representation."⁹ The performer can no longer present his speciality during an evening of hodge-podge diversion. Now each actor has to be a singing-dancing character.

Music is no longer merely a background for the character; it is part of the character. It is as impossible to separate the character of Billy Bigelow from his "Soliloquy" as it is to separate the character of Julie Jordan from "What's the Use of Wonderin'." In good musicals from the overture to the finale, the music gives depth to the character and helps point up the situations.

But no matter how far the American musical develops, no matter how artistically integrated the components become, "we will always have with us the line of gorgeous girls, the star comic, and the razzle-dazzle band in the pit."¹⁰ For these things entertain in

⁹Howman Levy, Rodgers and Hammerstein Song Book (New York, 1958), p. 7.

¹⁰Bernstein, The Joy of Music, p. 179.

a way in which most people want to be entertained. Musical comedy capitalizes upon people's likes and desires and thus its growth is assured.

Musical comedy satisfies perhaps better than any other type of theatre a desire that has been a part of man since ancient times, the desire to be entertained. It operates in an unreal world based upon the real world. It thrives upon fantasy but it is never far removed from reality. It gives lighthearted relief from the problems that beset everyone. In these respects it is closely linked with children's theatre. It might even be called the theatre for mature children where each person ". . . regardless of age or personal philosophy can visualize, if only for a few fleeting moments, the world as he would like it to be."¹¹ He may not believe in fairy tales, but ". . . in the midst of such wonderful, transporting music how can he be sure that they are not real after all?"¹²

Fantasy is the medium of musical theatre. "Tip" Harburg of Finian's Rainbow fame says that his purpose in writing is neither escapist entertainment nor realism. "I'm attracted to fantasy . . . to things with a poetic quality. Through fantasy, I feel that a musical can say things with greater effectiveness about life."¹³ Brooks Atkinson states, "the musical stage is pure theatre . . . it has the spontaneity of poetry."¹⁴ Yet, a musical need not "say

¹¹Copyright 1954, Radio Corporation of America. LM 1837 jacket The Student Prince.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Green, p. 215.

¹⁴Lehman Engel, The American Musical Theater (Copyright CBS Records, 1967), p. vi.

things about life"--though the best ones do. Just its expression of a delight and joy in life is reason enough for its being.

Another desire that musical comedy satisfies is that for the familiar. Musicals deal with things familiar to the American way of life. Its language is the everyday speech of the people and its music is the musical vernacular--jazz. Its plots are familiar. Shaw's Pygmalion provided Lerner and Loewe with a rags to riches Cinderella theme for My Fair Lady. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet inspired Jerome Robbin's concept for West Side Story, and the Heyward's Porgy is the basis of Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. In fact, almost every good musical is based upon a book or play that has already achieved success.

The characters in musicals are usually familiar. The audience can readily identify and easily understand them. Even the villains are acted in a likeable manner. The hardest of characters is given a touch of softness by means of comic dialogue or song. A notable example is Jigger in Carousel. He talks Billy into a robbery that leads to Billy's death, cheats him, and deserts him. But, the audience cannot help loving the villain who can so delightfully get the naive Carrie into a passionate embrace by convincing her that he is teaching her self-defense against unprincipled mashers.

Though an audience wants the familiar, they also crave variety, and variety is the very essence of musical comedy. The music and dances are lively, the songs rhythmical and singable, the costumes vivid and colorful, and the scenery is varied and quickly changed. The plot provides continuity of action but because of its very comic nature it is episodic and thus provides variety in unity.

Everyone loves a beautiful girl, and musical comedy provides feminine beauties among the chorus, dancers, and leading ladies. Even the musicals that make a serious comment about life such as The Three Penny Opera or Man of La Mancha do it in such a way that they are still appealing to the audience and satisfy human desires. And all of these--lovely girls, songs, dances--are presented in a style which the audience enjoys: the presentational style. This acting style has been a part of musical comedy from its early beginnings with the jokes, asides, and songs that let the audience know the mind of the character. As in no other musical form, the audience feels that it is in on the action, helping to create the good situation, planning the jokes. Playing to the audience while giving the illusion of playing to the other characters is part of the art and is the essence of the style of acting in musical comedy.

The American Musical Comedy has grown from an unintegrated series of entertainment acts into a mature art form in which the songs, dances, and action complement one another within a unified production. As the musical became more integrated and perfected, the actors who portrayed the musicals changed from speciality artists into versatile performers who conveyed the truth of their characters within the framework of the play. Throughout its process of development, the American musical comedy has retained a basic view of life in which love and mankind overcome all obstacles.

SECTION I

ORIGINS OF AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

Lohman Engel, one of America's best known conductors, says that from a general point of view the origins of the American musical theatre can be traced to the seventeenth-century ballad opera's simple closed form, the street and folk songs of Europe, and the early American musical circuses, puppet shows, and plays with songs. He adds that, specifically, the main influence which fed musical comedy as we know it today was the tradition of European operetta.¹⁵

Although the origins of American Musical Comedy were imported, it would be incorrect to say that these were "cultural transplants." "It would be more accurate to say that the products, the techniques, and the carriers of . . . musical culture were transported to America."¹⁶ These cultures influenced by a new environment were assimilated and grew into new musical concepts. This growth has paralleled the development of America as a national entity.¹⁷

By the nineteenth century American theatrical productions fell roughly into four categories: pantomimes, extravaganzas, variety shows or vaudeville, and minstrel shows. Each of these contributed elements to the later amalgam that would come to be called the revue.¹⁸

¹⁵Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁶Gilbert Chase, America's Music (New York, 1966), p. 3-5.

¹⁷Marion Bauer and Ethel R. Foyner, Music Through The Ages, edited and revised by Elizabeth G. Rogers (New York, 1937), p. 62.

¹⁸Engel, p. 3.

Pantomimes, the language of gesture, came to America from the commedia dell'arte of France. The form itself dates back to the one man shows of early Rome. The plots of the pantomimes were ordinarily drawn from such familiar sources as fairy tales and nursery rhymes. These plots were never adhered to but served primarily as vehicles for the exploitation of any special talents the players might have: singing, dancing, character impersonation, or comedy.

The basic procedure of every pantomime was essentially the same. The main actors were introduced and then transformed, often magically, into stock commedia characters complete with costumes and masks. If the plot required additional actors, they wore realistic costumes and did not use the stylized manners of the pantomimists. The meaning of the dumb show was made clear through the simple and familiar language of gesture. The regular actors could speak and even the pantomime characters frequently regained their voices in order to sing.¹⁹

In nineteenth century America these pantomimes were used as "curtain raisers." To compete with the growing popularity of extravaganzas, pantomimes were made longer and more elaborate, often using trick scenic effects and new types of stage machinery.²⁰

The acting style which pantomimes helped shape is one with enlarged gestures. This style eliminates the need for lengthy dialogue and allows the plot to be expressed visually. Entire scenes are sometimes pantomimed in contemporary musicals. The actor can

¹⁹Cecil Smith, Musical Comedy in America (New York, 1950), p. 302.

²⁰Engel, p. 3.

show nuances of character that even dialogue cannot reveal. The principal characters of Carousel are introduced in dumb show to the accompaniment of waltzes. Through music and gesture alone the characters of Julie and Billy, Mrs. Mullin, the owner of the carousel, Carrie, Julie's best friend, and Mr. Bascombe, the owner of the cotton mill, are shown. The pantomime also allows the actors to portray the conflicts between Julie and Mrs. Mullin over Billy, and to reveal Billy's love for both his carousel and for Julie.

Extravaganzas, like pantomimes, were imported from France. There the term applied to erotic balléts of fairy land known as "feeries." In the United States, the term was first used in 1857 to describe the bill presented by the Ronzani troupe, a ballet company of French and Italian performers. Their show was called, Novelty, With the Laying of the Atlantic Cable. The Ronzanis went home to Europe but "extravaganza" stayed.²¹ It came to consist of dance routines performed by lavishly costumed beauties before unusual sets. During the 1860's, impresarios tried to outdo each other in the presentation of colossal extravaganzas.

One such work often considered to be the first American musical comedy was The Black Crook. Presented in Noble's Garden, New York City, in 1866, it combined German melodrama, French ballet, and American comedy songs. This musical hybrid lasted a year-and-a-half on Broadway and ran for twenty-five more years on the road.

One of the reasons for the great popularity of this work was the belief of early theatre goers that because The Black Crook

²¹Smith, pp. 8-9.

came from Europe it was culture. In fact, only in America could such an outlandish work have been performed and have been successful. Perhaps the main reason for the extravaganza's success was its generous display of the feminine form. One of the best publicity men a play has ever had was a clergyman, who suspecting that the musical constituted a threat to his congregation, went to see it himself, and reported in the following fashion:

. . . the immodest dress of the girls . . . the flesh-colored tights, imitating nature so well that the illusion is complete; with exceedingly short drawers, almost tight-fitting, extending very very little below the hips, arms and neck apparently bare The attitudes were exceedingly indelicate--ladies dancing so as to make their undergarments spring up, exposing the figure from the waist to the toe, except for such coverings as we have described.²²

Regardless of its morality or artistry, The Black Crook is important because it incorporated the basic element of plot into its structure, thereby paving the way for a more integrated form of musical. And, it made chorus girls a salient, attractive, and an indispensable feature of musicals.²³

The extravaganza contributed the elaborateness of sets and costumes which have helped to give American musical comedy a sense of grandeur and largeness. My Fair Lady and Carmelot are examples.

Another form of musical entertainment popular in nineteenth century America was the variety show or vaudevilles. Brought to America from England, this type of show had its beginnings in France during the fifteenth century. According to one derivation the name

²²Ibid., pp. 15-16.

²³David Evan, The Story of America's Musical Theater (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 5.

is a corruption of Vaux-de-Vire, satirical songs sung to popular airs in the Val(Vau)-de-Vire, Normandy. This is consistent with the characteristics which remained in French vaudeville: the songs were in couplets, they were political and satirical, and they were sung to popular tunes.²⁴

In America, the terms vaudeville and variety show were first used to advertise offerings of diversified specialities by singers, storytellers, acrobats, trained animals, and freaks. The Franklin Theatre, New York, in 1842, claimed to be the first variety theatre. But, by 1850, dozens of "concert saloons" began to promote song and dance acts catered to by tastes of masculine customers. The best advertised part of these acts was the "waiter girls."

Due to police annoyance, most of these shows were forced to close. Tony Pastor began a campaign to clean up the variety show and to present programs of quality and wholesomeness. He established a theatre dedicated to the straight, clean, variety show. Women and children began to accompany the men to the theatre and business flourished.

By the turn of the present century, variety shows had divided themselves into two related but quite distinct genres, vaudeville and burlesque: the one growing primarily out of variety acts, and the other, out of the blandishments of the 'waiter-girls.'²⁵

Often classified as burlesque, Evangeline, presented in 1874, passed on two significant developments. One was the term "musical comedy," used for the first time by American author-composer, E. E.

²⁴"Vaudeville," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1966, XXIII, 12.

²⁵Engel, p. 4.

Rice, in his publicity. The other was that this was the first time when "an entire musical score was created directly for a specific production."²⁶

The variety show developed talents such as W. C. Fields, juggler and comic; Tom Heath, performer of the famous "Ham Tree"; and legitimate theatre stars such as Miss Lillian Russell, the undisputed queen of beauty, and Nat C. Goodwin.

Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart, the creators of a unique form of comic-farce, began their theatrical careers as variety artists. Between 1870-1879 Harrigan wrote over eighty vaudeville sketches which presented familiar American types: Irish, Negroes, Germans, Italians. It was from these vaudeville acts that the full-length plays of Harrigan emerged.

In their first form the sketches were popular songs ridiculing some well-known personage or type. The song led to the duet and the duet to the dialogue. Under the inspiration of audience response the dialogue was elaborated and lengthened. New incidents were improvised from performance to performance, and eventually enough material was created for a full length play.²⁷

Out of the skits on Irish and German immigrants grew the famous Mulligan Guard series. In these plays the actors used a delightful mixture of wild burlesque, songs, military drills, puns, and knock-down farce. The Mulligans represented one of the first attempts of American musical theatre to identify with everyday life and speech (however it was satirized).

²⁶Ewen, p. 6.

²⁷Garff B. Wilson, A History of American Acting (Bloomington, Indiana, 1966), p. 178.

It was the motion picture that around the nineteen-twenties started vaudeville on its way out. Musical comedy has perfected and incorporated many of its elements, however. Still alive are the song and dance man, the solo singer, the character specialist, the dramatic and comedy sketches, the headliners (or show-stoppers, as they are now called), and the acrobatic numbers which are now performed by the dancers. All of these have been blended, at least in the better musicals into a unified whole.

Musical comedy actors have also retained vaudeville's camaraderie with the audience, its effortless speech, and a modified form of its presentational style. No longer does the actor argue with the conductor or swap stories with the audience. Today the acting style is still audience centered but gives the illusion of being directed to the other characters.

In the second act of Fiddler On The Roof, Teyve and Golde sing the heartwarming, "Do You Love Me." The actors seem to sing to each other but they are really playing to each other through the audience. This illusion is accomplished by having them sit on a bench side by side facing the audience. In Carousel the same type of park bench blocking is used to enhance the audience sharing atmosphere when Julie and Billy discover love in the "If I Loved You" duet. The composition of the lyrics, although the song is a duet at no time do the actors sing simultaneously, enables the audience, in a sense, to become each of the characters and to share in the emotion of the scene.

Musical comedy also retains from vaudeville the art of developing character within the relatively short duration of a single

song. The vaudevillian actor was rarely allowed more than ten minutes to display his talents. He "therefore had to acquire precision and polish and to develop a sense of timing so as to establish himself quickly and move on to a climax or 'wow finish', knowing that he did not have a second chance."²⁸

This rapid build is possible in musical comedy because the music appeals directly to the heart without having to go through the intellect as dialogue does. Because words take longer to sing than to say, the words of the songs are condensed, as in poetry, and thus the best words are used in the best way.

Of all the entertainments which were amalgamated by the revue, the one form that was most directly related to American life was the minstrel show. Its format was based on what was popularly imagined to represent southern Negro folklore. There are several versions of the birth of the minstrel show. Langston Hughes records his version this way in Black Magic:

Wheel about and turn about
An' do just so---
An' ebery time I wheel about
I jump Jim Crow . . .

A little black slave boy singing this refrain . . . on a street corner caught the attention of an itinerant actor-singer named 'Daddy' Rice. Rice was a New Yorker born in 1808 who wandered into the South . . . where he observed the jiggling lad. Anyhow, he picked up from the little black boy both his song and his dance, and with it Rice became famous.²⁹

Another entertainer performing in burnt cork, Daniel Emmett, borrowed the song from Rice and carried it throughout the country.

²⁸"Vaudeville," p. 12.

²⁹Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, Black Magic (New Jersey, 1967), p. 16.

"Jump Jim Crow" thus became the cornerstone of what was to be for eighty years America's most popular form of entertainment, the black face minstrels.³⁰

In 1843, Emmett established one of the first full-time minstrel groups, The Virginia Minstrels. It was twenty-five years before a Negro aggregation came into being. This was Lew Johnson's Plantation Minstrel Company. They too blackened their faces and circled their lips with red or white. The Christy Minstrels, formed in Buffalo, New York, established the format for all minstrel shows.

This format consisted of three parts. Part one was a singing parade of blackfaced men who seated themselves in a semi-circle on command. Following this the interlocutor, a full-dressed white face, joked with the endman. Carl Wittke, historian of the black-face art, writes:

A good minstrel was always improvising The endman's chatter with the interlocutor usually varied to a greater or less degree from night to night, and many stories and jokes about the local community were introduced with real skill. Some companies actually sent advance agents ahead to pick up bits of local news to be used . . . for the peculiar delight of their special audience.³²

The jokes were interspersed with songs, dances and instrumental numbers. The indigenous character of early minstrel acts revealed itself mainly in the type of acting as well as in both the style and content of the texts. The songs themselves were usually variants of English folk tunes, and in the tradition of the English

³⁰Ibid., p. 18.

³¹Wilson, p. 181.

³²Ibid.

stage, were interrupted by dialogue, usually before the refrain. A scene between Emmett and Bower performed about 1846 illustrates this.

Emmett sings

Pray turkey buzzard lend to me your wing
Till I fly over de river to see Miss Sally King.
When I got over de river, Miss Sally she was gone.
If I had known she'd sarved me so, I stop wid Lucy Long.

Dialogue.⁷

Frank: She had a ticklar gagement to go to camp
/me/ tin wid dis child.

Dan: hah! You went down to de fish market to daunce
arter eels. mity cureous kind of camp meetin
dat!

Frank: It wasnt eels, it was a big cat fish.

Dan: What chune did you danee?

Chorus: /both singing/.

Take your time Miss Lucy
Take your time Miss Lucy Long . . .³³

The minstrel dances, unlike the improvised dances of the slaves, were consciously worked out to insure variety and showmanship. Arms, legs, head and sometimes props like a hat were integrated into the stance of the performer.³⁴

Part two of the minstrel format entertained with a variety of acts by individual members of the company and usually ended with a "hoe-down" or "walk-around" in which every member of the company did a speciality number while the others sang and clapped.

Part three, often omitted, was a parody on a play, opera or sentimental operetta based on southern Negro life on the plantation. These became the prototypes for the travesties presented by Harrigan and Hart and Weber and Fields.

³³Nathan, Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy (Norman, Oklahoma, 1962), pp. 130-131, 159.

³⁴Nathan, pp. 71-76.

The main contributions of the minstrel show to American musical comedy were a spirit and feeling for life, a reinforcement of the audience centered style of acting, jokes and dialogue which began to merge, however perfunctorily, with the songs and dances, the appearance of a chorus, and the introduction of popular music.

By 1880, the minstrel show was virtually defunct. By the turn of the century there was a wide range of musical productions in America. All of them featured girls, music, comedy, and dancing. All of them descended from pantomime, extravaganza, vaudeville or variety, and the minstrel show. These entertainments were all searching for a unified form. The revue which was an amalgamation of the earlier musical entertainments and the traditions of European operetta would help develop this unified form of musical.

As early as 1894 entertainments which could be classified as revues appeared but it was during the period between 1905-1930 with its glorious, elaborate, girl-bedecked productions of Dillingham, The Shuberts, and Ziegfeld that the revue flourished.

Revue remained without a plot or story but it did introduce a unifying thread, usually a theme of some kind to hold its acts together. It also introduced the element of topical satire in some of its sketches. These included sly references to current scandals, parodies of new fads, local jokes, and take-offs on successful plays and operas.

The very looseness of the structure of the revue was important in the development of musical comedy's style for it allowed for experimentation not hampered by pre-set traditions. Hundreds of actors developed their talents through the revue. These included

Helen Morgan, Gypsy Rose Lee, Bert Williams (Ziegfeld's popular Negro star), Ethel Merman, Rudy Vallee, Milton Berle, ad infinitum. Among other notables who began working with the revue were dancers Martha Graham and Agnes De Mille, designer Joseph Urban, and John Philip Sousa and his band.

Revue fostered such young native-born composers as Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and George Gershwin. In fact, most of the contemporary composer-lyricists came to Broadway via the revue. (Notable exceptions being Rudolph Frimel whose first work was an operetta, The Firefly, 1912, and Leonard Bernstein with his 1944 On The Town.)³⁵

Florenz Ziegfeld's Follies created a distinctively American form of revue. One of the basic features was suggested by Miss Anna Held, who advised Ziegfeld to "display young and beautiful girls in lavish costumes."³⁶ Even in his first experimental production in 1907, however, Ziegfeld tried to add the elements of comedy, dance, and spectacle and to comment on the year's events. By the 1920's, "intimate" revues were placing less emphasis on girls and more on comic wit and satire.

Ziegfeld also produced Jerome Kern's Showboat in 1927. This show did not have the usual line of chorus girls, it had a serious tone, it dealt with racial prejudice, and it was successful. Musical comedy as it exists today was beginning.

³⁵Engel, pp. 65-67.

³⁶Lloyd Morris, Curtain Time (New York, 1953), p. 313.

Revue's most important contribution to American musical comedy was that of the musical vernacular commonly called jazz. George Gershwin said of this spontaneous musical expression:

Jazz is the result of the energy stored up in America. It is a very energetic kind of music, noisy, boisterous and even vulgar. One thing is certain. Jazz has contributed an enduring value to America in the sense that it has expressed ourselves. It is an original American achievement which will endure, not as jazz perhaps, but which will leave its mark on future music in one form or another.³⁷

Ragtime songs were introduced by Irving Berlin in the 1914 revue, Watch Your Step, with "Simple Melody" and "The Syncopated Walk." Negro revues Shuffle Along in 1921 and Low Leslie's Blackbirds in 1926 which featured Dorothy Field's and Jimmy McHugh's, "I Can't Give You Anything but Love" and "Diga-Diga-Doo" influenced the new type of music.

The primitive syncopations of the typical Broadway chorus lines were also influenced by the Harlem Dancers in Shuffle Along. "Some of the vitality of the Negro dancing was gradually imitated by the musical theatre as a whole and by the end of the 1920's the mechanical Tiller Girls . . . had been pushed out by dancers with flash and verve."³⁸

While revue was giving the American musical theatre jazz and conversational speech, American themes, and a sense of variety in unity, operetta was helping to elevate the standards in music and lyrics.³⁹

³⁷Bauer and Foyser, p. 627.

³⁸Cecil Smith, "A Quarter Century of Musical Comedy Choreography," 25 Years of American Dance, editor Doris Hering, publisher, Rudolf Orthwine, 1947, p. 58.

³⁹Bernstein, Joy of Music, pp. 168-169.

For several years Americans had been exposed to European operettas. Records show that between 1855 and 1900 New York theatres offered seventy-two musicals and eighty-three operettas---most of which were European.⁴⁰ These operettas helped prepare Broadway audiences, which had not been exposed to grand opera, for a more excellent form of music and comic entertainment.⁴¹

According to Leonard Bernstein in a telecast on American Musical Comedy in October of 1956, operetta, comic opera, and opera bouffe are all "national versions of the same thing: Offenbach with his French opera bouffe, Gilbert and Sullivan with their British comic opera, and Strauss with his Viennese operetta. They all boasted interesting books, stylish music and literate lyrics."⁴² David Ewen, musical critic and writer, differentiates in this way; "The comic opera and opera bouffe accented the absurd and non-sensical, wit and satire, the operetta stressed sweetness and sentimentality, glamour and romance."⁴³

Opera bouffe is a descendant of opera comique which had its origins in the side shows of the great Parisian fairs. These shows fell into two categories: vaudeville, often bawdy, and the equally trivial but more decorous comedie a ariettes. The fair ground proprietors seemed doomed to business failure when a 1752 presentation of Pergolisi's La Serva Padrona started a Parisian vogue

⁴⁰Engel, p. 28.

⁴¹Bernstein, Joy of Music, p. 167.

⁴²Ibid., p. 166.

⁴³Ewen, p. 10.

for Italian opera bouffe.⁴⁴ These opera bouffas (or intermezzi) were described by Wright in his Travels in Italy, 1730, as "very comical in their way, which is somewhat low They laugh, scold, imitate other sounds, as the cracking of a whip . . . and all to music."⁴⁵ The opera bouffe did have a certain artistic unity and style, however.

Jean Monnet and Charles Favart realized that France must develop a native musical form with a style which would rival any Italian production. Favart finally developed the reputable genre known as opera-comique. His typical format featured a swift exposition followed by a closely knit intrigue in which the main actors portrayed simple-minded country lovers. Their love was a pretext for gallant dissertations and was frequently interrupted by sung couplets at moments of emotional expansion.⁴⁶

Prior to the French Revolution, a strong vein of political and social criticism crept into the librettos but by the 1800's a wave of romanticism had brought opera-comique quite close to opera. Adolphe Adam (1803-1856) was the French composer responsible for the evolution of opera bouffe. A few of his opera comiques hovered on the verge of opera but many others introduced enough frivolity

⁴⁴Gervase Hughes, Composers of Operetta (New York, 1962), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 163-164.

⁴⁶Martin Cooper, "Before Broadway: Musical Comedy Has An Ancestor In Opera Comique," Opera News, XXX (April 9, 1966), 8-12.

to classify them as opera bouffe. His music was described by Berlioz as "stylish, fluent, undistinguished, full of catchy little tunes which one can whistle on the way home."⁴⁷

The master and promulgator of opera bouffe was Jacques Offenbach. He established several precedents among them a burlesque of Italian opera, the sentimental ballad, and a military ensemble with a "ra-ta-plan" refrain. (Sullivan imitated this in his early musical, Box and Cox with a song which begins, "Ra-Ta-Plan, Ra-Ta-Plan, I'm a military man.")⁴⁸

As the established Theatre de l'Opera-Comique refused to recognize him as a composer, Offenbach in 1855 opened his own Theatre des Bouffes Parisiens. This theatre had a reputation as being a place where stall holders might enjoy the show and later a rendezvous with one of the actresses. When Hortense Schneider, the actress-singer-star of La Grand Duchess de Gerolstein flashed her eyes on stage, off stage "Ambassadors cropped up like hay,/ Prime Ministers and such as they,/ Grew like asparagus in May."⁴⁹ La Grand Duchess de Gerolstein made opera bouffe the vogue in New York after its 1867 premiere there.

Offenbach never began work until the libretto was completed to his satisfaction. This insured that, though occasionally vulgar or shallow, they were always well put together and the opera bouffe themselves had dramatic unity. Offenbach's melodies were usually uninhibited and sprightly and melodious.

⁴⁷Gervase Hughes, p. 15.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 20-21, 188-189.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 31-32.

Offenbach's influence spread to England where in the 1870's Gilbert and Sullivan created a crisp, satirical English comic opera. Gilbert's comedy displayed a sparkling wit that could satirize the principles of Victorian melodrama as well as parody it. His humor stuck to logic in the face of plain fact. His word play was inventive and subtle. Gilbert often used the chorus as a composite character rather than musical filler.

Gilbert's style had been greatly influenced by his years of writing for Mr. and Mrs. German Reed's at the Gallery of Illustrations. One of their lesser contributions was lending him an air of respectability which carried over into the Gilbert-Sullivan comic operas at the Savoy.⁵⁰ To a certain degree this Reed respectability has influenced American musical comedy heroines. Eliza in My Fair Lady and Julie in Carousel are more Priscilla Reed than Hortense Schneider. Though characters like Lois in Kiss Me Kate seem to be a bit in the style of the latter.

Sullivan was the perfect complement to Gilbert for he was always willing to maintain the integrity of the libretto. In their comic operas, musical numbers are an integral part of swift farce rather than an interruptive embellishment. An authentic version of Pinafore, H.M.S. opened in Boston in 1879 and America was captured.

An earlier English work, The Beggar's Opera, 1728, can, in many respects, be called the first musical comedy. This ballad opera was a play interspersed with no fewer than sixty-nine songs,

⁵⁰Jane W. Stedman, editor, Gilbert Before Sullivan (Chicago, 1967), pp. 42-51.

dances, and choruses. Many of the songs were in the popular English idiom, it was a parody on grand opera, and the music was adapted from well-known songs written by many composers (including Handel). The use of many composers resembles a similar practice in the American revue.⁵¹

From about 1870 a sentimental melodious style of operetta was developing in Vienna. "Fair maidens were tenderly wooed by dashing gentlemen who battled that cruel fate which kept them apart but which was one day to be overcome in a last-act duet."⁵² Johann Strauss the younger was one of the chief composers of this period. His Die Fledermaus was Viennese operetta at its peak.

Oscar Strauss and Franz Lehar wrote Viennese Operetta but in a form closer to musical comedy. Oscar Strauss' The Chocolate Soldier, 1908, based upon Shaw's Arms and The Man and Franz Lehar's The Merry Widow, 1905, were both great successes in the United States. Strauss' work brought a continuity to the operetta form.

Lehar took operetta seriously and did not believe that it should be debased by the incorporation of parody or burlesque. His librettists were careful to include popular ingredients. Lehar's settings were fantastically romantic, his characters over-glamorized, and the situations often far-fetched, but a plausible basis of reality always existed. Comic relief was integrated in Franz Lehar's works.⁵³

⁵¹Engel, pp. 66, 138.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Gervase Hughes, pp. 139-143.

One of the operetta traditions that has been adopted by musical comedy and which has affected the acting style is the use of a subplot. Because one of the prerequisites of musical theatre is that the story be told quickly it inherently precludes the depth of intellectual exploration that can sustain a single conflict for the duration of an ordinary drama. Its plot needs to be "filled out" with songs and dances. This still does not create a satisfying show, so a subplot is almost a necessity. "The need for a subplot was established in operetta at its high point. Almost invariably, there were subplots in the works of the Viennese composers, in Gilbert and Sullivan, and in Offenbach. This subplot idea did not descend from grand opera--the source of almost all the rest of operetta traditions."⁵⁴

The operetta tradition seemed to dictate that the leading couple be romantic and the secondary pair comedic. Die Flodermäus is an exception for its complexities preclude the use of a subplot. Another notable exception is The Merry Widow, where the principals, Sonia and Prince Danilo, are coquettish while the subplot characters, Natalie and Comille, are romantic.⁵⁵ In early American musicals the formula was never varied but contemporary musicals often have subplot characters with serious characteristics, for example, Lt. Cable and Liat in South Pacific and Perchik and Nodel in Fiddler On The Roof.

⁵⁴Tingel, p. 85.

⁵⁵Ibid.

Operetta also showed that music and the libretto could be integrated, that continuity is important, and that high standards could be combined with frivolity. These lessons would be used by Friml, Romberg, and Hubert in their creation of an American operetta. They would also influence the composers who were working with the revue. And when operetta traditions and revue's contributions of jazz, variety within unity, conversational speech, and American themes were combined, the musical form--American musical comedy--would really begin to mature.

SECTION II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

In the early twentieth century American musical comedy began to acquire the form that distinguished it from its predecessors. According to David Ewen, the red-letter day for the American musical theatre was November 20, 1894, for on that date Prince Ananias was produced and America's first significant composer--Victor Herbert--was introduced. Herbert was the summation of what had been happening on our stages, in operetta, for several years, but he brought a freshness, a spontaneity that had not existed before. His aim was to write beautiful melodies and he achieved it magnificently. In doing so, he raised the standards of orchestration and theatre music. However, his songs often had little connection with the characters who sang them or with the action surrounding them.⁵⁶

Perhaps this was because, as many early composers did, Herbert built his score and characterization around a pre-chosen star, whereas today the show is written and then the star found who will best fit the character.

Herbert's heirs were Rudolf Friml and Sigmund Romberg. Friml is best remembered for his lovely music in Rose-Marie (1924), The Vagabond King (1925), and The Three Musketeers (1926). These three operettas, interestingly enough, adhere quite faithfully to the customs and traditions of Lehar's The Merry Widow. Romberg's beautiful music made The Student Prince (1924) and The Desert Song (1926) great favorites.

⁵⁶Ewen, pp. 12, 151-152.

In Rose-Marie a precedent was set for today's musical comedy structure. The actor in the traditional operetta had a difficult problem to deal with for there were usually four or five acts often followed by twenty-minute intermissions to allow for cumbersome scenery changes. Sometimes a show would run from seven until midnight although the time the actors were on stage was about three hours. This created an enormous strain for the actor and for the librettist. To persuade an audience to return twelve times was a real feat.⁵⁷

Most of the musicals in the first part of this century were in three acts but in the 1924 version of Rose-Marie there are only two. The finale of Act I has the heroine reprising "Indian Love Call" to her beloved Jim, who is falsely accused of murder, as a signal that she will not leave with him. She hopes that he will escape while she plans to marry a man she does not love to insure it. Naturally the audience gallops back almost as fast as the Canadian Mounted Police to see Jim cleared and the lovers united. Since the 1930's almost every musical has had two acts. Thus there is only one major break (although there are many scene changes) from which the librettist and the actors must entice the audience's return.

Herbert, Friml, and Romberg represented one end of the pole of American Musical Theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the other end was the flag-waving tornado, George M. Cohan. He knew nothing about the conventions of European musicals. His background was vaudeville where the time given any sketch was

⁵⁷Engel, p. 97.

brief. The youngest of a well known vaudeville act, The Four Cohans, he soon became a master of the direct attack, the swift pace, and the hard punch. An article in Theater Magazine described him this way:

Cohan represents the restless American spirit, the cheeky go-aheadness of the hustling Yankee. All the time he is on the stage he is in motion. His hat worn jauntly on one side of his head, his face screwed up into a perpetual grin, his legs never still for a moment, coming on with the skit that soon develops into a hilarious dance, singing his own songs with a nasal drawl and forever waving a flag.⁵⁸

Will Rogers once commented that "Cohan wore out more flags than a war."⁵⁹ The Congressional Medal of Honor was bestowed upon Cohan for writing "Over There" and "A Grand Old Flag."

Cohan combined a hard boiled skepticism about human nature with an unabashed sentimentality about the things in which America believed: patriotism, family, love. He became a new vigorous independent force working with the materials of American life and giving them an unmistakable native expression.⁶⁰ Cohan knew his theatre and his audience and was a superb showman. His vitality and contagious excitement expressed the zest so necessary to musical comedy.

Cohan and Herbert shaped musical comedy style but in vastly different ways. Cohan tried to break from anything that suggested the old world; Herbert sought to perpetuate the traditions of the operetta. Cohan stressed speed and Americanism; Herbert placed

⁵⁸William Cahn, The Laugh Makers (New York, 1957), p. 20.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 21.

⁶⁰Morris, p. 310.

emphasis upon music. The influence of both can be seen in today's musicals. My Fair Lady, for all its integration, is a descendant of Herbert's operettas. And Robert Preston's portrayal of Professor Harold Hill in Meredith Wilson's The Music Man has the speed and sentimentality of a George M. Cohan act. The swift paced action even takes place on Cohan's beloved Fourth of July.

As the song and dance form of entertainment gradually developed into a musical form with plot and characterization, the key concepts that evolved were integration and variety in unity. It is difficult to say exactly when or with what work the process of integration began.

Cecil Smith in his book, Musical Comedy in America, calls The Brook, book and lyrics written in 1877 by Nate Salsbury, the germinal cell out of which integrated musical comedy ultimately grew.⁶¹ This farce tried to present some unity among plot, dialogue, and characters. The humor was obvious and the plot trivial. As Salsbury himself explained, "The main object which we strive to attain is the natural reproduction of the jollity and funny mishaps that attend the usual picnic excursion."⁶² Yet this was a milestone for it was an attempt to write a book for a musical that was both natural and American.

In The Brook, actors were not required to portray stilted or elegant characters. Instead they shared with the audience the familiar pleasures of a social gathering. Almost every musical

⁶¹Smith, Musical Comedy, pp. 56-57.

⁶²Ibid., p. 59.

comedy of today has taken advantage of the idea that naturalness can be entertaining by using such a gathering in at least one scene. These scenes give even the more serious musicals the variety and the feeling for life that puts them in the category of comedy. They also lend an opportunity for spectacle and romance and many times are used as a build up to a dramatic climax.

The clambake in Carousel is followed by the robbery scene in which Billy Bigelow kills himself. The party in the local gym in West Side Story established the love between Tony and Maria and builds the conflict between the rival gangs. The celebration dance following the wedding in Fiddler On The Roof is interrupted at its climax by the arrival of the Russian constable and his men who begin their destruction of the Jewish homes.

One of the most significant factors in the development of an integrated native musical comedy was the establishment of the Princess Theater in New York in 1915. To make the operation of the small theatre monetarily successful, Elizabeth Marbury, a literary agent, and F. Ray Comstock, the owner, decided to produce economic musicals with an intimate style. They wanted these shows to dispense with much of the spectacle that had come to surround musical comedy and to concentrate instead on good texts, good music, and good actors and performers. The new musicals dealt with people caught in comic but believable situations. The casts were limited to about thirty, the orchestra to eleven, and the sets to two.⁶³ The chief collaborators were Jerome Kern and Guy Bolton who were soon joined by P. G. Wodehouse. Together

⁶³Ewen, pp. 82-83.

they consciously worked to break with the musical theatre of that time and to integrate music into the plot. In 1917 Kern said:

It is my opinion that the musical numbers should carry the action of the play and should be representative of the personalities of the characters who sing them. Songs must be suited to the action and the mood of the play.⁶⁴

An attempt was also made to use situations and character laughs instead of unintegrated humor. The second Princess Show, Very Good Eddie, involved two honeymoon couples about to board a river boat. Through a mix-up Eddie finds himself sailing away with the other man's bride while the other mis-mated couple is left standing at the pier.

Guy Bolton explained the Princess Theater shows as "straight, consistent comedy with the addition of music. Every song and lyric contributed to the action. The humor was based on the situation, not interjected by comedians . . . realism and Americanism were other distinguishing traits."⁶⁵ This humor was a step closer to Susanne Langer's view of stage humor where "the joke, instead of being funny as our personal response would make it, seems funny as its occurrence in the total action makes it. People are laughing at the play, not at the string of jokes."⁶⁶

Perhaps the inspiration that Kern's music for these Princess productions gave to two teen-agers, George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers, was as important as his other contributions during this period.

⁶⁴Green, p. 71.

⁶⁵Ewen, p. 86.

⁶⁶Langer, p. 347.

After 1918, Kern returned to the commercial stage and during the following eight years wrote scores for over fifteen shows. These years enabled Kern to develop his style. His song verses became shorter, the songs were fewer and fitted smoothly into dialogue scenes, and the reprise was used to aid the dramatic action.

Then in 1927 Kern wrote the musical which incorporated all the innovations toward which he had been working for the last two decades: Show Boat. The musical opened on December 27th at the Ziegfeld Theatre. Show Boat used subject matter unusual for an American musical comedy. It dealt with unhappy marriage, the life of the southern Negro, and miscegenation. Traditions were broken, too, by having the show open with Negro dock workers lamenting that they must be "Load'in up boats wid de bales of cot-ton, Gettin' no rest till de Judg-ment Day."⁶⁷ Only after this scene did the entrance of "mincing misses" take place.

Show Boat's plot development is predictable and filled with coincidence, and many of its characters follow the set musical comedy formula. There are a romantic gambler, Ravenal; a dear, sweet heroine, Magnolia; a funny, loveable, father, Captain Andy; and a shrewish wife, Parthy Ann Hawkes. But there are also characters of more originality. Julie, the mulatto songstress, with her "Can't Help Loving That Man" and "Bill" brought Helen Morgan to fame. Joe, the chief dock worker, in the song, "Ol' Man River,"

⁶⁷Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, Show Boat, copyright 1927 by T. B. Harms Company, New York, copyright renewed. Reproduced by permission.

achieves more than a two dimensional character. The words and music seem to capture the soul of the Negro people. Jules Bledsoe's portrayal of Joe gave audiences something not only to enjoy but to think about.

The dances and ensembles in Show Boat were staged by Sammy Lee. There was an attempt to integrate song and dance. "Life Upon the Wicked Stage" sung by Ellie and the girls leads into a dance performed by the girls and boys and finishes with Ellie singing the last line of the number. Then a twenty-seven bar song and dialogue over music introduction leads into Queenie's Bally Hoo Dance. The importance of Show Boat aside from the merits already mentioned lies in the fact that it achieved a certain degree of artistic excellence and thus became the foundation upon which to build even better shows.

About the time that Show Boat was presented a new era in musical comedy began. World War I had made America a country that wanted new stories and new music. The beautiful land of the operetta and the last act triumph no longer completely satisfied. The spectacle of the revue had reached the height of its popularity, too. Both, however, left a heritage that is responsible for the present style of musical comedy. In South Pacific there is a perfect marriage of operetta and revue traditions. "There is Nothing Like a Dame" is pure revue and "Bali Ha'i" is exotic operetta.⁶⁸

The unorganized but general move towards more sophisticated plots and new music and lyrics involved such men as Gershwin and

⁶⁸Bernstein, Joy of Music, p. 175.

Younans, Porter, Schwartz and Dietz, and Berlin whose jazz had become the music of Broadway. The two-part song form of the Viennese school was being replaced by an American form of playing the main theme twice, relieving it with a secondary theme that provided some rhythmic and melodic variance, and then repeating the main theme. Engel says "A psychological improvement over its AB predecessor, the AABA form creates in the listener a feeling of satisfaction by rounding out the whole with a return to the original thematic material."⁶⁹

The elaborate revue was being replaced by more intimate revues with attitudes of mild defiance to the status quo. The Grand Street Follies was joined by The Garrick Gaieties in 1925. The latter featured a significant composing team, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. They were to dominate the musical arena for seventeen years.

This period also saw the beginnings of integrated dance. Directors of the ensemble such as Sammy Lee of Show Boat and Seymour Felix of Hit The Deck felt that dancers should do more than have a "turn" on stage or change the pace of the show. They felt that dancers should be used as integral figures to carry out the plot and that the dance should be a means of emotional and dramatic communication.

The chorus girls of the twenties were chosen more for face and figure than for technique. It took craftsmen such as Lee and Felix to achieve more than precision and novelty with them. Of course, there were stellar performers Fred and Adele Astaire, Marilyn Miller, and others who gave dance a place of honor in the

⁶⁹Engel, p. 30.

musical, and the Harlem Dancers of Shuffle Along had shown that the dance could have life and virtuosity, but the dance itself was not often used to project tragedy or passion or to advance the plot.⁷⁰

The first choreographer in the modern sense was Miss Albertine Rasch. She still used precision and synchronization but fused it with ballet techniques and a sleekness of style reminiscent of the earlier Castle ballroom routines. Her dances might look contrived now but she broke all rules in 1925 and kept adapting to changing times in her choreography for such shows as Three's a Crowd in 1930 and Lady in The Dark in 1940.⁷¹

The 1910's and 1920's were important because during these years operetta form began to merge with the revue; George M. Cohan brought a speed and Americanism to the musical; integration of music and plot advanced through the Princess Theater; the dance began to be recognized as more than just a speciality spot; and, Kern's Show Boat ushered in a whole new approach to musical theatre.

The 1930's were years of experimentation and of musicals with more meaning. The country was going through a depression and though laughter was still necessary, the audiences were more inclined to favor musicals with a tone of social commentary.

In 1931 the Pulitzer Prize for drama was awarded the book of Of Thee I Sing by Ryskind and Kaufman. George Gershwin was not included because of the technicality that he wrote only the music.

⁷⁰Walter Terry, The Dance in America (New York, 1956), p. 203.

⁷¹Smith, "A Quarter Century," p. 59.

The music cannot be separated from the lyrics, however, and Oscar Levant once said of the Gershwin score, "It contains an actual feeling of social comment."⁷² The music also used operetta technique to produce its effects. The first act finale is parallel to Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado.

Of Thee I Sing satirized political conventions, Congress, beauty pageants, and even motherhood. The plot revolves around President Wintergreen's choice of a wife. He finally rejects bathing beauty queen, Diane, because she cannot bake corn muffins, and weds faithful Mary, who produces a set of twins for him and the nation.

Another Gershwin, Ryskind, Kaufman show, Strike Up The Band written in 1930 should be mentioned because its subject matter is a satirical attack on war. Composers and lyricists were realizing that a musical could make a serious comment about something in life and yet say it in such a manner that it would still remain comedy and be appealing to an audience.

Many of these plays of the thirties which made a social comment are difficult to revive today. Their songs and lyrics are timeless but the "comic" dialogue is dated because it is built around a contemporary political situation. It did not arise from the characters or situations in the play but from current events outside the play.

One serious musical comedy which has survived is The Three Penny Opera by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. This adaptation of

⁷²Green, p. 119.

Gay's The Beggar's Opera was successful in Germany but ran for only twelve performances when it first opened in the United States. Its revival in 1954 with English lyrics by Marc Blitzstein achieved a record breaking run of over two thousand performances.⁷³ The music is haunting, gay and even jangling at times--very expressive of the social cynicism reflected in the work. The most remembered song is "Mack The Knife." Kurt Weill says that he "deliberately stopped the action during the songs which were written to illustrate the 'philosophy,' the inner meaning of the play."⁷⁴ The Three Penny Opera criticised a corrupt society but it did so with a broad humor, a certain charm, and a purposely ironically happy ending. (Just as Jim is saved by the Canadian Mounties in Rose-Marie, so the notorious Mack is saved by Queen Victoria's Mounted Messenger.)

One of the greatest achievements of the thirties was George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. When he first saw Dorothy and DeBose Heyward's play, Porgy, Gershwin determined to set it to music. It took almost seven years before the musical version opened in 1935. It is the closest to opera that the musical comes and is classified as opera by many. Its roots, however, are in the jazz tempos and in the genuine Negro rhythms. Porgy and Bess was ahead of its time. Its music, song, and dialogue are integrated. The plot and the comedy arise from the "living" people within the play.

⁷³Ibid., p. 237.

⁷⁴Copyright 1964, Radio Corporation of America. LOC-1086. Jacket notes by Miles Kreuger, The Three Penny Opera.

The following year, 1936, saw the creation by Rodgers and Hart of another milestone in the development of musical comedy. On Your Toes, a story of backstage ballet life, made dance an integral part of the action. George Balanchine's "Slaughter On Tenth Avenue" has remained a dance classic. During this scenario The Hooper, first played by Ray Bolger, is obliged to keep dancing for his very life because two gangsters are waiting to kill him the moment he stops.

While Balanchine stressed ballet methods and aesthetics, another choreographer, Robert Alton, was doing away with most of the old style line patterns except where they were pertinent and was substituting the action, movement and design of popular dance, jazz, and Latin American rhythms.⁷⁵ Alton's greatest achievement came in 1940 with Pal Joey.

By 1940 musical comedy had developed into a form where the performers could no longer be just specialty stars or feminine beauties. The song, dance, and plot were all integrated and the actor was most in demand who was versatile enough to carry all three.

⁷⁵Terry, p. 203.

SECTION III

THE PRESENT FORM OF AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

During the contemporary period, 1940-1970, the musical theatre has distinguished itself as a mature art form. This does not mean that the musical has reached its zenith. It has changed and will continue to change and grow with each new production, but future innovations will be based upon the artistry and sound achievement of the past thirty years.

Each new musical comedy is a creation. There is no set formula for the American musical stage. This has led to surprising innovations and new artistic directions. Rodgers and Hart, in an interview for Time magazine in 1938, said concerning the writing of musicals: "The one possible formula is: Don't have a formula, the one rule for success: Don't follow it up."⁷⁶ To say that American musical comedy does not follow a formula is not to say that there are no principles to follow in its production and performance. Any art form is based upon principles, but the secret of the American musical's growth is that it does not rigidly obey the rules. It uses them instead to build upon.

The greatest musicals have been written by men who knew the principles of musical comedy. They understood them so thoroughly that they were able to either employ them or to break them artistically. The result has been musical shows that are as different as their individual creators. No two artists work exactly alike, nor do any two art works say something in exactly the same way,

⁷⁶Green, p. 159.

even though they say the same thing. As Susanne Langer puts it, "A work of art . . . is more than an 'arrangement' of given things---something emerges from the arrangement . . . which was not there before, and this rather than the arranged material, is the symbol of sentience. The making of this expressive form is the creative process that enlists a man's utmost technical skill in the service of his utmost conceptual power, imagination."⁷⁷

The one principle that cannot be broken, that is basic to a successful musical comedy, is that it must have feeling. The best productions are those which both express and inspire the greatest depth of human feeling. This feeling must permeate the entire production and be a natural response resulting from the logically motivated action of the musical. The best musical comedies deal with the basic situations of life and these are centered in emotion: love, hate, joy, sorrow, anger and fear, or hope and courage. Zero Mostel puts the same thought a different way, "Acting is important when you are in a play that makes people feel or enlightens people or elates people or celebrates people or celebrates people."⁷⁸

There must be standards of creativity for the American musical, and each composer, choreographer, librettist and artist must strive to meet them; but likewise, the right to experiment and to succeed or to fail must be respected as an element in the development of the musical comedy. Even the modest efforts are important

⁷⁷Langer, p. 40.

⁷⁸Zero by Mostel. Photographs by Max Waldman with some personal words and drawings by Zero Mostel (New York, 1965).

in the learning process of the musical form. "Art alone does not create art; our living experience is what matters most."⁷⁹

There are several musicals that have been produced in the period between 1940 and 1970 that are artistic and excellent. From among them the following will be used as examples of the present form of American musical comedy: Oklahoma! (1943) and Carousel (1945) by Rodgers and Hammerstein; South Pacific (1949) by the same collaborators with the book by Hammerstein and Joshua Logan; My Fair Lady (1956) by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe; West Side Story (1957), book by Arthur Laurents, based on a conception of Jerome Robbins, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim; Fiddler On The Roof (1964), book by Joseph Stein, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, music by Jerry Bock; and Man of La Mancha (1965), book by Dale Wasserman, with music by Mitch Leigh and lyrics by Joe Darion. Other musicals from the contemporary period will be mentioned to illustrate certain musical principles or innovations.

Unity is one of the key working concepts of musical comedy. The music must be inseparable from the plot and characters. All the elements must be integrated: dance, song, setting, musical accompaniment. And, to be successful, they must all be good. One of the reasons for the maturation and artistic productivity of the contemporary period has been the realization by the creators of the American musical that beautiful music alone is not enough. Consequently, a specialization of creation has developed. A theatre program today reveals a staggering number of experts who are

⁷⁹Harold Clurman, Lies Like Truth (New York, 1958), p. 20.

working in separate fields: composer, librettist, orchestrator, choreographer, director of stage, director of music, costumer, set and lighting designer, and others. The remarkable thing is, that in the best musicals, all of these talents and all of these creations are unified as a single artistic production.

The first step towards this unity is a good libretto or book. Most of the contemporary musicals are based upon already existing successful books or plays. Alan Jay Lerner, who wrote the book and lyrics for Brigadeon and My Fair Lady, among others, strongly advocates the adoption of existing literary material. He argues that the expense of energy and spirit necessary to write an original plot can be better used to deal with the specific problems of the musical stage.⁸⁰ There are a few successful original musical books. Among them are E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy's Finian's Rainbow and Mike Stewart's Bye Bye Birdie. All of the seven musicals to be discussed in this section are adaptations. Oklahoma! is based on Green Grow the Lilacs by Lynn Riggs; Carousel on Lilium by Ferenc Molnar; South Pacific on James A. Michener's Tales of The South Pacific; My Fair Lady's book and lyrics are based on Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw; West Side Story is adapted from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet; Fiddler On The Roof is based on stories by Sholem Aleichem; and Man of La Mancha is based on Don Quixote and the life of its author, Cervantes.

In adapting a novel or play into a musical book, the librettist must decide how to present the central theme in a way suitable

⁸⁰The Lerner & Loewe Song Book. Commentary by Scott Sullivan (New York, 1962), p. 44.

for musical theatre. Because the medium is comedy, it must express a hopefulness and there must be some romance. The action must center around a central, clear, rather uncomplicated idea. The subplot is usually employed, but it must be integrated into the main plot and aid the entire story's development as the variety within the unity. The characters and situations must be incomplete without the music and lyrics and dances. The dialogue must be succinct. The characters must be poetical and human at the same time. They must be clearly defined but move in the realm of dance and song. The novel or play must be adapted as two acts with a climactic ending for the first act. An exception to this is Dale Wasserman's Man of La Mancha which uses no intermission.

There are advantages for the librettist who is adapting a work into a poetical and musical medium. While the straight dramatist must seek effective and plausible ways to convey the innermost thoughts of his characters, the librettist can use a song or dance to do this. Hammerstein uses a song "Lonely Room" in Oklahoma! to reveal the pathos and loneliness of the villain Jud, and in Carousel he uses a dance to express the feelings of heartbreak and longing of Louise. The mediums of dance and song can also portray emotions that cannot be spoken. Emotions which an audience might consider vulgar or crude if they were expressed in straight drama can be revealed poetically through music. Because of the medium through which they are presented, they become acceptable, and sometimes even humorous and delightful. "Too Darn Hot" from Cole Porter's Kiss Me Kate, in which the men sing of desires for love thwarted by the temperature, is funny. In another vein,

Ado Annie's "I Can't Say No" from Oklahoma! is definitely a comic song. Dialogue or realistic action could not suffice to express the emotion involved in the scenes representing the attack on Anita by the Jots in West Side Story and the rape and abduction scene in Man of La Mancha. It would be too "real." The dance, however, can eloquently portray the anguish and lust and hatred in the scenes.

Because the characters and actions in a musical cannot exist apart from the music and dance, the librettist must often work closely with the others involved in creating the show to achieve a good book. When West Side Story was written, it was based upon a conception of Jerome Robbins, the director and choreographer. Rodgers and Hammerstein always met for weeks in an endless series of conferences before the book was written. They would discuss "the story line, the musical numbers, just where they should go, just what the mood of a given number should be."⁸¹ Rodgers took only minutes to compose the music for "Oh, What A Beautiful Mornin'." "By the time Oscar gave me the lyrics," he says, "and I sat down to the actual business of writing the notes, I already knew all the governing circumstances--the scene, the mood, the singer, the subject, and even the fact that it was to be a waltz, a simple little waltz. These things had all been decided."⁸²

The creators of musical comedy must also consider such unartistic elements as the fact that the audience will generally not be

⁸¹Deems Taylor, Some Enchanted Evenings (New York, 1953), p. 221.

⁸²Ibid.

settled at the beginning of the show, and that it will be sleepy or restless about the middle of the second act.⁸³ Hence, the usual overture or opening mood song and the 11:00 show-stopper. In order to give new life to the second act of Oklahoma! the vigorous title song is introduced. Carousel uses the lovely dance by Louise to revive the audience. South Pacific is filled with drama in the second act, but the raucous performance of "Honey Bun" by Luther and Nellie is the show-stopper. My Fair Lady has Alfred P. Doolittle and friends singing "Get Me To The Church On Time." West Side Story's one really comic song, "Gee Officer Krumpke," in which the boys in turn tell the policemen their psychological and sociological troubles and which calls for a "fast Vaudeville style," explodes in the second act. It occupies almost the same position as the Musician's scene in Romeo and Juliet. Fiddler On The Roof has no definite show stopper, but the lovely dance of Chava gives variety, as does the earlier "I Just Heard," a satirical song on gossip. In Man of La Mancha, the abduction scene is followed closely by the appearance of the knight of the mirrors.

Within the unity of the entire production there must also be variety of songs and dances with regard to type, tempo, and mood. Songs like "People Will Say We're In Love" from Oklahoma!, "Tonight" from West Side Story, and "Some Enchanted Evening" from South Pacific must be balanced by songs like "I Can't Say No," "America," and "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair." There must be variety and balance in the dancing too. For example,

⁸³Engel, p. 123.

the vigorous choreography of the "Tradition" scene and the "Tattle Dance" at Tzeitel's wedding is balanced by the ballet choreography for the vision dance of Chava.

Musical comedy is theatre, and it is based upon the things which make any dramatic play good, such as, unity, variety, and balance, but it is also different. Contrary to the usual dramatic method of letting the conflict develop slowly, in the musical

. . . the author introduces, as such, his two principal characters, indicates directly or implicitly some conflict of position or personality that separates them and sets up a need in the audience to see a genuine resolution of their differences.⁸⁴

In Oklahoma!, Curly and Laurey are talking of the box social. The audience knows that they are really in love. Laurey wants Curly to treat her more "special" so she refuses his request to attend the social and dance. Later, to irritate Curly, she accepts the invitation of the disreputable farmhand Jud Fry. This creates conflicts between Curly and Laurey and between Jud and Curly. The audience wants the real lovers to be united.

In Carousel, the conflict is between Billy's love for Julie and his love for his work as a barker. Mrs. Mullen is a threat to the lovers, too. Again the audience needs to see Julie and Billy together.

The musical South Pacific opens with Emile de Becque's two Eurasian children singing a charming little song, "Dites-Pourquoi." It is essential that they be introduced and that the audience love them because they represent the conflict of racial prejudice that

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 80.

threatens to separate Emile and Nellie Forbush. Age and cultural backgrounds will be overcome, but the interior conflict remains until the end of the production.

By the end of the third scene of My Fair Lady, the audience knows that Professor Higgins, a wealthy, arrogant, self-centered phonetician, has placed a wager that he can pass the dirty cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, as a duchess at the Embassy Ball. The audience wants the Cinderella dream to happen again. Alan Jay Lerner states in his published version of the play that he omitted the sequel to Shaw's Pygmalion because ". . . in it Shaw explains how Eliza ends not with Higgins, but with Freddy, and---Shaw and Heaven forgive me---I am not certain he is right."⁸⁵

In West Side Story, the conflict is introduced before the lovers. The rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, express in dance-pantomime the conflicts of opposing social groups. The lovers, Tony and Maria, are not personally in conflict; they love each other. But their societies will not allow them to be united. The audience wants them to be happy, but this need is satisfied by hope rather than fact.

Fiddler On The Roof presents another variation of the basic principle. Tevye, the Jewish dairyman, opens the show by commenting on the precarious balance of life--like a fiddler on the roof--and on the fact that this balance is kept only by following tradition. The major conflict is between Tevye and his traditions as he seeks to find happiness and suitable matches for his five daughters. The audience needs to see Tevye succeed with the help of his "Dear God."

⁸⁵Lerner & Loewe, My Fair Lady (New York, 1956), p. vi.

Man of La Mancha opens with Cervantes being charged by his fellow prisoners as "an idealist, a bad poet, and an honest man." He pleads guilty and proceeds to defend himself by acting out episodes from the life of Don Quixote, who "has laid down the melancholy burden of sanity" to find values and truth and beauty in the world. The need for the audience to see him succeed is found in their reaction to the musical. Dale Wasserman describes it this way:

It was a phenomenon we were to grow familiar with at each performance: a sort of electricity crackling randomly among the audience for a time, then polarizing toward a massive discharge of emotion. Or as Mr. Marre succinctly put it, 'They're not just watching a play, they're having a religious experience.'⁸⁶

Perhaps the need for the audience to see the characters succeed is because, as Christopher Fry states,

There are times in the state of man when comedy has a special worth, and the present is one of them: a time when the loudest faith has been in a trampling materialism, when literature has been thought unrealistic which did not mark and remark our poverty and doom One of the necessities of our time is to redeem it. Joy.⁸⁷

In the contemporary musical the opening also sets the place, time, mood and pace of the entire show. It has become individually suited to each production. No longer does the audience expect a line of pretty chorus girls to come prancing on stage singing little ditties to start the show with gusto. Show Boat had broken this tradition by having a group of dock workers open the musical.

⁸⁶Dale Wasserman, Joe Darion, Mitch Leigh, Man of La Mancha (New York, 1968), p. 11.

⁸⁷Christopher Fry, "Comedy" in The Modern Theater, ed. Daniel Seltzer (Boston, 1967), p. 25.

But a forward step was taken with the opening of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma! They realized that a play with folk character demanded a fresh point of view. It had to open simply. As Hammerstein explained, such an experimental approach was a breach of implied contract with the audience but "Once we had made the decision . . . we had the inner confidence people feel when they have adopted the direct and honest approach to a problem"⁸⁸

When the curtain rose on March 31, 1943, Aunt Ellen was sitting alone on the stage churning butter. Off stage Curly was singing unaccompanied "Oh, What A Beautiful Morning." Agnes de Mille describes the effect, "At the end, people gave an audible sigh and looked at one another---this had seldom happened before. It was music. They sat right back and opened their hearts" ⁸⁹

Another of Rodgers and Hammerstein's breaks with the traditional opening was to dispense with the formal overture in The Sound of Music in 1959. To set the mood and spirit of the production they used, not leggy chorus girls, but nuns at the abbey singing a capella the "Preludium."

In the opening of West Side Story, the actor-dancers present the tension of the strangling hold of society upon the characters kinetically and musically. David Ewen quotes John Martin as saying that the theatrical substance of West Side Story is realized

. . . not in talked plot but in moving bodies. The muscles of trained dancers are tensed and untensed and tensed again stimulated by emotional tensions and

⁸⁸ David Ewen, Complete Book of The American Musical Theater (New York, 1958).

⁸⁹ Agnes de Mille, Dance To The Piper (Boston, 1952), p. 254.

stimulating them still further in return. These tensions are transferred automatically across the footlights and the musculature of every spectator in the house willy nilly. The cast acts and reacts in terms of movement and that is the most direct medium that exists for the conveying of inner states of feeling.⁹⁰

In Man of La Mancha the mood is suggested in large measure by the set. It is abstract in design, bare and empty with a drawbridge type stairs that can be retracted to cut off the prisoners from the outside world. It stands waiting for the actors to give it life. The opening of La Mancha is also different in that it, as well as all the prison scenes framing the inner play, have no singing or dancing except what is realistically motivated.

From these openings one can see that it is almost impossible to classify contemporary American musicals into one category of music, dance, or plot. Each is a blend of styles with emphasis on one or more. This is because the creators and actors of the musical have become concerned about what they say; how they say it has become a means to achieve the total results. When the proper words, movements, and music are chosen to express the meaning and truth of the musical, one enhances the other and the result is communication. As Katherine Litz, one of the original "Postcard girls" in Oklahoma! says, "It is here, working together and finding ways to communicate, that one touches on the heart of the matter."⁹¹

⁹⁰Ewen, Complete Book of American Musical Theater, pp. 38-39.

⁹¹"Katherine Litz Talks to Olga Maynard," Dance Magazine, XL (January, 1967), 59.

It has also become impossible to classify musical comedy characters as romantic, villainous, straight or comic. They may emphasize one characteristic more than another but they are usually three dimensional. In the contemporary period characters have become more human with human strengths and weaknesses. Their fairy tale qualities still exist but they are more probable. Because they are more human they are more interesting. The heroes and villains and comic characters share each others' attributes.

Gone are the always beautiful, always sweet and noble heroines. Gone are the always handsome, always noble heroes. Gone, too, are the always wicked, always hisseble villains.

Julie and Laurey in Carousel and Oklahoma! are still beautiful and sweet, but they are also determined and Laurey is a bit obstinate. Nellie Forbush is a character with whom the audience can readily identify. She has a background, she is capable of love; she is also capable of prejudice. Nellie is sometimes confident and sometimes bewildered. She can choose and this makes the outcome of the plot more interesting even though the audience is fairly certain of an ordered ending to South Pacific. She also has more comic characteristics than Liat, one of the subplot characters, who is sweet and romantic. Maria in West Side Story is one of the most romantic heroines, but she is strong enough to stand-up to society to be with her love. In Fiddler On The Roof, Golde is usually called shrewish, but she is a loveable shrew. Eliza in My Fair Lady is a Cinderella type but she has a temper. She cries tears of anger. She simultaneously loves and hates her Prince Stuffiness. Finally, in Man of La Mancha, the leading lady is

described in the script as "a savage, dark alley-cat, survivor if not always victor of many back-fence tussles."⁹² It is only through Don Quixote's faith in her that Aldonza does become his Dulcinea.

The heroes of the contemporary musical are just as uncategorizable. The middle-aged hero was introduced in South Pacific by Rodgers and Hammerstein. It took courage to break the tradition of the youthful lover and to make the lead a gray-haired Frenchman played by the famous operatic bass, Ezio Pinza. It also took courage to have the secondary love plot between Lt. Cable and Liat end with the death of Cable. The older romantic lead has persisted in My Fair Lady, Fiddler On The Roof, and Man of La Mancha.

Another change has been to make the male lead a hero-villain. Macheath from the earlier The Three Penny Opera is a jaunty, raffish criminal. Harold Hill of The Music Man is a con-man, super salesman, love 'em and leave 'em dynamo. What is more, he is a singing, dancing, comic, romantic, middle-aged, likeable, hero.

Billy Bigelow is another example of the loveable hero who is also undesirable. He is too proud to work at anything in which he is not talented. He loves his wife and his child, but he cannot express his love for them except through violence. He hits Julie, but only "because she was right." He agrees to a robbery, but only because he can see no other way to get money for his unborn child. He has a basic tenderness under his brusque manner,

⁹²Wasserman and Darion, p. 48.

and his weaknesses do not stem from something which he should overcome but rather from the way he is through no fault of his own.

Billy is a character who by all standards except perhaps his own is a failure in practically everything he undertakes. The audience identifies with Billy because they can recognize themselves in him. Billy has a dream of going to San Francisco where he can find the work he loves as a Carousel barker. This parallels the dream of everyman to find success and happiness. Billy's death is an artistic way for him to satisfy for his wrongdoings and his resurrection gives the feeling of a problem that has been resolved while also offering Billy the opportunity to finally succeed in something. When he finally does (by getting the message to Louise and Julie that he loves them and that they must go on) the audience has a great sense of fulfillment. Billy can now go to his great carousel in the sky knowing that he is at last a success and a hero. The final chorus of "You'll Never Walk Alone" many times brings tears to an audience, but the tears flow more from relieved tension and a sense of satisfaction than they do from sorrow.

Higgins in My Fair Lady is also a hero who is not exactly loveable. He is stuffy and self-centered. He is a bit of the villain because of the way he treats Eliza, but the real villain is class distinction. It was Shaw's contention that externals were the basis of class distinction, and when things like speech and looks could be equalized all discrimination would disappear.

The villains in Fiddler On The Roof are social prejudice, poverty, and life's problems represented by the Constable and his men. West Side Story's villain is the social web with Schrank and

his stooge Officer Krumpke the nearest things to live scoundrels. Racial prejudice is the villain in South Pacific, and in Man of La Mancha it is the established order--Dr. Carrasco, Antonio, the housekeeper--and man's brutality to man--the mulattoes.

An interesting character in Oklahoma! who is neither hero nor villain nor the main comic is Ali Hakim. He gives spice and flavor to the show. His philosophy is clearly evident in his dialogue with Annie when he tries to convince her that Paradise is waiting upstairs in the Clarendon Hotel. When Annie counters with, "I thought there were just bedrooms," Ali emphatically assures her that for them it will be Paradise. Annie delightedly thinks that he is proposing whereupon Ali's ardor vanishes and the nearest exit is suddenly Paradise.

This scene is funny because it is integrated and because it builds to a climax. The comedy is part of the characters and situation. It is pointed up by letting the audience in on the intentions of each character. Annie's innocent availability is contrasted with Ali's conniving attempt to seduce her. The humor reaches the climax when Ali's attempt backfires. Since the audience already knows Ali's views on marriage, the climax is emphasized. This parallels the scene in Carousel where the comic-villain Jigger tries to seduce the innocent Carrie. In this instance Jigger's attempt to carry her into the woods is brought to a sudden halt by the entrance of Carrie's intended, Mr. Enoch Snow.

Because each character is an individual who has recognizable human qualities, he must be created and acted in an individual manner. He must be recognizable by specific speech, specific songs, specific dances and specific humor.

South Pacific is a good example of how music is used to reflect the personal traits of the characters. Rodgers and Hammerstein were able to capture the exotic and flavorful personality of Bloody Mary, the Tonkinese mother of Liat, in her songs "Bali Ha'i" and "Happy Talk." The sophistication of De Becque is discovered in his love song, "This Nearly Was Mine." Nellie's mid-western, unsophisticated spirit is expressed in her "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair" and "I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy." Newman Levy says of the latter that Nellie's melody is

. . . all over the scale and since she is from the mid-west it is a simple fairly rapid waltz. She is sure of herself and her feelings for de Becque so at the end of her song she repeats . . .⁹³

"I'm in Love" five times while the music grows more insistent and mounts to a climax when Nellie proclaims, "With a Wonderful Guy."

Rodgers and Hammerstein explained that they had difficulty creating a song "that satisfied us for the situation in which Joe Cable, the marine lieutenant, makes love to the young native girl. Any hint of sophistication would have been vulgar and inappropriate."⁹⁴ They finally settled on words "as innocent and unspoiled as the two charming people who sang them . . ." and ". . . an untroubled, free musical thought, naive and straightforward."⁹⁵ The result was called, "Younger Than Springtime."

Lerner and Loewe insist that every song derive directly from the character and situation. In My Fair Lady they worked for months

⁹³Levy, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 9.

⁹⁵Ibid.

to write a lyrical, romantic song that would follow Shaw's script by suggesting a growing attachment between Eliza and Professor Higgins without stating it openly. "I Could Have Danced All Night" does just that.

In the same show, Lerner and Loewe decided that the songs given to Professor Higgins--because of his character and because of their intellectual burden--should give the impression of being spoken. They should reproduce the rhythms of witty cultivated speech while still being full of melody. This decision made it possible for the role to be played by dramatic actor Rex Harrison whose voice is not exactly melodious. It also retained the tone of Shaw's character.⁹⁶

Another musical comedy innovation came in South Pacific. Borrowing from a tradition of grand opera that exists in most musical forms--the recitative--Rodgers and Hammerstein introduced the double soliloquy. The recitative had been used in Porgy and Bess but it was in the operatic style. The scene between Nellie and Emile, just prior to Emile's song "Some Enchanted Evening," is in the style of the musical comedy. The words are sung to music--not exactly as recitative nor as song but as a combination of both. The words and the music reveal the characters and further the plot as they move towards the major song.⁹⁷

Emile leaves Nellie for a few minutes to get her some cognac, a move that separates them and gives the opportunity for them to

⁹⁶The Lerner and Loewe Songbook, pp. 119-121.

⁹⁷Bernstein, Joy of Music, p. 176.

express their feelings. Nellie wonders how it would feel to live on the lovely hill with a French gentleman and why thinking about it makes her as excited as a schoolgirl. Emile knows that he loves Nellie, but feels that she may not love him because he is older. He wonders why thinking about it makes him as nervous as a schoolboy. The music functions as a leading motive and helps unify the story while serving to reveal the characters' thoughts.

The contemporary view of musical comedy stresses that the function of all music and dance is to give unity, variety in unity, and plausibility to the entire show. Oklahoma! has just twelve basic musical numbers but they are woven in and out, quoted briefly, and repeated in various guises. (The dream ballet contains six of the numbers.) This serves to emphasize a mood or to show the relationship of one character with another. In contrast, the score of Show Boat contains twenty musical numbers, all different. It is full of "tunes." Carousel has thirteen basic numbers but the orchestra plays thirty-one times; South Pacific has only fifteen basic numbers but forty-nine musical cues.⁹⁸

As the various elements of the musical comedy became more integrated, it became important for the performers to become more versatile. The singers had to dance and act and the dancers had to act and sing.

When Agnes de Mille was choosing her line-up for Oklahoma! she emphasized talent and personality. The director, Rouben Mamoulian, wanted slim legs above all. When he rejected Miss

⁹⁸Taylor, pp. 173, 219.

de Mille's choices--Joan McCracken, Barbi Linn, and Diana Adams--she staged her first tantrum, and won. Later she wrote her fiance:

This is a remarkable troupe. The actors are dumb-founded. They've never seen such stamina before, they've never worked with real dancers. During the last dress rehearsal in New York, some musician struck a wrong note--Diana Adams's face contracted with pain. It was not annoyance or amusement, it was agonized concern. Richard Rodgers saw the expression and marveled. That look had never crossed a chorus girl's face, he was aware (as were not all of us?) that responsible artists had entered the ranks. Diana's expression marked the beginning of a new era.⁹⁹

Agnes de Mille had used artist-dancers for Oklahoma! but the success of the dances lay not just in that. The dances themselves were a living part of the musical itself. The dream sequence in which Laurey dreams of her true love and "Makes Up Her Mind," as the title explains, reveals the true Laurey. It is not just diversion. It is truth. Miss de Mille captured the spirit of the mid-west in her dances. She, like Jerome Robbins in his folk dances for Fiddler On The Roof and his dances for West Side Story, was able to portray with gesture the feelings of a people. Like all the great choreographers, she had the happy facility to be inspired by a source without imitating it, to use it to stimulate imaginative dance interpretations.

Miss de Mille was neither the first nor the last to bring this concept of dance to the non-dance theatre. Perhaps Hecter had a feeling for this concept when she danced her solo, "Ma Belle," in The Three Musketeers.¹⁰⁰

West Side Story's principal means of expression is the dance. The two gangs reveal their hatreds and feelings almost entirely

⁹⁹Agnes de Mille, Dance To The Piper, pp. 253-254.

¹⁰⁰Terry, p. 204.

through dance movement. Robbins had his dancers-actors use ballet-pantomime for *The Rumble*. In *Cool*, they had to use a blend of styles to portray an assumed facade of relaxation to cover inner tensions. The audience senses throughout the production that the characters are fighting for life and, when they can, celebrating life.

It was Robbins's choreography for West Side Story that prompted Agnes de Mille's prophecy that America will evolve an acting-dancing performance form that will be its lyric theatre. It will, she feels, be as characteristic and popular as nineteenth century Italian and German opera. The force of its expression will be dancing because Broadway dancing is in the vernacular. It speaks to all who see it.¹⁰¹

Whether this will happen is debatable, but the dance has become such an integral part of the plot that it cannot be removed without injuring the completeness of the entire production.

Even musicals requiring legitimate voices such as South Pacific and Kiss Me Kate require some dancing for the romantic leads. Emile performs a short dance with Nellie, and Fred Graham and Lilli Vanessi dance during their song "Wonderbar." In Kiss Me Kate, not only do the principal singers dance but the principal dancers sing. The role of Bill Calhoun, requires a dancer-singer who can perform the number "Bianca," a song interspersed with dance. He also must sing solo in "Tom, Dick, or Harry" and in "I Sing of Love." Cole Porter wisely avoided composing these numbers in a

¹⁰¹Agnes de Mille, The Book of The Dance (New York, 1963), p. 192.

range that would require a legitimate voice, which would make the role difficult to cast. Hanya Holm's dances are so integrated into the show that it is difficult to tell where the choreography ends and the general staging begins.

This integration of elements is one of the characteristics of all of the mature musical comedies. These musicals use beautiful music to develop the plot, depict the mood, and reveal the emotions of the characters. They stress artistic and dramatically sound librettos that emphasize actions that are motivated and plausible from the opening to the climax of the show. They have characters that are more human and more interesting. These characters are three dimensional with comic, romantic, and sometimes undesirable qualities. The contemporary musical has dances that are an integral part of the show. The best of them are characterized by a deep feeling for life portrayed by versatile performers who can act, sing, and dance.

It is the characteristic of creative individuality expressed in all phases of the musical that has helped to make the best shows the outstanding successes that they have been. It is this same individuality that will keep American musical comedy fresh and alive as new people with new ideas put them into creative form. To be really successful, however, future musicals will need a combination of this creativity coupled with a deep concern for the inherent truth and emotion behind the expression.

Many people connected with the musical theatre feel that it is in a transitional period moving towards a new, exciting musical form. Because it is in transition, it is presently marked by

a searching--a moving forwards and backwards. Clurman is concerned about the "new aesthetics," as he calls them, which are developing as actors and directors focus on the "splash-and-splurge" aspects instead of the content. He hopes that as a body the true entertainments--those that quicken the senses, touch the soul, and alert the mind--will triumph.¹⁰² Brooks Atkinson is concerned about the "hackwork" that is again being emphasized as it was in the years before 1940. Lehman Engel believes that "On the other hand," as Tevye would say, "there are those musicals in a lighter vein such as Guys and Dolls and Annie Get Your Gun and those that approach American opera such as Carousel and West Side Story which are artistically excellent and which place feeling and technical perfection before appeal. He also believes that, because they do this, they cannot fail."¹⁰³

Musical comedy will continually be progressing because there will always be men and women who must celebrate life and who must use their talents and technical acumen to create artistic musicals overflowing with the feeling for life.

They like Rodgers and Hammerstein and all the artists connected with Oklahoma! will have the courage to keep working and believing even though the backers and critics are against them. They will, like Dale Wasserman, Joe Darion, Mitch Leigh and Albert Marre keep following the impossible dream to create a musical comedy in which they believe despite all opposition. They, like the

¹⁰²Clurman, p. 13-14.

¹⁰³Engel, pp. viii, ix.

creators before them, will find that their shows will be welcomed by audiences because of the truth and beauty inherent in them.

SECTION IV

A THEORY OF COMEDY RELATED TO THE AMERICAN MUSICAL

In America, musical plays--light or serious or bordering on opera--are called musical comedies and with reason. American musical theatre is built around comedy. There are comic elements in most plays but comedy is the life blood of the musical. Comedy is the view of life, the observation about human nature, that gives men a sense of balance. Its underlying feeling is the sense of life; its rhythm is vital continuity.¹⁰⁴ Comedy is a celebration of life. The musical theatre celebrates with song and dance and laughter.

Comedy is a way of surveying life so that a happy ending must prevail. This happy ending at one time meant the forever after of the fairy tale but it has come to be more of an expression of order restored, hope for life or love to continue or for the dream to go on. The basic principle of happy ever after remains and Aristotle's assertion that the pleasure proper to comedy lies in the poet's writing what the audience would like to happen is true, but no longer do "The greatest enemies in the fable . . . make friends and go off at the end, and nobody is killed by anybody."¹⁰⁵ There are death and rape and evil in today's comedy for it is understood that they cannot be abolished from the world but they are minimized by the affirmation that life and love--that society--will prevail.

¹⁰⁴Lenger, pp. 331, 335.

¹⁰⁵Aristotle, "Poetics" in Aristotle on The Art of Fiction, trans. by E. J. Pottis (Cambridge, 1953), p. 34.

Benjamin Lehmann observes in his essay, "Comedy and Laughter":

Though we laugh at actions and utterances in comedy, we do not laugh at the comedy as a whole. For the comedy as a whole is a serious work, making an affirmation about life that chimes with our intuitive sense of how things are and with our deep human desire to have the necessary and agreeable prevail and our even deeper human desire to arrest before our minds a condition of things pleasant in themselves and completely free from the threat of time and disruption.¹⁰⁶

The desire for reassurance about life and continuity is the reason that comedy and romantic love are almost always found together. Love promises new life. The lovers may battle as Fred and Lilli in Kiss Me Kate, they may be opposed or separated as Ravenal and Magnolia in Show Boat but comedy insists that they be united and that the social order be restored before the curtain falls. Even the modern musicals that end with death promise the hope of resurrection and life, "Somehow,/ someday,/ somewhere."¹⁰⁷

Comedy cannot be equated with optimism however. It is more of an "image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence."¹⁰⁸ Comedy is Tevye of Fiddler On The Roof after his home is destroyed and his family scattered planning for a new life. Comedy is Tony, the middle-aged wine grower of The Most Happy Fella, pleading with his "Rosabella" to stay though she has been unfaithful because "My

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin Lehmann, "Comedy and Laughter," in Drama in the Western World by Samuel A. Weiss (New York, 1968), p. 782.

¹⁰⁷ Bernstein and Sondheim, copyright 1957, 1959.

¹⁰⁸ Langer, p. 331.

Heart Is So Full Of You." As Christopher Fry says, "Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith"109

The recognition of truth is the basis of comic humor. Agnes de Mille states, "The greater the truth, the greater the humor. Laughter is the explosive, instantaneous recognition of truth, and human beings are the only animals capable of it."110 Miss de Mille's use of the word "explosive" reflects the nature of laughter. Laughter seems to come when someone feels so much that the feeling must escape. Because this feeling must be released laughter is often accompanied by tears.

Technically comedy is bound up with a lack of proportion. The presentation is dependent on accents of emphasis. Physical mishaps, intelligent puns, incongruity of situation or character are but the means of expressing an upset of balance of truth and order. But a lack of balance, over-emphasis or under-emphasis, and incongruity are only relative to the truth. The audience must recognize the truth and order of a situation or character before it can laugh at the distortion of that truth and order.

Many of the comedies of the 1930's pointed up regrettable incongruities. They used satire which blended a critical attitude with humor and wit in order to improve social disorders. These satirical plays are not a separate class of musical comedy. They are another manner of expressing the feeling for life. They, too,

¹⁰⁹Christopher Fry, "Comedy," in The Modern Theater, ed. Daniel Seltzer (Boston, 1967), p. 23.

¹¹⁰Agnes de Mille, To A Young Dancer (Boston, 1962), p. 40.

spring from the desire of humans to have the agreeable prevail, to correct the disruption of order and to assure the continuity of life. Satire might be likened to a form of self-preservation--a basic life drive. Satire is not a celebration of joy; it does not cause effervescent laughter. It does help give humanity a sense of balance.

As America develops and audience sensibilities become more mature, American comedy itself is changing. From a beginning of gag type jokes, burlesque and slapstick American musical comedy has reached the stage where the humor is no longer extractable from the musical.

Early musical comedies did not integrate humor. Most of their laugh lines were injected with no regard for character or plot. What humor did arise from the characters or situations was not often the result of deliberate effort by writers or actors. A line from an 1882-show went like this:

Comic: Excuse me, which is the other side of the street?

Straight: Why, the other side of the street is just across the way.

Comic: Why, That's funny. I asked the fellow across the street and he said that it was over here.¹¹¹

One of the most famous of the Weber-Fields laugh lines still persists,

Weber: Who is that lady I saw you with last night?

Fields: She ain't no lady, she's my wife.¹¹²

¹¹¹Cahn, p. 42.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 56.

The Desert Song (1926) an American "favorite" has several laugh-line exchanges between Benjamin and various characters.

One goes like this:

Hassi (sharpening his knife and pointing it): When I
see a spy I want blood.

Benjamin: Don't look at me, I'm anemic . . .

Until about the 1930's the comedy tear or character interrupted the show from entrance to exit. There were notable exceptions: The Princess Theater Shows, various Rodgers and Hart musicals, and individual shows. The general rule, however, was comedy is a separate element.

Comedy has gradually evolved into humor that arises naturally from the character or situation. It is used to advance the plot and the musical actually builds to it. In Fiddler On The Roof (1964) Tevye and Golde have offered the hand of their daughter, Tzeitel, to the old but rich butcher, Lazar Wolf. Meanwhile, she is promising herself to the meek and poor tailor, Motel. When the lovers inform Tevye of their breach of tradition he is shocked but finally gives his consent. At the end of the scene Tevye suddenly remembers his wife and the fact that he must tell her of the new match. His cry "What'll I tell Golde?" brings a tremendous laugh because the songs, dialogue, and action of the entire scene have built to it.

In Oklahoma! (1943) Ado Annie's song "I Can't Say No" is funny because she seems so bewildered by her problem (although she doesn't quite understand if it is a problem or not). The humor arises from her character. The audience feels that she is innocent and at the same time knows that she isn't. The audience likes her. Fanny Brice the star satirist of the Ziegfeld Follies explains it this

way, "If you're a comic you have to be nice. And the audience has to like you. You have to have a softness about you, because if you do comedy and you are harsh, there is something offensive about it."¹¹³

In Carousel (1945) the audience laughs when Billy sings after his death "Let me be judged by the highest Judge of all . . . Let him send me to hell, But before I go, I feel that I'm entitled to a hell of a show!"¹¹⁴ The audience laughs because the character of Billy has been developed in the preceding scenes and the humor arises from his "true" character.

These scenes also point up another change in the structure of the American musical. Comedy had traditionally been the responsibility of the subplot characters. In contemporary musicals the principals may also be the source of humor, or all the characters can contribute to the humor as in My Fair Lady with its Shawian flavor. The villain can also be a humorous character because in comedy he is seldom completely cold and calculating. He is there but he must fit into the total view of life presented in the musical.

Theatrical humor must be pointed up. It must be clear. It must be specific and concrete. The subject matter of a comic song or comic sequence is usually limited to a single idea which is "developed in a series of variations, each of which explodes in

¹¹³Ibid., p. 58.

¹¹⁴Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2nd, Carousel, copyright 1945 by Williamson Music, Inc., New York, New York. p. 160. Reproduced by permission.

its own farcical conclusion."¹¹⁵ A single actor or a group functioning as one unit sings, dances, or portrays this sequence. This helps focus more sharply on the humor. Agnes de Mille stresses clarity in her advice to the comic dancer:

Comedy has to be clear. The audience has to understand Do not hurry. Taking time is not wasting attention or being dull if the audience feels you progressing toward a point. Rush at a comic idea and you mangle it. Waver between points or feelings, even for a split second of forgetfulness, and the audience is lost. You may seem sometimes to be expressing two things at once, as in comedy where you often try to reveal indecision or pull in two directions. But actually you are expressing two separate ideas in quick sequence, for you can never express more than one at a time. Brilliant comedy depends on the deftness and rapidity of the sequence. Actually the ideas never overlap. When they do, your emotions short-circuit: you blow your emotional fuses. Darkness results--a gap in communication.¹¹⁶

Because musical comedy is composed of music and dance and comedy, all of which are communicative arts, it demands a co-operation between the actor and audience to be successful. It is important to create a harmony between actor and audience. There must be a joint understanding of the characters and situations portrayed so that there can be a sharing of delight in their humor. The comedian must find the proper harmony with his cast and then he must achieve harmony with his audience, says Louis Jouvet the French comedian famous for his roles in Moliere and Girardoux. Jouvet goes on to say, "Exercising the comedian's profession is a perpetual adaptation. Theatrical art, more of an

¹¹⁵Engel, p. 116.

¹¹⁶de Mille, To A Young Dancer, p. 40.

improvisation than any other art, reflects the atmosphere of a period and is subject to the laws of fashion."¹¹⁷

Comedy changes. It has its permanent subjects and basic techniques of presentation but sometimes a generation gap exists in comic understanding. What makes one generation laugh makes another generation shudder. Audience reception of comedy will vary not just in a generation but from night to night. Zero Mostel, the renown interpreter of Tevye in Fiddler On The Roof, says, "It is best not to be overly concerned about the audience. Audiences vary but you can't vary. You have to play the meaning of the play."¹¹⁸

The comedy that will endure and will remain fresh for generations is the comedy based upon the pulse of life. It arises from the truth of the characters and situations within the play. It also imparts the knowledge to the audience that what is being portrayed is not real. To remain "comic," the musical must always be the world of the stage. Comedy may portray life, it may celebrate life, but it must never be life.

¹¹⁷Louis Jouvet, "Comedian and Actor," in The Modern Theater, ed. Daniel Seltzer (Boston, 1967), pp. 139-142.

¹¹⁸Zero by Mostel.

SECTION V

A STYLE OF ACTING IN AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

The actor of contemporary American musical comedy is a versatile performer who combines in his interpretation of a character the arts of singing, dancing, pantomime, and the speaking of dialogue. He uses a basically presentational style of acting. In a realistic drama, the actor attempts to represent action as it happens in life. He makes no direct contact with the audience because to do so would be to destroy the illusion. In musical comedy, as in children's theatre, the actor presents the play to the audience. He plays directly to them while giving the impression of playing to the other characters. He reveals the character, but he does not "become" the character. Thus, the actor remains distinct from his role.

In their text, Children's Theater, Davis and Watkins define the presentational style this way:

Presentational style is frankly acting. It allows the actor to remain part actor, part character; it permits him to select only those facets of his character's personality which will most clearly define the character for the audience; it lets him comment upon his character, be aware of the audience and its responses, play openly, and engage in honest make-believe.¹¹⁹

The actor in portraying a character in musical comedy holds him up, as it were, to a mirror for the audience to see. The audience sees the reflection with the actor and together they share the emotion of the character. The actor says of the action, "This

¹¹⁹Jed E. Davis and Mary Jane Larson Watkins, Children's Theater (New York, 1960), p. 134.

is life as the character sees it." This enables the audience and the actor to believe in the character and to take delight in him while realizing that he is not "real."

The presentational acting style has been present--though not in the integrated modified form of today--during all the phases of musical comedy's development. The basic camaraderie with the audience, the asides, the sharing of humor have all been part of the art form from the days of the vaudeville and minstrel shows, through the years of George M. Cohan's productions and the Princess Theater Shows, to the current musicals such as Fiddler On The Roof and Man of La Mancha.

The performer of musical comedy must be self-confident. The slightest trace of self-consciousness can be sensed in an acting style where the audience shares the emotion, and where the performer uses his human body in acting, singing, and dancing to portray human feelings. The actor must be familiar enough with his art to have fun with it. With the knowledge that his technique and his art are perfected comes the confidence that makes the actor's portrayal natural, sincere, spontaneous and delightful. He can use all his energy to communicate; he wastes none on being afraid. The true artist, even though he works hard, projects a feeling of relaxation and self-assurance to the audience.

Theatre critic, Harold Clurman, said in his review of the actors in My Fair Lady:

What makes me enjoy these players most of all is a quality of bravery, a certain professional sturdiness and reliability They are seemingly impudent, self-confident and modest at the same time. They are entirely immersed in the fine task of being entertaining. They are our humble servants and have a grand time at

the job which they have taken great pains to learn thoroughly. What they bring to the stage is not their private selves, but a craft which has somehow ennobled them for our pleasure and admiration.¹²⁰

Musical comedy is presented in a non-realistic manner for it is a celebration of life. No celebration is realistic. It has music and song and dance. It has a quickened pace, a faster tempo. It is always fresh and spontaneous. If it is not, it ceases to be a celebration. Man of La Mancha uses two styles, the realistic and the poetic-musical, but it never uses them together. The one represents the "real" Cervantes, the other presents the "poetic" Don Quixote.

Musical comedy is also presented in a larger-than-life manner. This is because of its basic musical nature. Music is magnificent. It expresses emotions and life in a grand manner. Therefore, to maintain a balance and harmony with the song and music, the other elements of the production--the dance, the dialogue, the gesture--must also be grand and large. The actor must project the movements of his whole body. His facial expressions are intensified. His voice is louder. He doesn't whisper, "I love you," to his beloved; he says or sings it so that everyone in the audience can share the tender moment. To keep a harmony between the musical presentation of an emotion and the straight dialogue that precedes or follows it, the actor must speak and gesture in a larger-than-life manner.

Jane Romano, trained as a method actress, found that she used a different technique of acting in musical comedy. Instead of working entirely within herself, she discovered that it was necessary

¹²⁰Clurman, p. 116.

to broaden her performance, that the "tone" had to be heightened and brightened. The freedom that she used in dance had to be applied to the acting as well.¹²¹

The actor uses certain techniques to help him interpret his character and the play in the presentational style and to project the interpretation with the vitality of feeling that musical comedy requires. If he masters these techniques, he is then free to use his intuition to guide him to the truth that he wishes to convey. He is also free to let aspects of his own personality help him in his interpretation of the personality of his character. An actor cannot communicate with technique alone. It is his humanity expressed through his technique that inspires an audience.

David Belasco says of personality in acting:

Personality is the greatest, the decisive element in art; above all in the art of acting, where not only the art but the artist is on exhibition.

If you do not master the technique of acting, personality will never make you a true actor . . . though it may make you, as it often has made others, a popular success . . . Behind the artist always stands the individual.¹²²

An actor may be self-confident, he may have learned all the technique that there is to learn, but he still must have the natural ability to communicate with an audience. The great stars have this. An audience can feel with them.

Adding music to pantomimic gestures creates the dance. Within the framework of the American musical comedy, a new style of

¹²¹Laura Clandon, "Developing the Triple Threat All in One, Singer, Actor, Dancer," Dance Magazine, XXXII (July, 1958), 32-39.

¹²²Toby Wolfe and Helen Kritch Cheney, editors, Actors On Acting (New York, 1949), p. 505.

unrestrained presentational dance gesture has developed. As Jerome Robbins says, "the spectator experiences the movement."¹²³ Pantomime as used by the actor-dancer is not formal. Choreographers have added colloquialism to the classic dance base. This had to happen for only a dance in "the vernacular" is suitable to portray cowboys, sailors, crapshooters and their molls.¹²⁴

The actor-dancer's gestures, while true to character and situation, are never realistic, but rather imaginative and suggestive, even when dealing with the basic situations in life.

Acting to music represents a peculiar problem says Agnes de Mille in her book, To A Young Dancer, for "the performer must phrase on two levels--the dramatic action, which has its own human rhythm, and the musical phrase, which imposes an arbitrary length and beat."¹²⁵ It also, she continues, represents an advantage because the coordinated emphasis, the placing of the pantomimic action so that it is reaffirmed by the music, guarantees a decisive point.

The dance is most effective in musical comedy when it is used to convey an emotion which no other medium could fully express. It thus adds dimension to the total musical. It can express any emotion. In West Side Story, the non-realistic dance pantomime is used by the actor-dancers to express tension, love, fear, and hate. In Carousel, dance reveals frustration, joy, and longing.

¹²³Sorrell, p. 209.

¹²⁴de Mille, The Dance, pp. 188-190.

¹²⁵de Mille, To A Young Dancer, p. 39.

In Finian's Rainbow, the deaf mute communicates entirely through eloquent gesture and dance-pantomime.

The dancer, like each member of the musical cast--principal or otherwise, must express himself with potent movements, eliminating all but what is necessary, motivated, and clear. He must say with his gestures only what he wants to say and no more. Daighilev says that omission is the essence of art.

The choreographer in directing dance and chorus-dance numbers in musical comedy starts with a central action governed by the plot. He uses the main characters as an acting-dancing-singing core to interpret the action. Then he adds the chorus members or dancers to add color and detail. They supplement and give depth to the action of the principals.

The chorus and dance ensemble members can do much to keep the musical vital and alive. Each member must act as an individual within a single-purpose group. He must keep his actions individual yet integrate them as contributing elements to the group action. He must remember that each actor is important in the presentation of the total play.

The members of the chorus and dance ensembles can also do much to help the musical pace and timing of the show. The tempo of life today is fast. Audiences expect a certain speed and rhythmic action in their entertainment. The principals and all of the cast members must speak, sing, and dance with a vitality reflecting a higher energy level than ordinary life. They must enter, exit, and act on cue. The right combination of pace and timing will produce the rhythmic speed which gives life to the production and ensures its success.

Sonia Moore in her book on the Stanislavski Method makes these statements about the actor which can be applied equally well to the singer and dancer:

When an actor seeks a justified tempo-rhythm for what he is doing, he is directly approaching his emotions which will respond. There is an individual right rhythm in every person. An actor must find it for the character he portrays. It will help him feel correct in his role, and it is as important to him to find it as it is for a director to find the right rhythm for a whole performance.¹²⁶

The singer in American musical comedy has the responsibility of portraying his character through song in a manner which is consistent with the way he presents him through dialogue and movement. The emotions which are expressed in song must come from the character as he would experience them, not from the actor-singer as he would experience them outside of the character.

In singing a role, it is as important for the actor to discover the states of heart and mind of the character as it is for him to have good tone production. His singing must reflect these states as accurately as possible. This does not imply that the singer himself will feel no emotion. If he does not, it is unlikely that the audience will. Susanne Langer states concerning singing and emotion:

As long as personal feeling is concentrated on the musical content, i.e., the significance of the piece, it is the very verve and 'drive' of the artist's work If on the other hand, the player lets his own need for some emotional catharsis make the music simply his outlet, he is likely to play passionately,

¹²⁶Sonia Moore, The Stanislavski Method (New York, 1960), p. 57.

with exciting dynamics, but the work will lack intensity because its expressive forms are inarticulate and blurred.¹²⁷

A beautiful voice expressing the emotions of the character is capable of stirring an audience in a way nothing else can. Artists such as Ezio Pinza in South Pacific, John Raitt in Carousel, and Alfred Drake in Oklahoma! are remembered for the quality and sheer beauty of their voices as well as for their dramatic portrayals. Such beauty of song balanced by artistry of dance, action, and orchestral music causes a real communication with the audience. Hammerstein recalls of the Oklahoma! audience returning for the second act, "The glow was like the light of a thousand lanterns. You could feel the glow. It was that bright."¹²⁸

Not all roles require legitimate voices but certainly a legitimate voice is desirable in any role as long as it is suited to the character. Bloody Mary in South Pacific is a comic character who while speaking comic dialogue distorts her voice in numerous ways. While singing the sentimental "Bali Ha'i," however, she projects the tones with full beauty and resonance. In the case of Professor Higgins in My Fair Lady, the songs reproduce the rhythm of speech but are still full of melody. The role provided an opportunity for an actor of great dramatic power who did not have a trained singing voice--Rex Harrison--to be utilized to advantage. This did not mean that an actor-singer with a legitimate voice could not play the Professor, but it meant that the role was not limited to someone with a trained singing voice.

¹²⁷Langer, p. 145.

¹²⁸Green, p. 244.

Because of the presentational style of acting in American musical comedy, the singer shares a closeness with the audience. The audience is the recipient of the emotions expressed in the songs while the illusion is that the other characters are (except in the case of a soliloquy).

There are several practical ways of including the audience in the action of the production. The most often used by singers, dancers, and actors alike are the aside, the soliloquy, "cheating" front, and direction of focus.

Asides are a character's remarks which the other characters on stage are not supposed to hear. Sometimes these are directed directly to the audience as Tevye does in Fiddler On The Roof, but more often the character seems to be expressing his thoughts to himself. The soliloquy, such as Billy's in Carousel, is similar in that inner thoughts are verbalized, but it is usually longer and performed when the character is alone on stage. The double soliloquy, for example, the scene between Emile and Nellie in South Pacific has two characters on stage but the blocking and the lighting create an illusion of the characters being alone.

"Cheating" front is a term used to describe the open position the performer takes when facing the audience while acting with and reacting to other characters. The voice is projected towards the audience but the illusion is that the actor is speaking to the other performers. This is achieved by gesture towards the other characters, by beginning a line to the other character before turning front or by positioning on stage.

This front position enables the audience to hear the dialogue and songs and to see the facial expressions of the actors. Many musical theatres, especially the larger ones, use microphones at the front of the stage to amplify the actors' voices. This necessitates the blocking of much of the action near the forestage or, at least, in a position facing the audience. Concealed microphones on the stage and concealed miniature transistorized individual microphones on the performers are also used in some professional theatres.

Direction of focus is another way of playing to the audience. The actor becomes a kind of audience himself. While the audience observes an action on stage, he observes the same action. However he does not actually look at it--because it is usually being performed behind or to one side of him. He looks out over the audience. This direction of focus is frequently used in a dream or vision sequence where both the character and the audience must "see" the action.

Having the character's focal point somewhere over the heads of the audience enables any dialogue that he might have to be clearly understood and it also enables his reaction to the vision or dream to be seen by the audience. In the production of Carousel starring John Raitt, Billy and the starkeeper leave the stage after Billy "sees" a few minutes of Louise's dance on the beach.

Communicating with the audience can sometimes become a problem during the long-run of a successful musical comedy. Howard Lindsay had the unenviable task of incarnating the Head of the Day

clan in Life With Father, a non-musical, for 3,213 performances. He is one of the best qualified modern actors to discuss the problems of the long-run play.

Lindsay says that when a comedy is repeated night after night, the actor becomes used to a hilarious response to certain situations. When an audience is present that refuses to be amused during the usual high points of the play, the actor is tempted to broaden his performance and to make the audience laugh. In this determination to achieve laughter, he goes farther and farther from the truth of the characterization. The audience ceases to be amused or to believe in the story.¹²⁹

Instead of trying to make the audience laugh, the actor should set out to create the truth of the character and the play for himself and for the audience. Zero Mostel in a discussion of the "cold" audience says that sometimes the fault lies within the actor himself. He may not be speaking clearly or he may have unconsciously shifted the emphasis in his characterization.¹³⁰ The actor must play the play. He must find the best way to interpret the truth of the character and then try to present this truth in a spontaneous and imaginative way at every performance. This does not mean "improving" the role or adding new things. That can be disastrous to the play. After such additions to a certain play the following notice appeared on the callboard:

REHEARSAL CALL
11:00 A.M. Monday
To Take Out The Improvements
(Signed) George M. Cohan¹³¹

¹²⁹Cole and Chinoy, pp. 549-550.

¹³⁰Zero by Mostel.

¹³¹Cole and Chinoy, p. 549.

The actor of musical comedy communicates the truth of his character and of the play to the audience. He does this in a presentational style where he plays directly to the audience, sparkling over the footlights, enjoying the role himself and letting the audience share, and participate in creating, the joy. As actor-character, he sometimes examines with the audience the deeper incongruities of human actions or he sometimes speaks a message, but he never lets his message overpower the play. He is a musical comedy actor. He is never completely realistic. He presents his role in a larger-than-life manner. He uses his technique and his talent--and today this means his singing, dancing, and acting--to create an evening of enjoyment for the audience. It can be an evening of thought but it must always be enjoyable. The musical comedy actor does not perform a representation of life; he celebrates life.

CONCLUSION

The actor of musical comedy uses a presentational style in which he plays directly to the audience. He presents his role in a manner which enables him to share with the audience an understanding and enjoyment of the character. This style has always been a part of musical comedy. Its development into an integrated and artistic form of presentation has paralleled the development of American musical comedy into a mature art form.

The song, the dance, and the gag-type humor of the minstrel show, vaudeville, pantomime, and extravaganza gradually grew into a musical form with plot and characterization. Revue contributed jazz, variety-in-unity, conversational speech, and American themes to the evolving form. Operetta showed that the musical libretto must be integrated, that continuity is important, and that high musical standards can be combined with fun. By the beginning of the contemporary period in 1940, the musical comedy had developed into a form where song, dance, and plot were all integrated.

The contemporary musicals stress artistic and dramatically sound librettos that emphasize actions that are motivated and plausible from the opening to the climax of the show. They use beautiful music to develop the plot, depict the mood, and reveal the emotions of the characters. The characters are more human and more interesting with comic, romantic, and sometimes undesirable qualities. The humor in the musical arises from the truth of the characters and the situations within the play.

The best musical comedies are characterized by deep human feelings. They present a view of life in which there is always hope--a larger-than-life view in which love and humanity prevail over all obstacles.

As the form of the American musical comedy has changed, the role of the actor has changed too. The performer can no longer be just a beautiful chorus girl or a specialty star. He must now be a versatile actor who can present his character to the audience through the media of song, dance, and gesture. He still communicates with the audience, he still sparkles and has fun, but he is now an integral part of the total production.

Although the acting style and the musical comedy form have become mature and have achieved a degree of perfection, they will continue to change. It is reasonable to assume that man's desire for variety and for perfection will lead artists to try new experiments in the musical theatre. It is also reasonable to assume that man's desire for the familiar will lead the same artists to build upon proven accomplishments. Whether the results of these changes will be an expansion of the present form of musical comedy or whether they will be of a different mold cannot be predicted. But, based upon a study of the past, it can be predicted that whatever the future form of the American musical theatre, it will always reflect the emotional and intellectual nature of man. It will always be built upon his desire to celebrate life through artistic entertainment.

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DEVELOPMENT OF A STYLE OF ACTING
IN AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

by

FRANCIS B. ROESNER

A.B., Marymount College, 1964

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Since an acting style springs from the nature of the play to be acted, a study of the development of a style of acting in American musical comedy necessitated a study of the development of musical comedy itself.

The presentational style of acting has always been a part of the American musical theatre. There have always been jokes, asides, and dialogue which let the audience know the mind of the character. There has always been a camaraderie between actor and audience. However, as the musical developed from an unintegrated series of entertainment acts into a mature form in which all the elements complement each other within a unified production, the acting style also became more integrated, refined, and perfected. There is still a presentation of entertainment; there is still a harmony between the actor and the audience, but it exists within the framework of a unified musical comedy and its purpose is to communicate the truth and humor of the character as he exists in the play. (

The actors are no longer specialty artists gifted in one phase of entertainment. The girls are no longer beautiful decorations. In the contemporary musical comedy, the actors must be versatile in singing, dancing, and acting. The girls must be talented and beautiful.

Both the American musical comedy art form and the acting style used to present it will continue to develop with new generations and with new ideas of what life is, but they will always be built upon the unchanging human desire to celebrate life and to share this celebration with others.