

DEVELOPMENT OF A STYLE OF ACTING
IN AMERICAN MUSICAL COMEDY

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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.