

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."<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup>Jerome 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.<sup>2</sup>

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,"<sup>3</sup> and comedy as "an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life."<sup>4</sup>

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!<sup>5</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>5</sup>Leonard 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 Straus, Offenbach, and Lehár, the banjos of Dan Emmett's

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

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 152-153.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

minstrel shows, the folksy 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."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> For these things entertain in

<sup>9</sup> Newman Levy, Rodgers and Hammerstein Song Book (New York, 1958), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, 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."<sup>11</sup> 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?"<sup>12</sup>

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."<sup>13</sup> Brooks Atkinson states, "the musical stage is pure theatre . . . it has the spontaneity of poetry."<sup>14</sup> Yet, a musical need not "say

<sup>11</sup>Copyright 1954, Radio Corporation of America. LM 1837 jacket The Student Prince.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Green, p. 215.

<sup>14</sup>Lehman 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 Robbins'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

Lehman 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 music. He adds that, specifically, the main influence which fed musical comedy as we know it today was the tradition of European operetta.<sup>15</sup>

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."<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

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

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

<sup>18</sup>Engel, 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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

<sup>19</sup>Cecil Smith, Musical Comedy in America (New York, 1950), p. 202.

<sup>20</sup>Engel, 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 pantomimos, 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.<sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>21</sup>Smith, 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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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 Camelot 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

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>23</sup>David 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.'<sup>25</sup>

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. B.

<sup>24</sup>"Vaudeville," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1966, XXIII, 12.

<sup>25</sup>Engel, 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."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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).

<sup>26</sup>Ewen, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>Garff 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."<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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

<sup>28</sup>"Vaudeville," p. 12.

<sup>29</sup>Langston 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>31</sup>Wilson, p. 181.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

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.<sup>7</sup>

Frank: She had a ticklar gagement to go to camp  
metin wid dis child.

Dan: ha! 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<sup>7</sup>.

Take your time Miss Lucy  
Take your time Miss Lucy Long . . .<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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.

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

<sup>34</sup>Nathan, 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-act traditions. Hundreds of actors developed their talents through the revue. These included