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Geoffrey Block

University of Puget Sound, block@pugetsound.edu

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Author(s): Geoffrey Block

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Review Essay

“Reading Musicals”: Andrea Most’s *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*
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GEOFFREY BLOCK

In Rodgers and Hart’s “Zip” from *Pal Joey*, a reporter named Melba sings about her interview with the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. The song presents Lee as an intellectual preoccupied by art, politics, and philosophy while she unzips, leading her to the conclusion that “Schopenhauer was right.” In that view Lee follows Friedrich Nietzsche, who borrowed from Schopenhauer the idea that music deserved its lofty position for its ability to transcend phenomenon (also known as appearance or representation) and embody the Will. In contrast to their mutual mentor, however, Nietzsche, like Wagner, embraces the Will as a liberating force, an antidote to the constraining views and approaches espoused by misguided neo-Socratic rationalists. Nietzsche goes still further. For the philosopher, music rests unchallenged in the hierarchy of the arts and even life itself: “Music alone, when placed alongside the world, can give an idea of what is to be understood by the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.”¹ At the time he published his famous exposition on the Dionysian and Apollonian in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the life expectancy of God, according to the philosopher, was about a decade. Art, however, would live forever and in the end justify not only humans but also the world. Schopenhauer may have been right, according to the hearsay of Gypsy Rose Lee in a 1940 musical. After rereading Nietzsche’s powerful early treatise for a course on modernization and modernism, however, I am struck by how

579

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 128.

much the philosopher seems at odds with the approaches, interests, and ideological perspectives in much current writing on the arts, in particular works that combine music and theater.² Nietzsche's aesthetically driven "world view" and the cherished place of music is not yet dead, but the end may be near.

For perspectives on opera, readers have many choices, including surveys of operatic works by major composers, handbooks on individual operas, and books that explore ways in which operatic music contributes to drama, ideas, and social meaning. Writings on musicals, by contrast, remain comparatively sparse. While some books and essays on the musical ably relate the music to its historical context, none compares with Susan McClary's demonstration of how the music in Bizet's *Carmen* conveys social meanings,³ or with Paul Robinson's accomplishment in his *Opera & Ideas*, a book that provocatively engages music to sustain a thesis "that operas reflect the intellectual climate of their age."⁴ Scholars have significantly broadened the range of critical approaches to the study of opera since Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama* first appeared in 1956, yet Kerman's work continues to serve as a central text in the attempt to work out the thesis "that in opera the dramatist is the composer."⁵ In this influential and controversial study of selected operas from Monteverdi to Stravinsky, Kerman maintains his credo in the preface to the revised edition: "What counts is not narrative, situation, symbol, metaphor, and so on, as set forth in the libretto, but the way all this is interpreted by a master mind."⁶ Kerman goes on to state his corollary creed "that an opera critic has to be sensitive first and foremost to music, and that such sensitivity is more, not less, important than his or her sensitivity to other stimuli, such as, for example, literature or historical and social forces."

Robinson, McClary, and Kerman argue persuasively that students of opera need to listen to the music. For Kerman and Robinson, among others, a reading of *The Marriage of Figaro* that does not take into account the music Mozart gives to the Count will lead to a misreading:

² For an extreme example of an argument that contradicts Nietzsche's aesthetic response see Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995). Although DeNora's subject is a composer rather than works for the musical stage, her book goes further than any I have read in its challenge to "our often deeply embedded assumptions about value, talent, and creativity" (xi) and its conclusion that aesthetics plays an inconsequential role in how these topics are socially constructed.

³ Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: "Carmen"* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992).

⁴ Paul Robinson, *Opera & Ideas: From Mozart to Strauss* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 8.

⁵ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Knopf, 1956; rev. ed. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

The sincerity of the philandering Count's apology to the Countess comes from Mozart's music, not from the comparatively perfunctory words found in Da Ponte's libretto. In another essay, Robinson concludes that "Mozart's sympathetic and profound treatment of Pamina works against any easy relegation of women to a lesser category of being" and that "both Haydn's *Creation* and Mozart's *Magic Flute* at once display the Enlightenment's shortcomings in their texts and, at least in the matter of gender, transcend them in their music."⁷ Music not only has the potential to redeem characters and their creators, it can thwart a misogynistic reading. Even feminist theorist Catherine Clément, who contends that Mozart's divine music for *The Magic Flute* serves an unjust cause, concludes that while the misogyny remains, music, "the unconscious of the text," invariably demonstrates its power to make us forget the words.⁸

Those inclined to accept Kerman's self-described "mandarin" approach to opera may nonetheless resist privileging music in studies of the American musical, where music is arguably less central than in an opera. Music varies in its relative importance from one musical to another, but in many instances, especially among works of the past several decades, music plays a role no greater than that played by books, lyrics, choreography, scene designs, costumes, or star performers. Only rarely is music unequivocally the primary aesthetic agent, even in musicals that use recitative rather than spoken dialogue. Nevertheless, there is arguably a middle ground between claiming that music is the primary force in a musical and proposing an interdisciplinary analysis that ignores music entirely.

It is not my purpose to deny that important ideas, information, and lessons can be learned from the impressive and exponentially growing bibliography of historical, biographical, bibliographical, journalistic, literary, and social treatments of musicals, and the many well researched and insightful biographies of major lyricists, librettists, directors, producers, choreographers, as well as composers—far too many to cite

⁷ Paul Robinson, "The Musical Enlightenment: Haydn's *Creation* and Mozart's *Magic Flute*," in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), 72, 74. Kerman makes a similar argument in *Opera as Drama*: "Pamina assists Tamino; what the supposedly misogynic Freemasons thought of this, I cannot say, but Mozart made it the center of his drama. Pamina is by far the fullest person in it, and her progress, by way of Mozart's greatest aria, 'Ach, ich fühl's,' is the most emphatically articulated" (105). Robinson further explores operatic readings that do not take music into account in "Reading Libretti and Misreading Opera," orig. publ. in *Reading Opera*, by Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988) and repr. in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*.

⁸ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988), 21. Clément's discussion of *The Magic Flute* appears on pp. 70–77.

here. Despite the proliferation of books on the Broadway musical in recent years, however, Joseph Swain's pioneering analytical and critical survey, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (1990; revised and expanded, 2002), and Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (1993) remain among the few full-length studies that succeed in showing how music contributes to the drama in a musical.⁹ Signs that this may soon change can be found in the increased attention given to musicals in our discipline's national and local meetings, and the future will doubtless display the fruits of many books and dissertations now in progress.¹⁰

To be sure, music historians can learn much that is meaningful about musicals from socially oriented studies that do not consider the music but that instead focus on how a musical may reveal unpleasant realities such as sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, I wish to argue the case for an approach that addresses aesthetic qualities and to encourage scholars and critics to consider how the music in musicals might convey social meanings, intellectual content, and dramatic ideas beyond words, stories, and stage

⁹ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990; rev. ed., Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2002); Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1993). In contrast to Swain, however, Banfield rejects the implication that "all musicals aspire to the condition of opera" (6). In *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from "Show Boat" to Sondheim* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), I have also tried to explore ways that music contributes to the dramatic impact of a musical. Several volumes of essays by Scott Miller effectively engage the intersection of music and drama. See *From "Assassins" to "West Side Story: The Director's Guide to Musical Theatre* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996); *Deconstructing Harold Hill: An Insider's Guide to Musical Theatre* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2000); and *Rebels With Applause: Broadway's Groundbreaking Musicals* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001). Ethan Mordden, in his multivolume survey of musicals from the 1920s to the present, *The Golden Age of the Broadway Musical*, consistently demonstrates sensitivity to and awareness of the role music plays in a musical: *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997); *Coming Up Roses: The Broadway Musical in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998); *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999); *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001); *One More Kiss: The Broadway Musical in the 1970s* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); and *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-five Years of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

¹⁰ One such book has just appeared: Raymond Knapp's *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), an important study that discusses music within a dramatic and cultural context; Princeton currently plans to publish Knapp's complementary volume, *The American Musical and the Performance of Self*. The Yale Broadway Masters, of which I am series editor, also intends to engage music directly. Two volumes, my *Richard Rodgers* (2003) and John Snelson's *Andrew Lloyd Webber* (2004), have been published, and volumes on Berlin (Jeffrey Magee), Bernstein (Carol Oja), Gershwin (Larry Starr), Kander and Ebb (James Leve), Kern (Stephen Banfield), Loesser (Thomas L. Riis), Romberg (William A. Everett), Sondheim (Kim Kowalke), and others currently proposed are scheduled to appear over the next decade.

directions. Even though Lehman Engel may have concluded that “the success of our best shows is due first to the effectiveness of their books,” he remained sensitive to the role music played in the shows he examined.¹¹ If readers accuse me of preaching to the converted, I will gladly accept the charge to the extent that it is true. In any event, I think we need to shore up our base and practice what we preach. If we ignore music, we ignore a significant dimension that can help us understand what is going on in a musical and what a musical can mean.

A case in point is *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook* (1997), edited by Joanne Gordon, a volume in the Garland Casebooks on Modern Dramatists series.¹² Sondheim has described himself as “a playwright who writes with song” but makes no claim to be the librettist for his shows.¹³ Nevertheless, the *Casebook* implicitly credits its subject for the dramatic work of Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart, Arthur Laurents, George Furth, James Goldman, Hugh Wheeler, John Weidman, and James Lapine. With the exception of Gary Konas’s essay, “*Passion: Not Just Another Simple Love Story*,” the collection does not acknowledge or address the fact that Sondheim is a composer as well as a lyricist and that the justification for placing him in a book on dramatists might have something to do with his musical contribution and not only the musical books contributed by other playwrights. *Casebook* readers unfamiliar with Sondheim might understandably conclude that Sondheim’s musicals contain no music at all.

According to general editor Kimball King, the *Casebook* “experienced such an overwhelmingly positive response” that three years later Garland issued a sequel, *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*.¹⁴ While most of these essays offer insights into historical, social, and textual meanings of Sondheim’s musicals, the virtual absence of musical discussion creates inevitable distortions and misreadings. Volume editor Sandor Goodhart notes that Sondheim “writes music and lyrics” and has the common sense to note that “it seems at least curious to found an analysis upon a reading of Sondheim, an examination of what has been set down on a page as opposed to what is beheld in performance or heard on recordings.”¹⁵ Yet Goodhart defends the curious omission of music when he states that “to read Sondheim is to isolate what is distinctive about his work in whatever context the

¹¹ Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater* (New York: Collier Books, 1975), 38.

¹² Joanne Gordon, ed. *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1997).

¹³ Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow in association with the Library of Congress, 2003), 79.

¹⁴ Kimball King, “General Editor’s Note,” in *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sandor Goodhart (New York: Garland, 2000), xiii.

¹⁵ Sandor Goodhart, “Reading Sondheim: The End of Ever After,” in *Reading Stephen Sondheim*, 8.

distinctiveness happens to be encountered.”¹⁶ Musical considerations, however, are absent from all contexts in the essays that follow.

Sondheim has fared better than most Broadway composers. I have mentioned Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, the first and to date only comprehensive musical survey of any Broadway composer's work in which readers can learn how Sondheim's music shapes drama in his shows. More recently, Mark Eden Horowitz's interviews with Sondheim offer what may be the most penetrating and articulate remarks on record by any composer on the notes and bolts of the creative process.¹⁷ Few if any composers have explored their compositional processes and artistic intentions with the rigor, depth, nuance, and honesty conveyed in Sondheim's interviews.

Unfortunately, many readers, including knowledgeable theater historians, who could profit from the ideas offered by Banfield and the Sondheim-Horowitz interviews cannot successfully negotiate their level of theoretical musical sophistication and technical musical language and are intimidated by the musical notation that accompanies these books. Perhaps what future authors of social and literary criticism need is a “Sondheim for dummies,” clear explanations of how the bean theme grows into many themes in *Into the Woods* or how musical fragments culminate in the song “Sunday” that marks the completion of Seurat's painting at the end of act 1 in *Sunday in the Park with George*, or the many musical and dramatic parallels between the first and second acts in both works. Instead, books like the *Casebook* and *Reading Stephen Sondheim* simply cite analytical studies such as Banfield and then abdicate responsibility for considering additional ideas about the relationship between words and music or the dramatic content of the music. A note in Edward T. Bonahue, Jr.'s “Portraits of the Artist: *Sunday in the Park with George* as ‘Postmodern’ Drama” speaks for his colleagues: “Nor am I concerned here with the musical aspects of the work, which are examined closely in Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*.”¹⁸ Surely interdisciplinary scholars could read, heed, and critique Banfield, whose book is a model of an interdisciplinary study that engages music.

Musicals can tell us much about social attitudes and values, notably by demonstrating the limitations of social progress, especially when measured against evolving standards.¹⁹ The history of *Show Boat* offers

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*.

¹⁸ Edward T. Bonahue, Jr., “Portraits of the Artist: *Sunday in the Park with George* as ‘Postmodern’ Drama,” in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, 183.

¹⁹ One recent book focuses exclusively on musicals as social documents rather than artistic products: John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American*

an instructive example. Its first act takes us to a time and place, about a quarter century after the Civil War, where African-American males, although no longer slaves, are employed as poorly paid hard-laboring stevedores on the docks while their wives work long hours as kitchen help and as maids. Black men embody negative character stereotypes (for example, Joe is described as lazy). In their songs and speech, at least in the original 1927 Broadway production, they occasionally refer to themselves as “niggers,” the word of choice spoken by the bigoted members of the white community such as Pete, the angry boat engineer infatuated with Julie LaVerne, and Sheriff Vallon. Dramatically, the African-American characters take a back seat, and in the case of Julie, they suffer a worse fate than the major white romantic characters. Julie, the show boat’s leading lady, discovered in act 1 to be of mixed blood and married to her white leading man Steve Baker—an act of blatant miscegenation—is banished and condemned to a life of drunken depravity in act 2 after she loses the man she loves. Magnolia sings several songs in each act, mainly with Ravenal, becomes the leading lady on the show boat after Julie’s expulsion, and appropriates black culture in an updated (i.e., ragged) version of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” to obtain Julie’s singing job at the Trocadero in Chicago in the second act (after which Julie vanishes from the show). Magnolia survives Ravenal’s abandonment and achieves success as a singer (we hear her singing “Can’t Help Lovin’ ” on a radio broadcast). The musical concludes with an awkward meeting between Magnolia and Ravenal arranged by Magnolia’s father, Captain Andy, a meeting that will doubtless lead to forgiveness and a happy ending.

If one chooses not to take into account the social meanings music can provide, the racist aspects of *Show Boat* loom large.²⁰ But even if one only “reads” *Show Boat*, it is possible to observe that Magnolia listens to, is nurtured by, and learns valuable lessons from Joe and Queenie,

Musical Theatre (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2003). For Jones, the criteria of excellence is determined by how successfully the musical “dramatized, mirrored, or challenged our deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs” and advocated change (1). The majority of musicals, which Bush designates as “diversionary musicals” throughout his text and in decade-by-decade appendices of “Long-Running Diversionary Musical,” “contain little content or social relevance,” and are only important because they “raise the question of why certain decades delivered more ‘mindless fluff’ than others” (1).

²⁰ For an essay that finds racism and no aesthetic content in *Show Boat*, see Robin Breon, “*Show Boat*: The Revival, the Racism,” *The Drama Review* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 86–105. Contrasting approaches can be found in John Lahr, “Mississippi Mud,” *New Yorker*, 25 October 1993, 123–26, and Scott McMillin, “Paul Robeson, Will Vodery’s ‘Jubilee Singers,’ and the Earliest Script of the Kern-Hammerstein *Show Boat*,” *Theater Survey* 41, no. 2 (November 2000): 51–70. All three essays address the controversies generated by the 1993 Toronto *Show Boat* tryout that preceded the Broadway revival of 1994, directed by Hal Prince.

while respecting both them and their culture. The black characters also fall just below Magnolia and Ravenal in the musical hierarchy of the show. Captain Andy plays a major dramatic role but sings patter rather than the big tunes. Before the Hal Prince revival in 1994, Parthy had an orchestral leitmotif but no songs and came off as intolerant, a social snob, and shrewish. Ellie and Frank are allowed a song and dance number in each act as comic rather than dramatic characters. Aside from the principal lovers, Ravenal and Magnolia, the only characters to possess musical substance are African American in whole or in part. Joe's "Ol' Man River" and Julie's "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and "Bill" give these characters a depth of humanity absent from all the others as they embody the central philosophy of nature and love along the river.²¹ If we disregard these songs we will likely miss the work's humanity and egalitarianism, rare qualities for this era.

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586

Outstanding among recent books that consider musicals from a social—Nietzsche might say rational—rather than from musical or aesthetic perspectives is Andrea Most's well researched *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*.²² As heralded by its title and subtitle, *Making Americans* is concerned mainly with "how first- and second-generation American Jewish writers, composers, and performers used the theater to fashion their own identities as Americans" (1).

At the outset, Most writes that musical comedy, in contrast to opera, features "an equal division of labor between the book, which consists of spoken scenes, and the musical numbers, which consist of songs and dances" (8). In a footnote to this sentence, however, she explains that although she will "draw attention to salient musical features, . . . an in-depth musicological study—of orchestration, harmonization, lyric[s], instrumentation, and so on—is beyond the scope of this project" (205–6). Thus Most informs her readers that her book will not treat musicals as an equal partnership between text and music. To her credit, Most acknowledges that "the music of musical comedy obviously merits consideration on its own terms as music," and "for those interested in the work done so far in this regard," she offers a list of four books and two dissertations, and she cites significant books on popular song by Alec Wilder, Allen Forte, and Charles Hamm.²³ And yet this well intentioned

²¹ Banfield notes that Julie's singing of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat man" "prefigures her unmasking; thus not just the singing of the song but the recognition of musical and lyric style actually becomes an issue in the plot, and the same can be said when Magnolia has to learn to sing the song in a more up-to-date manner" (*Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 185).

²² Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004.

²³ *Ibid.*, 205–6. The books on Most's short list include Swain, *The Broadway Musical*, Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, Deena Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of*

recognition reveals a serious misreading of these books, since only Wilder discusses music “on its own terms as music” (205)—even Wilder’s musical examples are untexted. At the very least, the other books address the relationship between music and their words, what Banfield (cited generally in Most’s note) refers to as the melopoetics of a song.²⁴ To varying degrees, the books on Most’s list, again with the exception of Wilder, demonstrate not only how music interacts with lyrics, but also how music informs the musical books, choreography, and design to convey dramatic and social meanings. Such interactions are rarely, if ever, pondered in *Making Americans*.

About as far as Most goes to show how a song can contribute to the dramatic meaning of a show is found in her discussion of “My Baby Just Cares for Me,” a song composed by the original Broadway composer Walter Donaldson and lyricist Gus Kahn for Eddie Cantor in the 1930 film adaptation of *Whoopee* (1928).²⁵ Cantor’s character has emerged from his hiding place in a stove with his face covered in soot. According to Most, Cantor’s “ability to transform himself with blackface can also be *read* [italics mine] as a triumph of Jewish escapism or American self-invention” (6). For Most, the social and entertaining virtues of this song cannot “cancel the racism of the scene, but they add levels of understanding and analysis that offer a more complex account of the show’s power” (6).²⁶ Despite these insightful observations, if “My Baby” contains any *musical* signs that may have suggested black culture to movie audiences in 1930, we do not find this out from Most. In fact, the rest of her discussion treats the Broadway production and film adaptation of

George and Ira Gershwin (New York: Dutton, 1991), and Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook, 1987); the dissertations cited are Graham Wood, “The Development of Song Forms in the Broadway and Hollywood Musicals of Richard Rodgers, 1919–1943” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan [Minnesota], 2000), and David Michael Kilroy, “Kurt Weill on Broadway: The Postwar Years (1945–1950)” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 1992). The books on popular song cited by Most include Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900–1950* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990; orig. pub. 1972; Allen Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924–1950* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995); and three books by Charles Hamm: *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), *Yesterdays: Popular Song in American* (New York: Norton, 1979), and *Irving Berlin—Songs from the Melting Pot: The Formative Years, 1907–1914* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997). Most concludes her list with a general recognition of Banfield, Kim Kowalke, and Ralph Locke.

²⁴ Stephen Banfield, “Sondheim and the Art That Has No Name,” in *Approaches to the American Musical*, ed. Robert Lawson-Peebles (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter Press, 1996), 137–60.

²⁵ The film title added an exclamation mark.

²⁶ Ethan Mordden interprets *Whoopee*’s racial tropes as “cultural satire on a well-nigh Voltairian level” and characterizes Cantor as “an equal-opportunity racist-baiter” who “does not only Jewish and black but ‘Indian,’ too, during the second-act reservation sequence.” Mordden, *Make Believe*, 192.

the journal of musicology

Whoopie as if they were non-musical plays. The role played by music in future chapters is equally superfluous.

In her "Overture," Most makes the point that since her "book is about assimilation as much as anything else, overt Jewish characters and themes actually *disappear* as the decades progress" (6). One chapter later, in "Acting American: Jews, Theatricality, and Modernity," she returns to this important idea when she notes that the Jewish characters in *The Jazz Singer* (play, 1925, and film, 1927) and the musicals *Whoopie* (1928) and *Girl Crazy* (1930) "emerged directly out of the conflicts experienced by the immigrant generation" (27). By *Babes in Arms* (1937), Jews were demonstrating a "second-generation rejection of ethnic specificity," and "Jewish characters were subsumed within an all-American cast, a trend that culminated with *Oklahoma!*" (1943). In the next stage, which Most discusses in chapters devoted to *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *South Pacific* (1949), and *The King and I* (1951), "the immigrant represented the beginning of a nostalgic reimagining of the American Jewish past as an example of other, newer immigrant groups."

In the three shows Most discusses in "Cantors' Song, Jazz Singers, and Indian Chiefs," the central character plays and is played by a Jew: Jackie Rabinowitz (later Jack Robin) in *The Jazz Singer* (George Jessel on stage and Al Jolson in the film), Henry Williams in *Whoopie* (Eddie Cantor on stage and film), and Gieber Goldfarb in *Girl Crazy* (Willie Howard). By *Oklahoma!*, Jewish characters are disguised, although the actor who first played the peddler Ali Hakim, Joseph Buloff, was a prominent Yiddish actor and would be readily recognized by his acting style as Jewish. In *South Pacific* the "sanitized" "Luther [Billis] bears a striking resemblance to the Jewish (or ethnic) comics who populated earlier musicals," i.e., *Whoopie*, *Girl Crazy*, and *Oklahoma!* (166).

In *Babes in Arms*, the character Gus "covers the [Jewish] nose of the boy just in front of him" as he tries to obscure the fact that not all the kids are "one hundred percent descendants of one hundred percent parents" (84). Val (Billie's "Funny Valentine") embodies the values of diversity and racial equality espoused by New York Jewish liberals without himself being Jewish. It is even more of a stretch to imagine Annie Oakley as a surrogate immigrant Jew who "will learn to be white" (135). Jud Fry, the outsider in *Oklahoma!*, is not Jewish from Most's perspective, an interpretation which explains why Jud dies without having a chance to assimilate.²⁷ Most interprets Fry as a surrogate black, albeit

²⁷ Rodgers and Hart's *Babes in Arms* is the subject of chapter 3, Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, chapters 4 and 6, and *Annie Get Your Gun* (book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields and music and lyrics by Berlin) the featured musical of chapter 5. Most devotes the bulk of her concluding chapter to *The King and I*, her third Rodgers and Hammerstein show and fourth show with a musical score by Rodgers.

not in blackface, who threatens the racial purity of the new state. In this land without blacks and Indians, the ranchers and farmers, and perhaps a few assimilated Jews, will learn to get along without people like him.

No doubt many Jews felt vulnerable to McCarthyism as early as 1948, when Hammerstein and Joshua Logan began their work on *South Pacific*, and Jews were frequently associated with Communism at the time the show premiered in 1949.²⁸ Nevertheless, although a Frenchman singing in an operatic style (with an Italian accent) may appear as a musical outsider, it is misleading to interpret Emile de Becque as a dramatic embodiment of Jewish liberalism and a character who “evokes the European (mostly German) [Jewish] intellectuals who fled to America in the 1930s and 1940s to escape Nazi persecution” (170). In the earlier musicals she discusses, Most argues with some success that Jewish characters succeeded in establishing their “whiteness.” Even conceding that in the real world, “centrist Jews, in order to protect their hard-won status as loyal Americans, therefore needed to dissociate Jewishness from Communism and to establish their own anti-Communist credentials” (154), Most does not offer a clear argument for how this plays out in *South Pacific*. She at least recognizes that since “there is, after all, a war going on” (173), it was prudent on political grounds and not necessarily a sign of anti-Semitism that the U.S. military wanted to check the background and ideas of a mysterious Frenchman before they signed him up for a secret mission in enemy territory. I am not persuaded that de Becque is a surrogate Jew, nor do I suspect that he is a Nazi sympathizer or a secret member of the French resistance.

Before *Making Americans*, Oscar Hammerstein, II had not customarily been identified as the author of a racist musical book. In contrast to the film director D. W. Griffith, widely recognized in his time and ours as a self-defined white supremacist, Hammerstein actively strove to eliminate racism. Most may distinguish between a racist and the author of racist work (Hammerstein is only the latter), but the racist epithet is a blunt instrument that does not easily distinguish between Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a classic but ideologically repugnant film that considers miscegenation evil and blacks inferior, and Hammerstein’s plea for racial tolerance in *South Pacific*.²⁹ Most concedes that

²⁸ Most, 154–55, 171–74, and 185–86.

²⁹ Hammerstein is also a racist of a different order than Wagner, who was unapologetically anti-Semitic in his writings and private life. It has only been since World War II, however, that scholars have tried to show how Wagner’s librettos, which he wrote himself, implicitly exhibit anti-Semitism in the musical depictions of characters like Mime and Alberich in *The Ring* and, more controversially, how anti-Semitism is conveyed in the music of *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*. See Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race, and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992) and Bryan Magee’s response in *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 371–80.

Rodgers and Hammerstein “never consciously intended to write a racist play” (160). She also acknowledges that Hammerstein, both in his private and public life, worked for years to combat social and racial inequality and “was active in a number of groups that fought against prejudice, including the NAACP” (160).

Nevertheless, despite the good intentions embodied in Cable’s powerful indictment against prejudice (“You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught”) and Nellie Forbush’s eventual acceptance of de Becque’s children from a biracial marriage, Most considers Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “theatrical racial type” exhibited by Liat and Bloody Mary as “a racist device that undercuts the very message the play is supposed to promote” (158). Most passes up few opportunities to demonstrate how Hammerstein’s play furthers the racism of Michener’s novel (“hardly a racially enlightened text, but marginally more so than the play” [159]). Perhaps most significantly, in the novel “Liat is actually an educated woman who speaks fluent French,” and her relationship with Cable, who also speaks considerably more French in the novel than he does in the musical, develops over time with conversation as well as early sexual intimacy.

590

According to Most, Rodgers and Hammerstein significantly increase the racist nature of the romance between Cable and Liat in their decision to condemn the object of Cable’s lust to musical silence, “a sentence that in the musical theater is akin to death” (159). Most also proposes that Cable does not sing “Younger Than Springtime” as a response to genuine feelings of love, but because as a romantic character in a musical comedy his “initial sexual encounter must be explained not realistically as lust but romantically as love-at-first sight” (159). (She makes no apparent stylistic musical distinction between a man in love singing “Younger Than Springtime” and a group of horny Seabees objectifying women in “There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame.”) Aside from the extra racist implications of a musically silenced Liat, racism in the musical play *South Pacific* corresponds closely to Michener’s novel and his characters. In both novel and musical, for example, Bloody Mary exploits her daughter for financial gain and offers her daughter as a sex worker. Through this seemingly reprehensible action, Mary wants to give Liat a better life with a bright potential marriage prospect. Most blames Michener, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and implicitly co-librettist Logan either for creating such a character or for not transforming such a character into someone less exploitative and less racist.

It seems paradoxical to find Hammerstein, one of the most liberal, egalitarian, and socially enlightened creative figures on Broadway of his time, charged with creating (albeit unintentionally) a racist musical, a musical theater counterpart to the more overtly racist film *Birth of a Na-*

tion. We have already seen how *Show Boat*, also with a book by Hammerstein, has been chastised for perpetuating the racism of an earlier era, despite the fact that it was racially integrated, with a featured black character singing the central song (“Ol’ Man River”). Record producer John Hammond still gets high marks for his crusade to discover and support black talent without personal gain in the 1930s, but his brother-in-law, Benny Goodman, who had much to lose when persuaded by Hammond to feature black jazz players in his combo, has been criticized for not going far enough or for demonstrating artistic rather than social motives. If we do not place our cultural artifacts in their historical contexts and instead invoke current standards of political and moral correctness, only an enlightened few will measure up. Like the men who wrote the constitution, Hammerstein, the founding father of the American musical, falls short of the great idea that America is a land of equality and justice for all.

During the initial Broadway run of *Anything Goes*, the wealthy Englishman Evelyn Oakleigh sang nothing and still ended up with Reno Sweeney (Ethel Merman) before the curtain came down. In *South Pacific*, Liat produces virtually no sound at all. I concur with Most that Liat is reduced as a character because, like Parthy in *Show Boat* and the dancing Azuri in Hammerstein and Romberg’s *The Desert Song*, she is not allowed to sing. To add insult to injury, Liat also loses her man, twice, first to prejudice and then to death. The other racial Other, Bloody Mary, Liat’s mother and procuress, sings two songs (“Bali Ha’i” in act 1 and “Happy Talk” in act 2). Liat, however, is relegated to a visual rather than audible presence in “Younger Than Springtime” and signs rather than sings in “Happy Talk.”

Despite Liat’s passive musical presence—her love for Cable is evident in the musical book by her reluctance to marry the rich French planter Jacques Barrere—the lyrics and music of “Younger Than Springtime” successfully convey how Cable’s lust for a beautiful and sweet Tonkinese girl can be audibly transformed into love. We know that getting the right musical tone was important to Rodgers and Hammerstein. In fact, they had considered and rejected at least two other songs for Cable to sing at this major moment in act 1.³⁰ Director Logan regarded the second of these songs “a bit light weight for a hot, lusty boy to sing right after making love to a girl who will change his life,” Rodgers and Hammerstein agreed, and the song was rejected.³¹ They eventually discovered that “My Wife,” a song left over from *Allegro*, would serve Cable’s

³⁰ See Block, *Richard Rodgers*, 144–46.

³¹ Joshua Logan, *Josh: My Up and Down, In and Out Life* (New York: Delacorte, 1976), 232–33; repr. in Block, *The Richard Rodgers Reader* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 144–45.

situation. Two years after *South Pacific*, the second discarded song, “Suddenly Lovely” (which Logan unfortunately misremembered as “Suddenly Lucky”) was given a new title and lyrics and recycled to its present felicitous location as “Getting to Know You” in *The King and I*. In contrast to Most, I hear in “Younger Than Springtime” a song that persuasively depicts a young man’s passion for a young woman and the possibility of genuine love without marriage.³² In act 2, Cable rejects Liat as an unsuitable marriage partner, but after he sings his song against the evils of racial prejudice, he realizes before his fateful mission that he loves Liat enough to oppose the social order of the Philadelphia elite. Critics of *South Pacific*, including Most, usually consider the death of Cable dramatically necessary in order to avoid confronting the inevitable that the Lieutenant would never marry Liat and stay on Bali Ha’i. The lingering power of “Younger Than Springtime” persuades me to take Cable at his word: “Yes, sir, if I get out of this thing alive, I’m not going back there! I’m coming here. All I care about is right here. To hell with the rest.”³³

* * *

Most’s decision not to address the music constitutes a lost opportunity to explore a dimension that might add credence to her generally plausible narrative of Jewish assimilation. For example, when Eddie Cantor sings in blackface, he not only appropriates blackness visually, he appropriates aural signs of African-American musical culture. It is now accepted as a commonplace that music is not merely an autonomous bystander but a direct participant in a cultural dialogue. As early as 1924, Latvian musicologist Abraham Idelsohn attempted to locate specific musical identifiers in Jewish folksongs.³⁴ In an appendix to his biogra-

³² The rhythm of the song’s verse adopts the rhythms of the verse to “Bali Ha’i”’s and therefore reinforces how the island’s music, which belongs to Liat as well as her mother, has permeated Cable’s being. The sudden shift from I to ♭VII (F to E♭) the “burst” on the word “song,” also parallels the modal shift from C to B♭ in the “Bali Ha’i” verse (on the word “island”). The pervading lyricism of the “Younger Than Springtime” chorus, which culminates in whole notes at its melodic apex on the words “I with you,” conveys a romanticism that is missing, not only from “Suddenly Lovely” (the future “Getting to Know You”), but also from the boisterous and lustful “There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame.”

³³ *Six Plays by Rodgers & Hammerstein* (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 347. Without trying to minimize the prominent role race takes on in *South Pacific*, it is important to mention the unspoken (by Rodgers and Hammerstein or Most) role played by class, a factor that may have inhibited the realization of a possible romance between Cable and Nellie.

³⁴ Abraham Z. Idelsohn, “Musical Characteristics of East-European Jewish Folk-Song,” *Musical Quarterly* 18 (October 1932): 634–45. See Charles Schwartz, *Gershwin: His Life and Music* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1973; repr. New York: Da Capo, 1979), 321–33. Schwartz also cites Idelsohn’s “The Distinctive Elements of Jewish Folk-Song,” *M. T. N. A. Proceedings* (1924).

phy of Gershwin, Charles Schwartz summarizes Idelsohn's conclusions and notes various "Jewishisms," especially the "emphasis on a 'minor' sound" and examples in which "the interval of a minor third plays an important part" in conveying this "Jewish profile."³⁵ Schwartz also offers examples to show how Gershwin's tunes "exhibit the declamatory and expressive traits found in Biblical prayer chant, as well as characteristics associated with Jewish secular pieces" in "My One and Only," and he makes note of the parallels between "Seventeen and Twenty-One" and lively Jewish dances known as freylekhs (frailachs in Schwartz, both derived from the German word *freulich*).³⁶

A quarter century after Schwartz's appendix, an essay by Jeffrey Magee, "Irving Berlin's 'Blue Skies': Ethnic Affiliations and Musical Transformation," demonstrates in far greater detail, precision, and insightful social and analytical underpinning how particular uses of chromatic lines, the minor mode, "modal blending and shifting," and specific intervals (for example, ascending perfect fifths at the outset of a song) were perceived as Jewish signifiers by contemporary commentators and songwriters themselves.³⁷ After discussing how "Blue Skies" shares musical characteristics (with ethnically neutral lyrics) found in Berlin's previously direct attempts to convey Jewish affiliation musically and textually, Magee surveys the evolving dramatic contexts of this song and its changing cultural meanings in stage, film, and jazz transformations. As Magee explains, "Blue Skies" was first heard as an interpolated song in Rodgers and Hart's *Betsy* (1926), a star vehicle for the Jewish vaudevilian Belle Baker in a "theatrical and dramatic context that was explicitly Jewish."³⁸ The larger theme of *Betsy* was the virtue of assimilation, a subject that Most relates insightfully in her chapter on *The Jazz Singer*, *Whoopie*, and *Girl Crazy*. Since Jakie's jazzy performance of "Blue Skies" was the dramatically pivotal song in the film version of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Magee emphasizes Charles Hamm's point that performance style conveys as much information as the printed music.³⁹ In the 1920s,

³⁵ Schwartz, *Gershwin*, 323.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 324–25. For a book that surveys Gershwin's (and others Jews') indebtedness to African-American musical heritage see Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: Jews, African Americans, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999).

³⁷ Jeffrey Magee, "Irving Berlin's 'Blue Skies': Ethnic Affiliations and Musical Transformation," *Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000): 537–80.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 557. Magee carefully qualifies his musical description of alleged Jewish signifiers: "It must be stressed that there is nothing essentially Jewish about chromaticism, minor keys, or modal blending and shifting, all of which had been common currency in European musical styles for over two centuries. But in a specific time and place—namely Manhattan in the first four decades of the twentieth century—songwriters and critics interpreted such musical traits and songs as Jewish" (549).

³⁹ Charles Hamm, "Genre, Performance and Ideology in the Early Songs of Irving Berlin," in *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 370–80.

influential critics believed that “jazz constituted a Jewish interpretation of a black idiom” and that a work like Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* represented “the ultimate refinement of jazz.”⁴⁰

A welcome recent book by Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish*, offers hundreds of musical examples to demonstrate or suggest parallels and possible connections between Yiddish folk and popular music, synagogue modes and melodies, and American popular song on Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood.⁴¹ In one sense, Gottlieb’s thesis is not unlike Most’s in that both authors argue that Jews transformed their ethnicity into the American mainstream. Without addressing the music, Most concludes that “remarkably successful, the Jewish creators of the Broadway musical established not only a new sense of what it means to be Jewish (or ‘ethnic’) in America but also a new understanding of what ‘America’ itself means” (2). Gottlieb emphasizes musical transformations: “The premise of this book is that they [Jews] infused popular music of the United States with melodic elements from Yiddish folk and theater songs and from Ashkenazic synagogue modes and tunes in the twentieth century, which came to be part of the American sound.”⁴²

594

Gottlieb, like Wilder, focuses on songs and rarely discusses the dramatic context of songs in staged musicals. In one case, however, he attempts to show that Gieber Goldfarb’s assimilation, identified by Most, is musical as well as literary. Gottlieb’s example of possible musical assimilation is “Goldfarb, That’s I’m,” the brief—51 seconds in the performing edition recorded by conductor John Mauceri—and little known moment between “Embraceable You” and the third appearance of “Bidin’ My Time.”⁴³ He interprets the cross-relation “between the melody’s B \flat on the word ‘he’s’ (referring to Goldfarb) and the harmony B \flat on the word ‘right’ ” as “a sly reference to the character’s ethnicity in the phrase ‘Goldfarb, he’s all right.’ ”⁴⁴ Gottlieb hears this cross-relation as a sign of assimilation, but to my ears the clash of minor and major suggests cultural difference. Perhaps more importantly, the style of this musical snippet evokes something more like an Irish jig, certainly a song significantly unlike the ballads, jazzy numbers, and

⁴⁰ Magee, “Irving Berlin’s ‘Blue Skies,’ ” 558.

⁴¹ Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 2004). Jack Gottlieb, a composer of Jewish sacred music, was Leonard Bernstein’s assistant and program annotator at the New York Philharmonic (1958–66). I am grateful to James Peltz for making proofs of Gottlieb’s book available to me prior to publication.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴³ Elektra Nonesuch 9 79250–2.

⁴⁴ Gottlieb, 64.

pseudo-Western styles that mark the rest of the score (albeit without Jewish signifiers). Before the end of the evening, however, when Gieber immediately reprises Molly's romantic ballad, "But Not For Me," in act 2 (originally sung by Ginger Rogers), audiences can hear that Gieber's assimilation is musical as well as social.

Despite many insights into how Jews assimilated into Americans and in the process created an American language, Most does not attempt to show how Jewish music as well as Jewish jokes and Jewish sensibilities also appeared on musical theater stages in the 1920s and 1930s. Like other writers, Most notes how Jews combined elements of Jewish and black culture to create a style that many came to think of as American. The jazzy "Makin' Whoopee!" also suggests a Jewish musical trait in its prominent use of minor harmonies and minor thirds in its bridge section. Although he does not address the dramatic context of "Makin' Whoopee!" (Henry is singing his thoughts about marriage to a comely female sextet prior to the wedding of Sally Morgan and Sheriff Bob Wells), Gottlieb inadvertently offers another musical clue that might shed light on how Henry conveys his Jewish associations. Through a series of examples, Gottlieb shows how "Makin' Whoopee!," along with several related popular songs from the 1920s and 1930s ("April Showers," "Blue Room," "Am I Blue?," and "The Glory of Love"), can be heard as rhythmic paraphrases of the synagogue prayer known as the "Kedusha Response" by 19th-century liturgical composer Salomon Sulzer.⁴⁵ Sulzer's chants were undoubtedly familiar to more than a few future Jewish songwriters who may have had or witnessed a Bar Mitzvah, and they are still widely sung in Conservative and Reform congregations. All these songs share a sequence that arises from a stationary musical pivot in the prayer ("Ka-*dosh* [D-B], Ka-*dosh* [D-C], Ka-*dosh* [D-D]); in each case the ascending note appears on the strong beat and in longer note values. In "Makin' Whoopee!" these longer ascending notes match the most important words, for example "bride," "June," and "sun" in the first phrase, and the repeated Ds on the last phrase correspond to the repeated Ds of the prayer. Not only does Henry Williams act Jewish and do Jewish shtick (despite his un-Jewish name, like Belle Baker as Ruth Kitzel belting "Blue Skies"), but his music may also convey Jewish associations, even if these remnants are obscure or subliminal in origin compared with the more easily recognizable Jewish signifiers in Berlin's "Jewish" song.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 148–49. "April Showers" (1921) was composed by B. G. DeSylva and Louis Silvers, "Blue Room" (1926) by Rodgers and Hart, "Am I Blue?" (1929) by Grant Clark and Harry Akst, and "The Glory of Love" (1936) by Billy Hill.

Much of what Most has to say about the books to her chosen musicals is well argued. She is convincing when identifying evolving social attitudes, perceptions, and ideologies about Jews. She also offers reasonable explanations concerning the ways Jews succeeded in establishing their identity as an ethnic and a cultural group rather than a race and how Jews were able to appropriate black culture while at the same time becoming assimilated Americans (unlike blacks) and eventually creating a new American identity. Interestingly, Most does not stop with a cultural dialogue between Jews and blacks. Three shows she considers contain a strong Native American presence (*Whoopie*, *Girl Crazy*, and *Annie Get Your Gun*), and in one instance, *Oklahoma!*, we find a conspicuous Indian absence in a show set in a region known as the Indian Territory. In fact, if one were to consider island natives in *South Pacific* and the Siamese presence in *The King and I*, indigenous groups occupy a discernible presence comparable to that of Jews. In any case, Most tells readers a great deal about how the cultural presence of Indians as well as Jews evolved from the 1920s to the 1940s, and anyone interested in this evolution may profit greatly from Most's analysis and careful documentation.

596

"Cantor's Sons, Jazz Singers, and Indian Chiefs" is for me the most successful chapter, however, in part because Jews appear directly and without camouflage in the three shows (and films) discussed, *The Jazz Singer*, *Whoopie*, and *Girl Crazy*, and also because of the reduced role music plays in the dramatic construction of these shows, despite the fact that each served to introduce at least one song that has entered the collective American consciousness: "Blue Skies" in the film version of *The Jazz Singer*; "Makin' Whoopie!" in *Whoopie*, and "Embraceable You," "But Not for Me," and "I Got Rhythm," and possibly several other contenders in *Girl Crazy*.⁴⁶ Regarding the transfer of *Whoopie* from stage to film, especially, it is probably of little consequence that two of the three hit songs in the former ("Love Me or Leave Me" and "I'm Bringing a Red, Red Rose"), along with almost every other non sequitur song, were discarded in the film less than a year after the Broadway production was intentionally closed to make way for the film.⁴⁷ If the actual musical content of a song is superfluous, Henry (Cantor) as a waiter in

⁴⁶ Although primarily associated with *The Jazz Singer*, "Blue Skies" was actually introduced as an interpolated song by Irving Berlin in a show otherwise by Rodgers and Hart, *Betsy* (1926). See Magee, "Irving Berlin's 'Blue Skies,'" 552-57.

⁴⁷ The first screen adaptation of *Girl Crazy* (RKO, 1932) retained five songs from the original Broadway production, a fairly high survival rate at the time ("Could You Use Me?," "But Not for Me," "Embraceable You," "Sam and Delilah," and "I Got Rhythm"), and added one new song, "You've Got What Gets Me."

blackface can just as easily sing “My Blackbirds are Bluebirds Now, Ever Since the Movies Learned to Talk” (an interpolated song with an allusion to blackface in its title) and “Hungry Women” as “My Baby Just Cares for Me.”⁴⁸ In contrast to a later era when books were scrapped and songs preserved, an era that persists to this day, the film *Whoopee!* retained much of its book and discarded most of the songs. If songs do not matter, *Whoopee!* offers an excellent example for modern audiences of how a stage show can be read in a film. Although neither Ruth Etting nor her character or song, “Love Me or Leave Me,” made the transfer from stage to cinema, and in the end a significant amount of the book never made it to the film, a number of the original stars returned in the movie to reenact—or in the case of Cantor to expand—their stage roles.⁴⁹

The lyrics of “My Baby” do matter and Most makes a persuasive case through additional references in the dialogue and other business that the “operation” Henry’s baby “enjoys” is almost certainly a circumcision.⁵⁰ People uncomfortable with the image of the Jewish schlemiel conveyed by Woody Allen in his earlier films may find the “surprisingly literal illustration of the feminized Jewish man” (47) in *Whoopee!* still more discomfiting. Most also argues plausibly that much of the play “is rife with allusions to Henry’s implied homosexuality” and that “references to sickness become clear allusions to homosexuality” (50). One of the most striking images in the film occurs in the scene when Henry and the wealthy, distinguished Jerome Underwood roll around on the floor trying to look into each other’s pants to compare “operations.” Most’s analysis helps us to get the joke and to see that a cigar can be more than a cigar. What we will not learn from Most is the extent to which Jewish assimilation is musical as well as social.

At various times and to varying degrees, music in a musical can set moods, establish and transform characters, demonstrate compatibilities and antipathies between characters or groups, foreshadow and recall

⁴⁸ For a synopsis that briefly offers the context of each song, see Stanley Green, “*Whoopee*,” notes to the Smithsonian American Musical Theater Series “archival reconstruction of the original 1928 Ziegfeld production,” RCA Special Products DPM1 0349 (with additional archival information by Martin Williams).

⁴⁹ Most makes no attempt to clarify how the film abandoned much of the music that did not include Cantor and how the film altered and expanded Cantor’s role from secondary comic lead to the central star.

⁵⁰ Sometimes Most’s decoding of lyrics arguably goes too far, for example her view of Lorenz Hart’s playful plays on the word “fair” in the song “You Are So Fair” from *Babes in Arms*. In Most’s reading, the song is “about the problems of establishing meaning through language, and by extension, of establishing identity through stereotype” (94). Since the lyrics to this song explicitly mention that the character being addressed, Delores, does *not* have fair hair (“your hair ain’t fair”), Most’s presumption that the title and opening line of the song “implies a standard romantic cliché: you are so blond and light-skinned, and, by extension, so beautiful” (94) overreaches the context and places too great a cultural burden on Hart’s clever word play.

events, convey underlying tensions, suggest historical, national, or ethnic styles, confirm dramatic truths, contradict false lyrical protestations, and even convert musical hate into love. Music also conveys hidden as well as overt social meanings. In an ideal interdisciplinary world, social historians would attempt to explain how music—as well as stories, lyrics, and stage directions—confirms or contradicts these meanings. Only a person impervious to the musical impact of “Some Enchanted Evening” would complain that Emile de Becque shows no signs of physical demonstrativeness after he sings his high note of the big love ballad that concludes the first scene. Most is such a person: “As he sings the last line of ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ (Never let her go!), he does not even touch her. Where a kiss might be expected the stage directions read: ‘There follow several seconds of silence. Neither moves.’ Their apparent passion for each other is hard to glean from either the dialogue or the stage directions” (176–77).

I agree that a close reading of *South Pacific* could cause one to question the substance beneath the surface compatibilities between Emile and Nellie and to conclude that sharing an appreciation and enthusiasm for life may not be sufficient basis for a marriage. Perhaps Emile would be more persuasive to Most if he sang *Carousel*'s “If I Loved You” or an aria by Mozart, Verdi, or Puccini. But I doubt that it would matter to Most what Emile sang if his music was not corroborated by dialogue or stage directions.

Clearly musical expression counts for very little in Most's view. The idea that the composer might have a role in how we experience a musical—the notion of the composer as dramatist espoused by Kerman, McClary, Robinson, and Swain, among others—does not fit into her reading of the dialogue. Consequently, music does not factor in persuading a listener of Emile's love for Nellie when he sings “Some Enchanted Evening,” nor in conveying the potency of his loss in “This Nearly Was Mine,” nor in showing that Nellie sincerely loves Emile when she exuberantly concludes “A Wonderful Guy” by declaring “I'm in love” 18 times. The relationship between Emile and Nellie may not be a romance made in our current notions of heaven, but we need to listen to what these characters are singing if we are to understand how to interpret the dialogue and the stage directions.⁵¹ Although not a musician, Hammerstein understood that his collaborator “writes music

⁵¹ One of Most's principal reasons for doubting the romantic suitability of Emile and Nellie is unpersuasive, i.e. “the fact that they almost never sing together means that their love is never quite believable” (178). If simultaneous singing were a criterion for believable romance, Emile and Nellie would join most of their predecessors in shows where such singing was the exception.

to depict story and character and is, therefore, himself a dramatist.”⁵² After all is said and read, we need to listen to how Rodgers transformed Hammerstein’s words.

Much has changed since 1983 when Charles Hamm’s impassioned review of Albert Goldman’s biography of Elvis Presley appeared in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and shook up the musicological world.⁵³ After branding the biography “a disgrace,” Hamm sounded a call to arms when he advocated that “we musicologists should take matters into our own hands by beginning to produce responsible, disciplined studies of the music of our own time” and that music historians should subject “the literature on popular and vernacular music to the same critical scrutiny we lavish on other books.”⁵⁴

Most’s *Making Americans* is not Goldman’s *Elvis*. On the contrary, Most has written a thoughtful study that contributes to our understanding of how ethnicity is revealed in selected musicals from 1925 to 1951. Despite the book’s many strengths, however, her decision not to consider the role played by the music in her story undermines her attempt to understand these shows and creates distortions and misreadings. Ideally, writings on the musical not only need to hear from musicologists who are comfortable addressing social and literary meanings, but also from social historians who enhance and give credence to their arguments by trying to understand how music can support, modify, or contradict meanings obtained from reading spoken or underscored dialogue. It is not necessary to adopt Nietzsche’s view and place music at the pinnacle of art and life, or even the centerpiece of a musical. We do not have to agree with Gypsy Rose Lee that Schopenhauer was right. But if social and literary historians—the modern equivalent of Nietzsche’s neo-Socratic rationalists—fail to discuss or even recognize the social, dramatic, and aesthetic role music plays in a musical, music historians must take it upon themselves to interrupt the silence.

⁵² Oscar Hammerstein 2nd, Foreword to *The Rodgers and Hart Song Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), ix; repr. in *The Richard Rodgers Reader*, 81.

⁵³ Charles Hamm, Review of *Elvis* by Albert Goldman, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35 (1983): 335–40; repr. in Hamm, *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

ABSTRACT

Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* studies eight musicals (*The Jazz Singer*, *Whoopie*, *Girl Crazy*, *Babes in Arms*, *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*) in an effort to explore "how first- and second-generation American Jewish writers, composers, and performers used the theater to fashion their own identities as Americans."

Most offers imaginative and often insightful sociological readings of musical librettos, lyrics, even stage directions, but virtually ignores music. That music can sometimes elucidate or contradict an exclusively social or literary reading may be seen, for example, in Emile de Becque's immobility at the end of "Some Enchanted Evening." In other cases, when the social assimilation of Jewish characters is revealed to be a musical one as well, music can support Most's argument.

The problem exemplified by writings such as Most's—the distortions and misreadings that may result from a social history that does not engage music—may be seen in the broader context of Broadway and opera scholarship. Lessons to be learned from studying the musical *Show Boat* and the works of Sondheim point to the need for scholars and critics to consider how the music in musicals might convey social meanings, intellectual content, and dramatic ideas beyond words, stories, and stage directions.