My Preference for Musical Comedy

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Introduction

After reading “Introduction: A Sketch of the History of U.S. Musical Theater,” I became particularly interested in *West Side Story*, the 1957 musical set in New York City. The musical attracted my attention because dance is not treated as a minor form of entertainment added between scenes. Instead, dancing is one of the central methods through which the characters communicate their emotions, relationships, identities, and conflicts. This aspect helped me develop a personal connection with the musical because dancing is one of the activities I enjoy most. I like dancing myself, and I also enjoy watching how other people use movement to express emotions that may be difficult to communicate through ordinary speech.

My interest in *West Side Story* also comes from its New York setting. Because New York is my place of origin, I find it easier to connect with a musical that presents the city as more than a simple background. The streets, neighborhoods, social divisions, and crowded public spaces all contribute to the action. The original Broadway production opened on September 26, 1957, and was set on the West Side of New York during the final days of the summer of 1957. It brought together Arthur Laurents’s book, Leonard Bernstein’s music, Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics, and Jerome Robbins’s direction and choreography (Internet Broadway Database [IBDB], n.d.).

The history of American musical theater also interested me because it demonstrates that theater has always been connected to the political and social conditions of its time. Musical theater may entertain an audience through singing, dancing, romance, comedy, and spectacle, but it can also reveal how a society understands race, class, gender, immigration, and national identity. The development of minstrel shows, musical comedy, integrated musicals, *West Side Story*, and more recent productions such as. *Hamilton* demonstrates that the American musical has both reproduced social prejudice and challenged it.

This essay reflects on my response to the history of U.S. musical theater, with particular attention to dance in. *West Side Story*, my interest in musical comedy, the racial history of minstrelsy, and the development of modern theater criticism. It argues that American musical theater cannot be separated from the social history of the United States. However, it is also important not to assume that every musical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was inspired only by racism and segregation. Race strongly influenced American performance, but musical theater also developed through immigration, urbanization, popular music, comedy, commercial entertainment, and changing

approaches to storytelling.

My Interest in *West Side Story*

The musical that interested me most in the historical introduction was *West Side Story*. I was initially drawn to it because of its emphasis on dance. In some performances, dance appears to be included mainly to entertain the audience. In *West Side Story*, however, movement is closely connected to the storyline. The characters dance because movement is part of how they communicate their confidence, aggression, attraction, rivalry, and sense of belonging.

The Library of Congress describes *West Side Story* as a production in which dance was used more extensively and dramatically than in previous musicals. Jerome Robbins's choreography did not merely decorate the story; it revealed character, advanced the plot, and intensified the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks. The creators worked collaboratively, meaning that the choreography influenced Bernstein's music and Oliver Smith's scenic designs, while the music and dramatic action also influenced the movement (Library of Congress, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

This integration is one reason the musical feels emotionally powerful. The gangs do not only describe their rivalry through dialogue. Their posture, spacing, gestures, and movement demonstrate their desire to control the neighborhood. Even before the audience fully understands each character, it can recognize tension through the way the characters occupy the stage. Dance becomes a physical language of ownership and exclusion.

The "Dance at the Gym" is a strong example of this relationship between movement and storytelling. The scene contains energetic dance styles, including mambo and popular social dance, while also presenting the social separation between the two groups. Tony and Maria first notice each other during the dance, and the surrounding activity appears to slow as their attention becomes fixed on one another. The scene allows dance to communicate both group conflict and private attraction without separating those ideas into unrelated parts of the performance (Library of Congress, n.d.-c).

This use of dance is especially meaningful to me. When I watch people dance, I do not pay attention only to technical skill. I also notice the attitude, emotion, confidence, and personality expressed through movement. *West Side Story* demonstrates how a performer's body can communicate before the character says anything. The aggressive movements of the gangs create a different feeling from the tenderness associated with Tony and Maria. In this way, choreography functions almost like dialogue.

The musical also interests me because it combines romance with social conflict. At its center is a love story influenced by Shakespeare's. *Romeo and Juliet*, but the romance develops in a New York environment shaped by hostility, ethnic difference, territorial conflict, and prejudice. The personal relationship between Tony and Maria cannot be separated from the conflict surrounding them. Their love offers the possibility of connection, but it is threatened by the identities and loyalties imposed by

their communities.

Because I am from New York, the setting makes the musical feel familiar, even though it represents an earlier historical period. New York is often presented as a place of opportunity, diversity, and cultural energy. However, it can also contain sharp divisions among neighborhoods, ethnic groups, generations, and economic classes. *West Side Story* captures both sides of the city. It presents energy, music, movement, and romance, but it also presents insecurity, exclusion, violence, and competition over limited space.

My Preference for Musical Comedy

Of the musical styles discussed in the introduction, I am most interested in musical comedy because it creates a balance between dramatic storytelling and humor. I enjoy performances that can present serious ideas without becoming emotionally exhausting. Comedy gives the audience room to breathe, but it can also help expose foolish behavior, social hypocrisy, and human weakness.

When I have attended or watched Broadway shows, I have often noticed moments of laughter appearing during serious parts of the storyline. These moments do not necessarily weaken the drama. In many cases, humor makes the characters feel more human. Real life rarely remains entirely tragic or entirely comic. People may laugh during stressful situations, make jokes to hide nervousness, or use humor to discuss subjects that would otherwise be uncomfortable.

Musical comedy can use songs, movement, exaggeration, misunderstandings, and surprising changes in tone to create humor. A comic song may entertain the audience while also revealing a character's personality or advancing the plot. The best comedy therefore does more than interrupt the story. It contributes to the meaning of the performance.

The history of the integrated musical further explains why this balance is important. In an integrated musical, songs and dances develop naturally from the characters and dramatic situation rather than appearing as unrelated entertainment. *Oklahoma!* became a major turning point because its songs and choreography supported the plot and revealed character motivation. Agnes de Mille's dream ballet, for example, allowed Laurey's emotional conflict to be expressed through dance rather than ordinary dialogue (Robinson, 2019).

Comedy can also be integrated into the story. A humorous secondary character may provide contrast to the central conflict while reflecting the same themes from another perspective. In *Oklahoma!*, the secondary romantic plot involving Ado Annie, Will Parker, and Ali Hakim provides comedy, but it also reflects the larger musical's concerns with love, courtship, choice, and social expectations (Robinson, 2019).

My interest in musical comedy therefore does not mean that I want theater to avoid serious subjects. Instead, I appreciate how comedy and drama can strengthen one another. Laughter may make an

audience more receptive to a difficult message. It can also make a sudden tragic moment feel more powerful because the emotional atmosphere has changed.

Musical Theater in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

I was also interested in the discussion of musical theater during the late 1800s and early 1900s, particularly because racial segregation and discrimination were major social problems during that period. The history demonstrates that musical theater was not created outside society. The attitudes, conflicts, and power relationships of American life entered the theater and appeared in its characters, songs, costumes, humor, and performance traditions.

After researching this period, I began asking what kinds of messages popular musical performances were communicating to their audiences. Entertainment may appear harmless, but repeated images can influence how people view groups that are different from themselves. When audiences repeatedly see one racial group represented as unintelligent, lazy, dishonest, or naturally inferior, those images can make discrimination appear normal.

However, my original hypothesis that musical shows of the late 1800s and early 1900s were mainly inspired by segregation and racism needs some qualification. Racism deeply influenced American theater, but it was not the only influence. Musical theater also developed through vaudeville, operetta, burlesque, Tin Pan Alley, immigration, urban entertainment, European theatrical traditions, African American music and dance, and the commercial demands of Broadway.

A more accurate conclusion is that racial segregation and racism shaped a major part of American theatrical history. They influenced who could perform, what roles were available, how Black culture was represented, where audiences could sit, and which performers received recognition. Some productions directly repeated racial stereotypes, while other artists worked within restrictive theatrical forms and gradually challenged their limitations.

Minstrelsy and Blackface Performance

The minstrel show provides one of the clearest examples of racism within the history of American musical entertainment. The form emerged prominently during the nineteenth century rather than the late eighteenth century. The first minstrel shows were performed in New York during the 1830s, when white performers darkened their faces and presented exaggerated imitations of enslaved and free African Americans. By the middle of the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy had become a major commercial entertainment industry (National Museum of African American History and Culture [NMAAHC], n.d.).

The performances combined songs, dances, jokes, comic dialogue, and caricature. White performers generally used burnt cork or similar materials to darken their skin. They exaggerated speech patterns, clothing, movement, and behavior in ways that represented Black people as ignorant, childish, lazy, dishonest, or excessively emotional. These performances encouraged white audiences to laugh at invented versions of African American life rather than recognize Black people as complex human beings.

The Library of Congress explains that blackface minstrelsy reached its peak during the mid-nineteenth century and relied heavily on stereotypical figures such as the plantation slave and the overdressed urban "dandy." By the 1840s, minstrel performances had developed into structured evening programs, and their influence continued into later popular forms, including vaudeville and burlesque (Library of Congress, n.d.-d).

The fact that white actors performed in blackface illustrates how racism influenced musical theater. These actors did not simply present inaccurate images; they turned racial humiliation into profitable entertainment. The stereotypes helped create a theatrical world in which whiteness was associated with normality and authority, while Blackness was represented as something comic, strange, or inferior. The National Museum of African American History and Culture explains that such stereotypes made it easier to deny African Americans full citizenship because they encouraged white audiences to accept dehumanizing assumptions (NMAAHC, n.d.).

At the same time, the history is more complicated than saying that every person connected with musical theater was racist in exactly the same way. By the 1870s, African American performers also appeared in minstrel companies, sometimes because minstrelsy offered one of the few available paths into professional entertainment. Black performers were often still required to wear blackface and reproduce stereotypes, but some used the stage to demonstrate musical skill, introduce elements of African American culture, and create opportunities for later Black theatrical companies. Their participation does not remove the racism of the form; instead, it reveals the limited and contradictory conditions under which Black artists worked (Library of Congress, n.d.-d; Smithsonian National Museum of American History, 2016).

This history forces modern audiences to ask difficult questions. Can a performance be artistically influential while also being morally offensive? How should theater historians discuss the musical and choreographic elements that developed within racist forms? Is it possible to acknowledge artistic influence without celebrating the racism attached to it?

I believe the answer requires honesty. Minstrelsy should not be removed from theater history because doing so would hide an important source of later American entertainment. However, it should not be described as innocent comedy. Its influence must be discussed together with the stereotypes, unequal power relationships, and social damage it produced.

Race, Segregation, and the Development of the Musical

Racism and segregation played important roles in American musical theater because they affected performers as well as the content of performances. Black artists frequently faced restricted opportunities, segregated audiences, unequal payment, and pressure to perform identities created by white producers and audiences.

Nevertheless, African American music and dance strongly influenced American popular entertainment. This creates a major contradiction. White theatrical institutions often discriminated against Black people while borrowing from, imitating, or profiting from Black artistic traditions. The history of American musical theater therefore contains both cultural exchange and cultural exploitation.

Over time, Black performers and writers established their own companies and created works that challenged the limitations of minstrelsy. They did not simply contribute to a form created by white performers. They developed artistic voices, professional networks, and performance traditions that influenced Broadway, jazz, tap, comedy, and popular music.

Later integrated musicals also began addressing social conflict more directly. *Show Boat*, which opened in 1927, combined music with a continuing narrative and addressed subjects including racial inequality and interracial relationships. Its success helped demonstrate that musical theater could engage serious social questions rather than functioning only as light entertainment. *Oklahoma!* later strengthened the integration of music, dance, plot, and characterization, establishing a model that influenced Broadway for decades (Robinson, 2019).

West Side Story continued this development by integrating dance with a tragic story of romance, prejudice, immigration, and gang conflict. The musical does not address Black-white segregation in the same way as minstrelsy or. *Show Boat*, but it demonstrates how ethnic identity and social exclusion remained central to American theater.

Therefore, racism did not merely provide subjects for musical theater. It influenced the structure of the industry, the movement of performers, the expectations of audiences, and the meaning of American identity onstage.

From *West Side Story* to *Hamilton*

My reflection on Katherine Richardson's article about *Hamilton* also helped me understand how American musical theater has continued to change. Richardson's article is better described as a critical essay or review than as an empirical research paper because it does not present a formal research question, research participants, data-collection method, or statistical analysis. However, this

does not mean the article lacks value. Theater criticism often depends on careful observation, interpretation, comparison, and argument rather than experimentation.

Richardson describes how she interpreted different aspects of. *Hamilton*, particularly its language, representation, and musical style. The production combines hip-hop, jazz, rhythm and blues, and traditional Broadway influences while presenting the history of Alexander Hamilton and the American founding era (Richardson, 2017). The musical's use of contemporary musical forms demonstrates that Broadway can communicate historical subjects through sounds associated with present-day America.

This creates an interesting comparison with earlier American musical theater. Minstrel shows often allowed white performers to imitate and distort Black culture. *Hamilton*, by contrast, uses musical forms strongly associated with African American and Latino culture while placing performers of color at the center of a national historical narrative.

The comparison does not mean that *Hamilton* resolves every question about race or history. Critics have debated how the musical presents slavery, the Founding Fathers, immigration, and national identity. However, it clearly demonstrates how Broadway has become a location where older historical narratives can be retold through newer musical and racial perspectives.

The musical also demonstrates how popular styles can become forms of theatrical storytelling. Hip-hop is not included merely to make the production appear modern. Its speed, rhythm, verbal competition, repetition, and wordplay communicate ambition, conflict, intelligence, and political debate. Alexander Hamilton's verbal energy reflects his desire to write, speak, rise socially, and influence history.

Richardson's article is therefore valuable as a personal and critical interpretation. A review does not need to pretend to be a scientific study. Its success depends on whether the writer presents a clear argument, supports observations with details from the performance, and explains why those details matter.

Applying Elinor Fuchs's Critical Method

Richardson's discussion can also be understood through Elinor Fuchs's "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play." Fuchs encourages critics to examine a play as an entire world rather than focusing immediately on individual characters or isolated lines.

In Fuchs's approach, a critic asks questions about the play's space, time, atmosphere, social structure, patterns, and forms of power. She writes that a play is not merely a description of another world but a world that passes before the audience in time and space. Her method encourages readers to identify patterns while also paying attention to unusual details that do not fit easily into their first interpretation (Fuchs, 2004).

This method provides a useful way to analyze *West Side Story*. Instead, of asking only whether Tony and Maria love each other, a critic can ask larger questions. Who controls the streets? How do the Jets and Sharks move differently? What kinds of spaces allow the characters to feel safe? Which characters are permitted to speak, dance, or belong? How does the environment change when violence begins?

The same method can be applied to. *Hamilton*. A critic may ask who is allowed to represent the nation, how time moves through the performance, why writing is repeatedly associated with power, and how the musical's casting changes the visual meaning of American history.

Richardson's article follows important elements of successful theater criticism because it breaks down the musical's words and considers what they mean within the larger production. However, the analysis could become stronger if it more explicitly followed Fuchs's guidance by examining space, time, power, movement, and recurring patterns in addition to language.

Conclusion

Reading "Introduction: A Sketch of the History of U.S. Musical Theater" helped me understand that musical theater is more than singing and entertainment. It is a changing artistic form shaped by American history, social conflict, popular culture, and the experiences of both performers and audiences.

West Side Story interested me most because dance is essential to its storytelling. The choreography presents conflict, community, romance, and identity through movement. My own interest in dancing made this aspect of the musical especially meaningful. Its New York setting also created a personal connection because the city is part of my background.

I remain particularly interested in musical comedy because it balances serious drama with laughter. Humor does not necessarily distract from the meaning of a performance. When it is integrated effectively, comedy can reveal character, expose social contradictions, and prepare the audience for more serious emotional moments.

The history of minstrelsy also demonstrates that American musical theater has been shaped by racism and segregation. White actors in blackface transformed demeaning racial stereotypes into popular entertainment. These performances influenced later theatrical forms while reinforcing harmful assumptions about African Americans. However, it would be too broad to conclude that every musical in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was mainly inspired by racism. Musical theater was shaped by several forces, even though racial inequality remained one of its most significant influences.

Finally, Richardson's article on *Hamilton* shows how a critical review can interpret a musical without becoming a formal research study. Through Elinor Fuchs's method, a critic can go further by treating

each play as a complete world with its own rules, spaces, patterns, and power structures.

The history of American musical theater is therefore both inspiring and uncomfortable. It includes artistic innovation, dancing, music, romance, and comedy, but it also includes exclusion, stereotyping, and unequal access. Studying this history allows audiences to appreciate the art while also questioning the social ideas it has communicated. It also demonstrates that musical theater continues to change as new performers, writers, composers, and audiences reconsider whose stories belong on the American stage.

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