



Musical Theater and Film

by John M. Clum

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Many within and without gay culture have observed a strong identification on the part of gay men with musical theater. A number of gay writers have seen the musical as a crucial element in their consciousness of their homosexuality.

Alexander, Larry Kramer's alter ego in his play *The Destiny of Me* (1992), sings "I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair" from *South Pacific* (1949) as a way of drowning out the attacks of his violent, homophobic father.

Queer critics Wayne Koestenbaum (*The Queen's Throat*) and D.A. Miller (*Place for Us*) write of their youthful love of the musical and its relationship to their sense of difference.

At the same time, television situation comedies have used love of musicals or knowledge of show tunes as a definitive sign of homosexuality. Even Kevin Kline's small town hero in the film *In and Out* (1997) listened to the cast album of *Gypsy* (1959) and worshipped Barbra Streisand.

In reality, such identification is stronger for men who grew up in an age in which musical theater was a more central part of American popular culture than it is now, a time when gay men necessarily had to find ways to sublimate their desires and identity. The flamboyant excess of musical theater, including opera and ballet, offered such outlets.

There are a number of ways to look at the relationship of the musical to gay culture, particularly gay male culture. One can consider the contribution of out or closeted gay composers and lyricists to the musical. One can also focus on the importance of musicals and, particularly the centrality of the women who were its divas, to that group of gay men known as show queens.

One can also look at post-Stonewall presentations of openly gay characters and shows written by gay writers primarily for gay audiences.

Composers and Lyricists

It is now common knowledge that some of the most important creators of the American and British musical have been gay men. One has to look only, for instance, at the men who brought *Kiss Me, Kate* to the stage in 1948, at the beginning of the Cold War when treatment of homosexuals was particularly Draconian.

The hit musical was produced by a gay man; written by Cole Porter, a gay man who was married but who rather openly and, for the time, incautiously, conducted his affairs with men; directed by John C. Wilson, who had been, in the 1930s, Noël Coward's lover; and featured among its stars bisexual Harold Lang, who had affairs with Leonard Bernstein and Gore Vidal, among others.

Of course, none of this was common knowledge at a time when homosexuality dared not speak its name

(though people in the theater knew), but it does suggest the ways in which gay men were invested in and responsible for musical theater.

Of course, not everyone involved in musical theater is or was gay, but there were and are a significant number of major gay artists involved in musical theater from composers (Porter, Bernstein, Sondheim, Coward, Elton John), to lyricists (Hart, Porter, Sondheim), to librettists (James Kirkwood, Terrence McNally, among others), to directors and choreographers (Michael Bennett, Tommy Tune, John Dexter, among others), to scene and costume designers, and, of course, performers.

While now the homosexuality of artists involved in musical theater is celebrated in the gay press, during the heyday of musical theater (1920-1960), artists had to be circumspect.

Nonetheless, Cole Porter wrote a number of lyrics that contain homosexual innuendo. Lorenz Hart, half (with composer Richard Rodgers) of one of the most successful songwriting teams of the 1920s and 1930s, penned a number of serious lyrics that can easily be read autobiographically as cries from the heart of an anguished, self-hating homosexual.

Noël Coward and Ivor Novello, the two most successful British musical composers and stars of the period between the world wars (Coward wrote musicals into the 1960s), were both gay men.

In our time, Stephen Sondheim, although never dealing openly with the subject of homosexuality and never offering a gay character (though it is very difficult not to read Robert, the central character in *Company* [1970], as gay), is something of a gay icon.

Revivals of Sondheim's classic musicals, particularly *Follies* (1971), a hymn to diva worship, and the grand diva classic *Gypsy* (for which Sondheim wrote the lyrics), are quasi-religious events for show queens.

For almost a century, particular show tunes have had special meaning for gay men. From Judy Garland singing "Over the Rainbow" (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939; Harold Arlen, E.Y. Harburg) to Doris Day celebrating her "Secret Love" (*Calamity Jane*, 1953; Sammy Fain), to the unseen singer in *West Side Story* (1957) reassuring us, in the words of gay men Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, that there's a place for us "Somewhere," to Albin in Jerry Herman's *La Cage aux Folles* (1983) proudly declaring "I Am What I Am," the Broadway theater and Hollywood musical have provided us with our anthems.

The Broadway Diva

For many gay men, the centerpiece of the musical was the larger than life female star, her persona an exaggeration of the femininity that one associates with drag queens. Although there are a number of fine leading men, some of whom do not put much effort into concealing their gayness, show queens have been far more interested in the divas.

The Broadway diva defies conventional notions of gender and plays out the parodic, larger-than-life performance of gender that the musical privileges. For this reason, perhaps, gay men have been the core following of a number of leading ladies.

From the devoted following of Judy Garland's stage appearances to the fans of Garland's daughter, Liza Minnelli, to the admirers of Elaine Stritch, Barbra Streisand, Angela Lansbury, Bette Midler, Barbara Cook, and, more recently, Betty Buckley, gay men have made adulation of the leading lady part of the gay theatrical experience.

Now, when fewer musicals are being written for star turns--because of the long runs necessary for musicals to be profitable, musicals are usually written with leading roles that can easily be played by a succession of lesser known performers--many divas have been required to build their careers on concert and cabaret

appearances, and many show queens have turned their attention to cabaret.

Particularly in the pre-Stonewall days of the closet, the diva was part of the camp appeal of the musical. Camp allowed gay spectators to find gayness in shows that were ostensibly heterosexual and heterosexist. The artificiality of the musical re-enforced gay men's sense of the artificiality of the gender order that excluded them.

The content was not transgressive, but the form and style were. Excess is at the heart of the traditional musical.

Representations of Gay Characters

Since Stonewall and gay liberation, a large number of gay men are no longer satisfied with queering ostensibly heterosexual musicals, but want to see themselves on stage. Over the past three decades, mainstream Broadway musicals have acknowledged their gay audience, though often by trotting out tired stereotypes.

Lauren Bacall's diva vehicle *Applause* (1970; book, Betty Comden & Adolph Green; music and lyrics, Charles Strouse and Lee Adams), an adaptation of the camp film classic *All About Eve* (1950), featured as Margo Channing's sidekick a flamboyant gay hairdresser who early in the show takes her to a gay bar where she is worshipped by show queens, a unique acknowledgment of a large segment of the show's audience.

Since Tommy Tune played a gay choreographer in *Seesaw* (1973; book, Michael Bennett and Michael Stewart; music, Cy Coleman; lyrics, Dorothy Fields), show business musicals have acknowledged the role of gay men in their creation.

However, Bennett's next musical, *A Chorus Line* (1975), rather incredibly had only two gay men in the show's group of eager candidates, neither of whom was good enough actually to be cast as a member of the chorus for which the show presented a fictional audition.

Set in a Saint Tropez gay nightclub, *La Cage aux Folles* (1983; book, Harvey Fierstein; music and lyrics, Jerry Herman) offered a chorus of drag performers and a drag diva and her "husband" of twenty years as the leading characters in a saga of middle-aged gay marriage. Presenting a cartoon version of gay couples acceptable to heterosexuals, the show ran for four years and has since become a staple of amateur theater groups.

One element of the crossover success of *La Cage aux Folles* is its dependence on traditional stereotypes of drag, effeminacy, and the notion that a gay couple has to parody the gender politics of a heterosexual couple. Nonetheless, the musical had a large gay following, in part because its writers and director were openly gay.

The same kind of stereotyping is apparent in subsequent musicals. For example, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (London 1992, New York, 1993; book, Terrence McNally; music and lyrics, John Kander and Fred Ebb) removed the irony and complexity of Manuel Puig's novel to present a nelly mama's boy's love for a macho straight man and his worship of a flamboyant diva, played by musical veteran Chita Rivera.

For all its vaunted hipness, Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996), which includes among its couples a Black man and a Puerto Rican drag queen, builds on the same stereotypes.

At least the megahit *The Producers* (2001; book, music, and lyrics, Mel Brooks) is aware of the outrageousness of its cartoons of gay stereotypes, who at one point sing a number aptly titled "Keep It Gay." Brooks's gay caricatures, an essential element of a musical in which everything is over-the-top parody, mock traditional stereotypes more than they mock lesbians and gay men.

The irony of casting openly gay Nathan Lane as the ostensibly straight leading man adds to the possibilities of gender and sexuality bending.

The more realistic musical comedy *The Full Monty* (2000; book, Terrence McNally; music and lyrics, David Yazbek) has a gay couple among the unemployed steel workers who have taken up stripping to gain cash and regain their self respect. Here gayness is not exoticized in any way, although it is presented rather cautiously; and the gay couple develop one of the show's least problematic, most loving relationships.

Musicals Written for Gay Audiences

There have been gay-themed musicals since gay culture in American cities became open in the late 1960s. These shows see their primary audience as gay men and seldom attract a large number of heterosexual theatergoers.

From early low budget works such as *Boy Meets Boy* (1975; music and lyrics, Bill Solly) to recent works such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (1998; book, John Cameron Mitchell; music and lyrics, Stephen Trask), *Closer to Heaven* (2001; book, Jonathan Harvey; music and lyrics, the Pet Shop Boys), and *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001; book and lyrics, Mark Ravenhill; music, Matthew Scott), there have been musicals that speak directly and powerfully to a predominantly gay audience.

These works demonstrate the variety of approaches to gay musical theater. Moreover, many of them share the diva worship that has been an essential element of gay men's relationship to musical comedy.

For example, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, with its brilliant, hard-driving rock score, is a contemporary gay version of the traditional diva musical. A rock concert cum autobiography, *Hedwig* tells the story of a German transsexual who aspires to being a rock diva.

A more conventional book musical, *Closer to Heaven* combines aspects of musical theater popular with gay men. In essence a show business biography, the musical tells the story of Straight Dave, a young man from Ireland, who gets a job as a dancer in a London gay club whose shows are presided over by a hilarious larger-than-life transsexual diva. Straight Dave discovers he is not as straight as he thought, comes out, and becomes a successful singer.

Amidst the powerful songs and humor, *Closer to Heaven* is a hard hitting look at the sometimes destructive marriage of drugs and club culture for young gay men. The musical posits the possibility of a gay male star to rival and, perhaps, transcend the appeal of the traditional musical diva. However, the most theatrically powerful character is the transsexual diva who has the best lines and the most enjoyable musical numbers.

Although mostly set in eighteenth-century London gay male culture, *Mother Clap's Molly House* features another diva role, a shrewd London woman who gains wealth and personal empowerment from running a "molly house," a gay club. Mother Clap, brilliantly portrayed in the original production by Deborah Findlay, is a direct descendant of Angela Lansbury's Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* and Carol Channing's Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*

Closer to Heaven did not find an audience beyond its core gay constituency, and gay men in London do not seem as invested in musical theater as gay men in American cities. *Mother Clap's Molly House* had a successful though limited run in repertory at London's Royal National Theatre.

The Revue

Musicals whose primary appeal is to a gay audience tend to be intimate productions. The revue, a satirical mix of comedy and song, once a mainstay of the larger commercial theater, has proven to be a viable form

for gay audiences.

Robert Schrock's *Naked Boys Singing* (1998), for example, is a small-scaled revue, representing the popularity of cabaret with gay audiences. As in many gay-themed revues (such as the compilation show *The Gay Nineties* [1995] and Eric Lane Barnes' *Fairy Tales* [1997]), the songs in *Naked Boys Singing* satirize aspects of urban gay life. The "Gratuitous Nudity" celebrated in the title and opening song is a popular, some would say essential (for box office success), aspect of gay theater.

Among successful gay revues, the wittiest have been the work of the late Howard Crabtree, whose outlandish costume designs inspired *Whoop Dee-Do* (1993) and *When Pigs Fly* (1996).

Musical Films

For many gay men during the golden age, Broadway was out of reach geographically and economically, but from the early 1930s until the mid 1960s, Hollywood offered a steady stream of musical films, some of which have been particularly susceptible to gay readings.

In his enormously successful series of films with Ginger Rogers in the 1930s, which boast superb scores by Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin, Fred Astaire was surrounded by a group of supporting players who certainly could be read as gay: Eric Blore's eyeball rolling, lisping queens, Edward Everett Horton's prissy Milquetoasts, Erik Rhodes' flamboyant portrayals of men who never get the girl and do not seem to care, and Helen Broderick's butch sidekicks.

Of course, the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* has played a special role in gay culture: for years gay men called themselves "friends of Dorothy."

In the 1940s, the unit at MGM that produced a series of fine musicals was known as "Freed's Fairies," because producer Arthur Freed had gathered such an array of talented gay men as directors, choreographers, composers, arrangers, and designers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, wide screen epic musicals offered audiences classic diva turns by Judy Garland (*A Star Is Born*, 1954) Gwen Verdon (*Damn Yankees*, 1958), and Barbra Streisand (*Funny Girl*, 1968).

In 2000, *The Sound of Music* (1965), hardly a film that could be considered gay, was resurrected as a camp classic and, with the lyrics superimposed on the print, became for the London gay community the sort of costume party, audience participation event *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* had been for teenagers twenty years before.

Although the film musical seems to be a dead genre and musical theater does not hold the central position in popular culture and popular music it once did, nevertheless the musical holds an important place in the history of gay men.

It may be no accident that the recent film of the Kander and Ebb musical *Chicago* (2002), which has been acclaimed as the best film musical in years, is the product of the collaboration of several out gay men, including director Rob Marshall, screenwriter Bill Condon, and executive producers Neil Meron and Craig Zadan. All four have spoken of the crucial significance of musicals in their own lives from an early age, almost in the same terms in which gay men and lesbians frequently speak of their early awareness of their sexual difference.

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