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*Anything Goes* on an ocean liner: musical comedy as a carnivalistic heterotopia

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**Abstract:**

This article argues that the ocean-liner setting of the 1934 Broadway musical *Anything Goes* provides a rich place from which to explore how such seemingly frivolous musical comedy can otherwise be viewed as socially discursive and critical. It explores the way *Anything Goes* can be viewed as a typical product of the Great Depression and suggests its function in re-envisioning identities in the face of the apparent failure of the 'American Dream'. The nature of the carnivalistic comedy offered in the shipboard narrative of *Anything Goes* further suggests that it offers an important salve for Depression-era anxiety. From this Bakhtinian perspective, *Anything Goes* is figured as a subversive space for the performance of social deviance of one sort or another. Bakhtin's vision of carnival spaces suggests that musical comedy has an important function in social renewal but it might be too utopian to articulate to 'real' society. However, Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopias allows for a re-connection of Bakhtin's utopianism with the 'real' world and thus serves to show that *Anything Goes* and, indeed, musical comedy more generally might be as vital a location as passenger ships for functional socio-critical discourse.

**Keywords:**

*Anything Goes*  
Carnival  
Heterotopia  
Cole Porter  
Roland Barthes  
Mikhail Bakhtin  
Michel Foucault

## ***Anything Goes* on an ocean liner: Musical comedy as a carnivalistic heterotopia**

### **Putting to sea with *Anything Goes***

This article argues that the ocean-liner setting of the 1934 musical *Anything Goes* provides a rich place from which to explore how such seemingly frivolous musical comedy can otherwise be viewed as socially discursive and critical. With a few notable exceptions, such shows of the interwar period have generally been considered as lightweight, escapist and ephemeral entertainment of their time. The farcical plotlines and diverting musical numbers of musical comedy seem to display little concern for the sort of searching socio-critical discourse offered by ‘legitimate’ theatre.

While Rodgers and Hammerstein’s so-called integrated musicals might now lay claim to such theatrical legitimacy, the ‘book musicals’ of interwar musical comedy have rarely been subject to searching critical attention in this regard. Much of the criticism has instead focused on the strength of some of the truly wonderful songs of musical comedy in the face of the generally weak books that surround them (e.g. Block 1997: 41-59). This article, however, seeks to show that, when viewed in an interdisciplinary critical light, musical comedy can appear every bit as socially discursive as the perhaps more ‘legitimate’ musicals that came after *Oklahoma!* (1943).

This article suggests that even seemingly inconsequential details that are offered in the much-criticised books of musical comedy can be particularly enlightening in this regard, especially when placed within a critical framework that engages both words and music in contextual discourse. The particular focus here is

thus on highlighting the way the shipboard setting of the original Broadway production of *Anything Goes* (1934) offers a vehicle for re-reading something of the socio-political discourse that lies beneath the frivolous surface of such musical comedy.

Although *Anything Goes* undoubtedly has many distinctive features, it is fairly typical of musical comedy of the period for its marriage of a highly farcical, much revised and rather contrived plot with wonderfully diverting songs and a jazzy score drawing on a voguish dancehall aesthetic. The show's equally fashionable setting aboard an ocean liner is also shared with a good number of shows of the period.<sup>1</sup> Such common tropes highlight the appropriateness of *Anything Goes* for informing us on musical comedy more widely and suggest its specific shipboard setting might be extended to read the genre more generally as a special ship-like space for socio-critical discourse. However, to explore this suggestive conclusion we must firstly establish some of the salient features of the original show before pointing towards a contextual and critical framework for reading its shipboard setting. This can then be applied in analysis to the show itself and then to the musical comedy genre more generally.

### **Conceiving of a socio-critical function for *Anything Goes***

The rather complicated production history of the original Broadway version of *Anything Goes* is well documented by Miles Kreuger in the liner notes to John McGlinn's recording of the revived 1934 score of the show (Kreuger 1989). It is worth reiterating some of Kreuger's detail here because this history highlights that the original production of *Anything Goes* was very much a product of its time and helps

explain why the show's much criticised book might still be considered as something of a reflection of its time and even a form of active socio-critical discourse.

Kreuger relates that *Anything Goes* was the brainchild of the seasoned producer Vinton Freedley. Freedley had enjoyed a string of successes on both sides of the Atlantic in a producing partnership with Alexander A. Aarons, but the failure of *Pardon My English* (1933), despite its strong Gershwin score, broke up the partnership and left Freedley fleeing to the Caribbean to escape his creditors (Kreuger 1989: 10). There Freedley had time to plan how best to recover his reputation and he conceived of a return to musical comedy with a new show in the style of the intimate shows written at the end of the 1910s by Jerome Kern, P. G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton for the 299-seat Princess Theatre (ibid.).

The story of Freedley's financial ruin, his subsequent self-examination and planned recovery by means of revising his strategy for success is, of course, a fairly typical narrative of the Great Depression that followed the famous Wall Street crash of October 1929. Morris Dickstein has shown that the Depression represents a period of general soul-searching and social readjustment when some of the most cherished ideals of American society were searchingly questioned and alternatives were sought through just such cultural forms as musical comedy (Dickstein 2009: xxi).

Foundational notions of unbridled individualism, self-reliance, entrepreneurial spirit, the promise of prosperity and social mobility, and so on, seemed no longer guaranteed to bring America success but appeared rather as false promises that had contributed to a financial and social disaster.

Broadway was not immune to the economic downturn and by the 1931-1932 season 83 per cent of shows failed (Kreuger 1989: 8). Freedley was caught up in this

financial collapse and, like so many of his countrymen, sought a way out of the disaster by reflecting on where it had all gone wrong. For many Americans the whole basis for the so-called ‘American Dream’ had been undermined in the rude awakening caused by the crash and the very evident hangover of poverty and misery that followed it. In fact, as Dickstein relates, the phrase ‘the American Dream’ became popular during the 1930s only because it was considered an ideology that needed urgent critique if a post-Depression society was to be countenanced (Dickstein 2009: 219)

New ‘dreams’ were needed, if only to cope with the realities of massed unemployment, widespread poverty and a general malaise. Thus, as Dickstein suggests, a central paradox of the Great Depression is that in addition to gritty representations of the grim reality of the times it also produced some of ‘the most buoyant, most effervescent popular culture of the twentieth century’ (Dickstein 2009: xix). It is within this context that Freedley dreamed up his new show. It was to mark his own recovery through a return to an earlier, more sophisticated form for musical comedy. It was nevertheless intended to be current and filled with spectacle, laughter and music that defied the era that shaped it. As Kreuger notes, the show appeared just after Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected and when a new wave of optimism was gripping the country (Kreuger 1989: 9).

The careful crafting of the so-called ‘Princess shows’, which were Freedley’s models, put them in sharp contrast with much musical comedy of the 20s and 30s. As Andrew Lamb has generalized, shows of that era ‘were often little more than vehicles for individual stars with contrived boy-meets-girl situations and happy endings, songs that for the most part were just catchy tunes with lyrics tagged on and occasional spectacular “production numbers”’ (Snelson & Lamb 2014). Although *Anything Goes*

was intended as a vehicle for star performers (including the renowned comedians William Gaxton and Victor Moore) and displays some generic features, in following the model of the 'Princess shows', its producer nevertheless aimed for a more refined exemplar of musical comedy than was the norm.

To ensure this refinement, Freedley sought to engage the very authors that had finessed those 'Princess shows' some 25 years earlier. However, Jerome Kern was at that time working exclusively with Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein II and George Gershwin was busy with *Porgy and Bess* (1935), so the score was entrusted to Cole Porter. Porter was by then in Europe, where the British writers Wodehouse and Bolton could also be found. Thus Freedley sailed on the *Majestic* to London in May 1934 to secure his creative team. It is suggestive for what follows that it was apparently aboard ship that Freedley conceived of a basic scenario for his new show involving just such an ocean liner (Kreuger 1989: 10).

Once in London Freedley added the American playwright and director Howard Lindsay to his production team before travelling to France to secure Bolton, Wodehouse and Porter. The advantage of having Lindsay on the staff as director was that he could also make the expected editorial changes to the play-script in the absence of the British authors during production in the US. In fact, when Freedley received a complete book and score for the show called *Hard to Get* in mid-August 1934, he found its tone needed Lindsay's immediate editorial attention.

As Kreuger reports, in *Hard to Get* the hero, Jimmy Crocker, is tasked by his former boss with discrediting the bumbling British lord, Eric Oakleigh, in order to scupper the forthcoming marriage of his boss's daughter, Barbara Frisbee, to the stuffy Englishman (Kreuger 1989: 12-13). Among the colourful passengers aboard

ship, Crocker meets a retired scriptwriter, Elmer Purkis, who suggests ways to discredit Oakleigh drawn from plot devices of old movies. Thus a fake bomb is used to terrify the passengers in Act One and the foreboding mood is further heightened during Act Two.

With the uncertainty of the Depression in mind, Freedley felt that the mood of impending doom risked not only its success in theatres but also its option as a Hollywood film. To compound this concern, in early September 1934 a disastrous fire swept through the liner *SS Morro Castle* as it passed the coast of New Jersey. Somewhere near 140 passengers were killed (reports vary) and the extensive press coverage of the terrifying ordeal suffered by them effectively sealed the fate of the play-script. Thus Lindsay was tasked with making a complete revision of the show to lighten its mood. But this was a job far beyond the typical editing of such a show for production by its director and so a further re-writer, Russel Crouse, was brought in to help Lindsay. Lindsay later claimed they only used ‘about five lines’ of the original book but this is almost certainly an exaggeration (Lindsay & Kreuger 1989: 19).

The narrative that resulted from the revision of *Hard to Get* into *Anything Goes* is well known enough not to need detailed exposition here but the retention of the original ocean-liner setting is telling of its importance as an essential feature of the show. Furthermore, the fact that it was nevertheless deemed necessary to revise the narrative following the *Morro Castle* disaster suggests that there is an important, if largely unacknowledged relationship between such seemingly frothy entertainment and the very real concerns of the contemporary society that surrounded it.

Depression-era shows like *Anything Goes* are often considered escapist, but to treat such shows as mere escapism is to underplay their vital social function. As

Dickstein makes clear, the fantasies they represent have as much to do with coping with the economic crisis and envisioning a post-Depression society as the more gritty social realism offered in much of the leftist literature of the time (Dickstein 2009: 233). However, as such seemingly lightweight texts are much less overt in their social critique, the difficulty is to illuminate the social discourse beneath the surface of the comedic spectacle offered by such musical comedy.

This is where the idea of the ship comes in as a useful critical tool. I want to use this tool to suggest that the relationship between *Anything Goes* and social reality of the early to mid 1930s is not simply a reflective or responsive one, as most standard historiographies suggest, but rather something more searching, far-reaching and actively critical in scope (cf. Green 1971: 105-107; Kreuger 1989: 9-17; see also Block 1997: 41-59; Mordden 2005: 68-79; Knapp 2006: 88-101). To illustrate this we will turn away from *Anything Goes* for a moment to consider the passenger ship in general as a particular kind of critical space before we return to the specifics of the show in relation to its social context to put some analytical flesh on the bones of this theory.

### **Recognizing a New-Deal-Self among ‘Others’ aboard the ‘SS American’**

In the late 1950s, the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes examined the paradoxical nature of the space afforded by ships in his *Mythologies* collection of writings (Barthes 2000 [1957]). He noted that although the literary depiction of the ship seems to represent it as an escape into the unfathomable realm of the oceans, it actually provides a utopian place of enclosure and self-determination. He writes,



An inclination towards ships always means the joy of perfectly enclosing oneself, of having at hand the greatest possible number of objects, and having at one's disposal an absolute finite space. To like ships is first and foremost to like a house, a superlative one since it is unremittingly closed, and not at all vague sailings into the unknown: a ship is a habitat before being a means of transport. (Barthes 2000 [1957]: 66)

In reflecting on Jules Verne's submarine, 'The Nautilus', Barthes goes on to claim that:

the enjoyment of being enclosed reaches its paroxysm when, from the bosom of this unbroken inwardness, it is possible to watch, through a large window-pane, the outside vagueness of the waters, and thus define in a single act, the inside by means of its opposite. Most ships in legend or fiction are, from this point of view, like the *Nautilus*, the theme of a cherished seclusion, for it is enough to present the ship as a habitat of man, for man immediately to organise there the enjoyment of a round, smooth universe, of which, in addition, a whole nautical morality makes him at once the god, the master and the owner (*sole master on board*, etc.). (Barthes 2000 [1957]: 66-67)

For Barthes then, ships offer a revitalising space for self-determination with respect to the vast and uncontrollable otherness conceived beyond this ordered-subjective universe. In this context, ships seem to enable a pleasurable, escapist-utopian sense of absolute subjectivity or 'knowing one's place' that thrives on the imagined mastery of otherness. This mastery appears wholly plausible only in such spaces of enclosure because of their separation from the rest of the world.

Barthes' thesis of this reassuring role of ships in subjective fantasies of identity and alterity is readily transferable to the social context which produced *Anything Goes*. If the ship does indeed offer an ordered-subjective universe then, in view of the social chaos and soul-searching of the Great Depression, it is easy to imagine the appeal of such a space for authors and audiences alike. Is it any wonder then, that the ocean-liner setting of *Anything Goes* was retained even when a real-life disaster aboard just such a ship prompted an otherwise complete revision of the show? Furthermore, in the general quest for a new 'American Dream', where better to re-imagine a surer foundation for American identity than aboard the 'SS American' in *Anything Goes*?

The central protagonist of *Anything Goes*, Billy Crocker, is very much an idealised figure of the Great Depression as, in his attitude to adversity, he can be read as the embodiment of a certain Rooseveltian politic of the times. Roosevelt famously stated in his inaugural address on 4 March 1933 that 'the only thing we [Americans] have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance' (Roosevelt 1938: 11). Even in the face of impending disaster (losing his job and his love) and the chaos of the madcap scenarios in which he finds himself, Billy does not fret and won't be deterred but is ever optimistic, unflappable and enterprising in advancing his quest to get his girl.

Once he stows away aboard the 'SS American', Billy negotiates a whole raft of 'others' including gangsters, clergymen, Chinese converts, a British peer, cabaret artists, society ladies, sailors, etc. The original Billy, William Gaxton, had made comedic disguise his speciality and thus the character often externalises otherness when he poses as a Spanish count with a Pomeranian dog's hair for a beard or as the elderly wife of the president of Columbia University with balloons for bosoms. Billy

may not be in control of events aboard the 'SS American' but his confident mastery of otherness, amply demonstrated in various ruses and disguises, only better defines him in his difference from them as new kind of American hero.

The donning of such ridiculous garb, although taking in other characters at times, only serves to heighten Billy's underlying identity and integrity as an idealised American of the Roosevelt era. In the face of the apparent failure of the 'American Dream', by identifying with Billy and his shipboard quest, could the contemporary audience be as much identifying with a new ideal, one offering a surer foundation for American identity? If so, the 'SS American' was not idly named because it becomes a vehicle for re-envisioning the American among its many others. However, perhaps this is taking Barthes' reading of ships a bit too far? His reading of shipboard spaces is rather too generalised and as such somewhat removed from the material conditions of any particular society. We will thus take our analysis in a more searchingly socio-critical direction with the help of the Soviet literary scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, and particularly his work tracing the resonances of the rituals of mediaeval carnival culture in later literatures.

### **The 'SS American' as a Bakhtinian Carnival of the Great Depression**

The premise of Bakhtin's analysis in *Rabelais and his World* (1984b) is that an alternative 'folk' or popular culture of the Middle Ages thrived in the spaces and rituals of carnival. Therein, for Bakhtin, the dogma and power of the church was temporarily suspended in favour of alternative structures that promoted social renewal in a way that escaped violent sanction. A sort of 'folk humour' is thus crucial to Bakhtin's reading of carnival because it allows for a sort of enacted exploration of

alternative social structures without censure (Bakhtin 1984: 127). As we will see, carnivalistic comedy thrives on inversion, parody and ambivalence that undermine social hierarchy in such a way as to engender a sort of social rebirth (Bakhtin 1984b: 20-25).

Several critics have highlighted how this notion of carnival is actually a veiled critique of Bakhtin's own situation as a literary scholar working within Soviet society. His work has thus been read both as a vision of resistance within that highly repressive system (Holquist in Bakhtin 1984: xix; Eagleton 1981: 144; Stam 1989: 158) and as a disempowerment of the individual therein (Ryklin 1993: 54, 56). The latter critique has its basis in Bakhtin's suggestion that social change envisioned through carnival occurs at a mass level in which the life of an individual is relatively insignificant in view of the greater social good that carnival engenders. However, this critical duality may itself be a reflection of Bakhtin's own carnivalistic writing because, as we will see, carnival humour thrives on precisely such ambivalent or double-voiced rhetoric.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin aims to show how the carnival culture of the Middle Ages was 'transposed' into later literatures. Bakhtin writes that 'As a form it is very complex and varied, giving rise, on a general carnivalistic base, to diverse variants and nuances depending upon the epoch, the people, the individual festivity' (Bakhtin 1984: 122). Nevertheless, he offers a catalogue of general features that might be instructive for an analysis of *Anything Goes* as a Depression-era manifestation of carnival. Bakhtin is careful to state that his list does not merely involve abstract ideas. Instead he aims to relate what he calls, 'concretely sensuous ritual-pageant "thoughts" experienced and played out in the

form of life itself, “thoughts” that had coalesced and survived for thousands of years among the broadest masses of European mankind’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 123).

For Bakhtin, ‘Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators’ (Bakhtin 1984: 122). Thus ‘its participants *live* in it’ and as ‘carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent “life turned inside out”, “the reverse side of the world”’ (ibid.). As carnival suggests a space removed from ‘normal’ life and, indeed, it inverts hierarchical structures thereof, it inherently entails ‘free and familiar contact between individuals [...] who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers’ (Bakhtin 1984: 123). For Bakhtin, ‘the free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena and things’ (ibid.). Thus what he calls ‘*carnivalistic mésalliances*’ abound, resulting in unusual combinations of ‘the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid’ (ibid.).

The freeing of the hierarchical conventions that usually govern behaviours means that carnival’s participants tend to act in ways that would otherwise be considered eccentric or inappropriate in the ‘real’ world. Furthermore, the profanities and blasphemies of carnival become ‘a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth’ (ibid.). Carnival humour is thus aimed at undermining exalted objects and ideas and nowhere is such renewal-through-debasement more evident for Bakhtin than in the symbolic ritual of crowning and de-crowning the carnival king.

Bakhtin describes this ritual as the ‘primary carnival act’ that evokes ‘*the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal*’ (Bakhtin 1984: 124, original

emphasis). It is central for him because this joyful act is carried out in the full knowledge of its inevitable undoing (crowning always implies decrowning). It thus represents a cycle of (re)birth and death while reflecting ‘the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) positions’ (ibid., original emphasis). The symbols of authority (mock crown, sceptre, etc.) used in such crownings thus represent for Bakhtin laughable props only as much as they reflect on the absolute seriousness signified by the actual symbols of power in the ‘real’ world.

Such relativity is crucial to the critical function of carnival humour in promoting social renewal (Bakhtin 1984: 127). Carnival’s ambivalent comedy offers a form of socio-critical discourse that escapes official sanction, as carnival appears, on its surface at least, as merely offering a good laugh. However, beneath that surface, carnival humour presents a whole world of performed socio-critical discourse and indeed it reflects the social crises implied in that discourse in a readily digestible form. Importantly the place (the carnival square) and duration (the festival) of carnival are clearly demarked and these underline the process of (re)birth (becoming) and death (changing) that is essential to carnival’s functioning in social renewal.

The society aboard the ‘SS American’ in *Anything Goes* can easily be read as ‘life turned upside down’ in Bakhtin’s terms. Therein gangsters are feted as heroes (in ‘Public Enemy Number One’) and, in terms of the trajectory of the narrative, figures that would ordinarily be considered wise act as fools, whereas the fools seem to act wisely (even if they do not recognize it themselves). There is also a profound sense of performance in the way the characters live up or down to their adopted hierarchical positions aboard the ship in an exaggerated manner: I suggest few real people could be quite so pretentious as Mrs Harcourt, as eccentrically upper-class as Lord Oakleigh, as down-to-earth as Moonface Martin, as ‘showbiz’ as Reno Sweeney or as

‘oriental’ as Ching and Ling, to name but a few figures found aboard the ‘SS American’.

These larger-than-life comedic characters surround the central pair of lovers whom we take more seriously and, in a change from the book of *Hard to Get*, are re-named Billy Crocker and Hope Harcourt in *Anything Goes*. These lovers appear powerless in the face of an apparently impassable obstacle in the way of their union: Hope’s betrothal to the English peer (now dubbed Evelyn Oakleigh). However, despite the fact that we are meant to take the lovers’ relationship seriously, the hero, Billy, represents a sort of jester or trickster figure and conspires with the more idiotic characters to overcome that obstacle via a number of improbable ruses, most often involving disguise. Thus the central conceit of the narrative is entirely concerned with the inversion of ‘normal’ relations of society ashore.

Much of the comedy in *Anything Goes* comes from the intervention of the peripheral characters in the overarching trajectory of desire (wanting to see Billy and Hope united). These characters are all carnivalistic grotesques that parody Depression-era stereotyping through exaggeration, inversion and *mésalliance*: a struggling stockbroker (Elijah J. Whitney), a passionless and eccentric English aristocrat (Oakleigh), an evangelist-turned-cabaret-singer (Reno Sweeny), a second-rate gangster (Moonface Martin), a flirtatious gangster’s moll (Bonnie), a society dowager (Mrs Wentworth T. Harcourt), a Bishop (Henry T. Dobson) and his two gambling Chinese converts (Ching and Ling), etc., etc. The comedic narrative is facilitated by the confinement of these distinctive parody-characters aboard ship where the nature of that ‘removed’ space means they interact in ways that would be unthinkable at home despite their differing social statuses. Thus in *Anything Goes* a

clerk can conceivably marry an heiress, a gangster can schmooze with the wealthy and a cabaret singer can flirt with a knight.

Bakhtinian *mésalliances* extend from these character traits and interactions to unlikely combinations of the sacred with the profane, the oriental with the occidental, the self with the other and the 'high' with the 'low'. Clergymen and impersonations of them feature prominently in the narrative of the show but the sacred most obviously rubs up against the profane in the character of Reno Sweeney. She vividly displays her evangelist-turned-nightclub-singer credentials in the show-stopping 'Blow, Gabriel, Blow' in Act Two. The song comes in a scene depicting a mock-revivalist meeting in which the Reverend Dr Moon (the gangster Moonface Martin in disguise) is saved from embarrassment and given a lesson in 'performing' as an evangelist by Reno. She advises him, 'It's a cinch, Mooney, I got away with it for years' (Bolton, Wodehouse & Porter 1936: 49).

Reno's number opens with Gabriel's trumpet, represented by a military-sounding bugle call. This ushers in an all-singing-all-dancing, show-stopping number featuring plenty of fashionable jazzy syncopation and the obligatory scantily-clad female dance chorus of Reno's 'Angels'. This unlikely mix of jazz-burlesque and pseudo-military religiosity only illuminates the contrived nature of the comedic 'performance' and *mésalliance* of the scenario. This jazzed-up parody of contemporary revivalism represents in its ambivalence something beyond the narrative scenario of the show: it is simultaneously a secular plea to shake off any post-1929-crash blues and to 'fly higher and higher' again with Reno (Porter 1989: 57).



Musically, this particular line of lyrics is marked out by triplets in an otherwise duple-meter melody. These offer the most obvious syncopation in the song because of their treatment as melisma. The ‘flying’ triplets also signal the brief restoration of the song’s tonic (C major) in a musical section that is otherwise set in the relative minor (a minor). This return of the tonic is, however, short-lived because a plunge towards Bb major returns us to retrospection (‘I’ve been through the brimstone’) and issues in another set of triplets for the line ‘And I’ve been through the fire’. Porter then moves the song away from Reno’s reflection on the past and revives the tonic and also the here-and-now by means of a pulsing progression passing through a French augmented-sixth chord towards the dominant seventh of C major (see Figure 1). Any triplet-laden retrospection is thus literally beaten back to life and key centre. On its repetition, during the immediate reprise of Reno’s refrain by the whole company, energy levels are ‘revived’ yet further by shifting the whole phrase up a semitone from ‘purged my soul’. This affects a yet more climactic ending for this already highly charged song-and-dance number.



Figure 1: The progression from Bb major to C major in ‘Blow, Gabriel, Blow’.

Eccentricity is exhibited in the actions of most of the characters in *Anything Goes* but as eccentricity is stereotypically a characteristic of the English upper classes so beloved of Wodehouse, the behaviour of Lord Evelyn Oakleigh is perhaps the most evident in this regard. In his habits, like being numb to romancing by moonlight and collecting voguish American expressions, he appears so detached from the ‘reality’ that surrounds him as to be oblivious to Billy’s advances on his betrothed and, indeed, to Reno’s amorous advances on him. Such detachment opens up the suggestion of forbidden homosexual or bisexual desires, especially when Oakleigh inadvertently declares he has ‘hot pants’ for Moon (cited in Kreuger 1989b: 39). The liberal sexual attitude envisioned in this particular carnivalistic gesture was evidently a step too far for the times, for Moon responds, ‘You keep away from me or I’ll shoot’ (ibid.) Oakleigh’s eventual pairing with Reno in Act Two effectively puts an end to any such speculation.

The highly comic exchange between Billy and Reno in Porter’s famously inventive list song, ‘You’re the Top’ in the middle of Act One is a prime example of carnivalistic profanation and debasement but the target is cultural iconography rather than mediaeval religious dogma. As Billy is keen to underline his platonic fondness for Reno in the face of his love for Hope, his verse critiques the poetic representation of love, stating such words are best left ‘unexpressed’. His refrain then compares Reno with a string of cultural icons ranging from the Coliseum to the Mona Lisa (Porter 1989: 51-52). In Reno’s reply, however, such comparison moves from the sublime to the ridiculous as she compares Billy to, among other mundane things, cellophane and a turkey dinner (Porter 1989: 52). The following encore, as one might expect, takes this comparative duel further in quick-fire exchanges between the characters, offering ever more inventive examples of *mésalliances* and cultural

‘blasphemies’. For example, Botticelli, Keats, Shelley and Ovaltine are mentioned in the same breath (ibid.). From a Bakhtinian perspective, this exchange represents an updating of the ‘cursing matches’ that for Bakhtin are a part of carnival ritual (Bakhtin 1984: 125). The discourse of the song is, of course, thus as much about the relative value of objects in the face of Depression-era austerity as the changing relationship between Reno and Billy.

‘You’re the Top’ might represent the crowning of a friendship, but the most symbolic crowning of the show occurs when Billy is mistaken for the gangster ‘Snake Eyes’ Johnson (America’s most wanted man). The whole of the ship’s community assemble to honour the notoriety he brings to their liner in ‘Public Enemy Number One’. Hope, however, is aware of Billy’s true identity and feels Billy has made a fool of himself in so public an impersonation. Thus it is clear that his crowning as the effective carnival king of the ship cannot last if they are to be together (as we all desire) and it suggests that such a union is just too ‘real’ for her for such playacting.

So, here is the primary fulcrum for social (re)birth and death, right at the heart of the show (around the interval) that, for Bakhtin, is so central to carnival ritual. It serves to reflect the contemporary public’s fascination with gangsters as a means to highlight the relative precariousness of all those with high social standing (cf. Dickstein 2009: 349-350). Although the status quo may not appear to have altered much when Billy reveals himself as an imposter and is thrown into the ship’s brig, there is a sense in which the society of *Anything Goes* is not quite the same for the self-reflection engendered by his deception and its undoing. The suggestion seems to be that if only Billy could stop pretending he might get his love as much as the rest of the ship’s retinue, as representatives of Depression-era society at large, might do better for dropping their own pretensions.

‘Public Enemy Number One’ opens Act Two of *Anything Goes* and is set in the ship’s lounge. The song opens with a bouncy 6/8 section (in the spirit of ‘Bon Voyage’) featuring various singing crewmen announcing that there’s to be a party in Billy’s honour that evening. The tempo then slows for a stirring yet ironic 4/4 anthem for the whole company. They thank ‘Public Enemy Number One’ for putting their liner ‘on the map’ (Porter 1989: 57). In its grandiose-comic style Porter’s anthem is highly reminiscent of one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s equally ironic ‘patriotic’ numbers, such as ‘For he is an Englishman’ in *HMS Pinafore* (1878). In wrapping the archaic style of the anthem (with its ‘thees’ and ‘thous’) in more up-to-date theatre music the song simultaneously presents the past with the present and thus evokes another sort of critical relativity through stylistic juxtaposition. As much as the performance of the characters of *Anything Goes* aboard ship exaggerates social standing to the point of rendering it absurd, thus I suggest Porter knowingly overdoes the grandiose pomp in this song to a similarly carnivalistic-debasing effect but through a relativity achieved through the *mésalliance* of musical styles.

Once Billy is thrown into the ship’s brig, closely followed by his co-conspirator Moon, it is clear that, as the carnival king has been de-crowned, the carnival ritual must be coming to a close. In what seems like one last carnivalistic act, Billy and Moon manage to obtain their freedom by means of the Chinamen, Ching and Ling, who have joined them in the brig. These ‘converts’ were caught gambling and are due for release in port but give over their clothes in a game of strip poker. The action then moves ashore, to the conservatory of Sir Evelyn’s home in England, for the final scene of the show, where Billy is discovered to be hiding.

The fact that one of the most carnivalistic of songs in the show, ‘The Gypsy in Me’ is sung in this final scene by Hope, the one person that disapproved of Billy’s

crowning as carnival king, shows that the carnival rituals of the ‘SS American’ have some resonance with the ‘real’ world of *Anything Goes* beyond it. ‘The Gypsy in Me’ offers perhaps the most colourful example of Porter’s famously hybrid mix of musical styles anywhere in the show and this is greatly enhanced by the orchestration. In Hans Spialek’s original score, the solo violin obbligato that opens the song immediately evokes the Hungarian Czardas tradition and introduces Porter’s liquid melody of the song’s verse. The clarinet and tambourine are later prominent in the orchestral backing and the vocal line lends itself to a sultry-*rubato* treatment that helps conjure the exotic ‘other’ of the Gypsy.<sup>2</sup>

Porter sets the song in the minor key (c minor) but often flattens the second and sixth degrees of the scale to give a foreign-sounding modal inflection to the melody and harmony. Midway through the verse, he introduces an unsettling ambiguity of key by employing the tonic major to paint the suspicion of drunkenness implied in the lyric, ‘I know you will say she was / A little bit tipsy’ (Porter 1989: 59). It is in the ternary-form refrain, however, that we are treated to the full exoticism of this Carmen-like depiction of the Latin other.

In the refrain the tonic major (C major) and a lively syncopated rhumba are established in the accompaniment, replete with ‘exotic’ castanets in the orchestra, before the voice enters with a sultry triplet figure. This is set on the beat and outlines an ascending octave (see Figure 2). It is immediately followed by a contrasting rhythmical idea featuring an offbeat start and a quaver-dominated rhythm that suggests a turning or whirling dance movement. The melodic line then comes to rest in a closing, descending tag, which, again, features a triplet motif.

**Tempo di Rhumba** ♩ = 144

Ascending, time-defying triplet idea | Off-beat syncopated-turning quaver idea

Hope

Hid - ing a - way \_\_\_\_\_ There's a lit - tle bit of

4 | Descending, closing tag

gyp - sy in me \_\_\_\_\_ That's ne - ver been found. \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2: The opening eight bars of the refrain melody of ‘The Gypsy in Me’.

These eight bars thus offer contrasting rhythmic features (triplets versus quavers) that form the building blocks of the whole refrain. To establish just such a foundational quality for this material and to reflect the stereotypical AABA song structure of musical comedy, the whole phrase is simply repeated a tone lower for a further eight bars of music. Then the key shifts to the mediant major (E) for quite a different musical section (B). This new section extends the contrast of triplet-crotchets with quaver movement to colour the equally contrasting Romantic imagery of a ‘sleeping lagoon’ with the ‘tinkling guitar’ strumming away at a ‘titilating tune’ (Porter 1989: 59).

True to the forms of its Latin-American inspiration, it is the time-defying triplet figure that comes to dominate the song as the opening phrase (A) returns with the lyric ‘When I’m there in that dream’. Triplets predominate until ‘At the moment supreme’ (see Figure 3) after which quavers make a sudden reappearance but this time drawing on material of the song’s B section. It thus seems reality bites as ‘normal’ (non-exotic) time is momentarily restored and the dream is shown to be just that but one necessarily underlying Hope’s reality.

Hope

At the mo - ment su - preme Will be shown the un -

70 known gyp - sy in me.

Ascending, time-defying triplet octave

Variation of quaver material

Descending, closing tag (without triplet)

Figure 3: The closing eight bars of the refrain melody of ‘The Gypsy in Me’.

In narrative terms, then, ‘The Gypsy in Me’ functions here as if the dreamlike-carnival atmosphere of the ship has drifted ashore and, as a result of its intrusion, even the most unlikely of characters as Hope appears rooted in the performance of a hidden, exotic and deviant side. It suggests such performative self-reflection actually supports any seemingly more ordered, dignified and truthful public persona. Thus, Hope, who has otherwise taken the moral high ground throughout the narrative, finally shows in the pretension of her own performance an affinity with Billy, the great pretender of the story, and the two are thus at last able to be united.

### **Musical Comedy and Carnivalistic Heterotopias: *Anything Goes* on ships and the ‘real’ world**

Bakhtin’s notion of the spaces of carnival culture is perhaps too utopian an ideal to easily demonstrate the way *Anything Goes* has resonance in the real world beyond the show. In fact, Bakhtin has often been critiqued for his utopianism and at least one significant monograph has been devoted to this critique (Morson & Emerson 1990). This is especially troubling in the context of musical comedy because of the way the genre is so often read as offering little more than mere escapism. The trouble with

both utopianism and escapism is that they inherently involve being removed from the material conditions of society.

While it is possible to argue for the value of Bakhtin's critique despite his utopianism, as Michael Gardiner has done, I also want to suggest an important kinship between Bakhtin's agenda and that of Michel Foucault in his theorising of heterotopias (Gardiner 1992). The advantage of forging this link is that it allows us to extend the carnivalistic reading of *Anything Goes* towards certain spaces in the real world and thereby suggest how musical comedy reflects on such places as vital for socio-critical discourse and social renewal.

In a 1967 lecture entitled 'Of Other Spaces' (Foucault 1986 [1967]) Foucault argues that there has been a gradual de-sanctification of space since the Middle Ages, which has undermined old certainties founded on hierarchical notions of emplacement. Thus 'knowing ones' place' has been gradually superseded by an anxious sense of a transitory position among infinitely different and highly temporary sites. For Foucault, the old hierarchies have not entirely vanished in modern society and there are still apparently natural differences between certain private and public spaces, which are founded on hidden notions of the sacred. However, he is primarily interested in highly problematic and subversive modern places 'that have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 24).

To put such subversive sites into perspective, Foucault is careful to differentiate between utopias as 'sites with no real place' and these special places, which he terms 'heterotopias' (ibid.). For Foucault these are 'places that do exist and



that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (ibid.). In a bid to expose the socially subversive nature of these pluralistic-critical spaces, he outlines six principles that can be used to both define and analyse these heterotopias. Let us now explore these principles with particular reference to shipboard culture as it functions in *Anything Goes* and even beyond it.

Foucault’s first principle is that every culture constitutes heterotopias. They divide for him into two categories: those safe spaces for containing social crises and those critical sites where forms of social deviation can safely occur (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 24-25). Foucault finds the former type mainly in so-called ‘primitive societies’ where, for example, pregnant women were hidden away to give birth, but these have been generally superseded for him by the latter category in modernity. (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 25) Some heterotopias, like retirement homes, Foucault finds ‘are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation’ (ibid.).

We have seen that *Anything Goes* features a whole set of socially deviant characters that, on the surface at least, represent various social crises. The gangster, Moonface Martin, for example, represents the social crisis of criminality and is thus removed from mainstream society: he effectively puts himself away on the ‘SS American’ because, as America’s thirteenth most wanted man, he otherwise faces being put away in prison if not execution. In fact, when Mrs Frick asks him, ‘Surely, doctor, you don’t believe in capital punishment?’ he replies, ‘it was good enough for my father and it’s good enough for me!’ (Cited in Kreuger 1989b: 40).

In fact, it turns out that most if not all of the characters in the show exhibit deviances stemming from past transgressions and thus bring to the ship a whole set of social crises. These rub up against one another through the interaction of the passengers in the carnivalistic space of the ship in such a way as to illuminate their relativity in the face of otherwise apparent differences within ‘normal’ social hierarchies. This begs the question: is there really very much difference in motivation between, say, the gangster evading the law aboard ship and socialite Hope’s leaving on it for England to marry for reasons of money? Surely, both are equally motivated by crisis and, indeed, equally pretentious in representing themselves aboard ship. Yet these characters are apparently miles apart in terms of their social standing.

*Anything Goes* thus illuminates the potential of the passenger ship and, indeed, heterotopias of other forms, for this sort of social critique based on ambivalent relativity. In bringing otherwise separated communities together in one space, such carnivalistic places thus offer fertile ground for exploring social differences, through a special mode of self-performance which is staged outside of restrictive conventions that operate at home. *Anything Goes*, for example, seems to offer discourse on class, celebrity, race and even sexuality and the title song even gives former evangelist, Reno Sweeney, space to reflect on a sea change in moral values that seem so exemplified by the carnivalistic antics aboard the ship. In the title song we are told, ‘anything goes’ and are then treated to a tantalising list of the sort of indiscretions this includes. (cf. Porter [1934] 1989: 54) This exploration of Depression-era attitudes benefits, of course, from its containment, distance and deviation from ‘normal’ society in its performance aboard ship.

If initially this performance of ‘shock’ at the moral laxity of contemporary society seems to be just that, then the events of the shipboard narrative lead us

towards other conclusions. As we will see, it is in the journey experienced on the ‘SS American’ between the first rendition of the song and its reprise in the finale that we can chart an adjustment to that society’s moral compass. The song’s joyful indulgence, apparently engendered by the demise of old moral certainties, suggests nothing other than a social revitalisation of a profound order. ‘There’s no point being prudish’, the song seems to say, ‘instead it’s time to have the confidence to throw caution to the wind’ – just the way out of a depression!

Foucault’s second principle is that particular heterotopias can function differently as society changes and this difference is often highly nuanced (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 25). This feature is particularly apparent in the several revivals that *Anything Goes* has experienced since its 1934 premiere. Geoffrey Block has documented the revisions of the show that were presented in productions of the 1960s and 1980s (Block 1997: 46-53). These represent a fascinating way of charting social change, especially towards gender and racial politics and might envision new attitudes that pertain to revitalizing contemporary society. While exploring this particular enterprise in detail is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that the liner setting is retained as a constant frame in all revisions even though the form and content of the show are often quite radically updated.

Foucault’s third principle is that ‘The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 25). In *Anything Goes* we are given ready access across normal class distinctions to all levels of accommodation aboard the ‘SS American’ from staterooms to the cells of the brig. The public spaces of the deck and lounge scenes are a particular focus as they facilitate the carnivalistic interaction of characters of different classes and cultures, with the upper-class characters mixing as

much with Chinese immigrants, sailors, cabaret performers and even ‘notorious’ gangsters.

When we are shown cabins they are treated almost as much as social spaces and are improbably juxtaposed: Sir Evelyn Oakleigh’s suite, for example, is located just across the hall from the cramped cabin in which Billy and Moon share bunk beds. Furthermore, the opulently eclectic design of ocean-liner interiors gives them a function something like a museum in which one lives surrounded by references to many other times and places. The French liner *Normandie*, for example, featured a dining saloon mimicking the famed Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, mock-African cabins with leopard-skin rugs and a Byzantine-styled chapel (Wall 1978: 117-118, 203). Such a rich diversity of spaces suggested by the ship thus offers a ‘sense of a great city’, which Bakhtin considers a signature feature of carnivalesque literature (Bakhtin 1984: 160) and, indeed, liners were often described as ‘floating cities’ in publicity materials (Wall 1978: 92). It is the relativity of spaces and cultures that are normally completely removed from one another that is suggested by their unlikely juxtaposition or admixture aboard ship. This gives such heterotopias their socio-critical function as much as the unlikely social dialogues that are facilitated by such spaces.

Foucault’s fourth principle of heterotopia is that there is a vital link between the heterotopic space and a break in ‘normal’ perceptions of linear time (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 26). The nature of ocean travel leads to a difference between the somewhat timeless and ephemeral experience aboard ship and that seemingly more real and meaningful time experienced ashore. The ship is thus dreamlike and, much like song in musical comedies like *Anything Goes*, it affords a means of interrupting ‘normal’ time for subjective reflection that is enabled by the location’s distance in

time and place from ordinary society. As we will see, because such spaces are temporary and transitory, the heterotopic experience offered there takes normally sensitive social issues into 'nowhere' where they can be indulged before bringing them back again to the 'real' world. Such indulgent 'dreams' about the world thus function only to revitalise it. To such an end, musical comedies as much as ships harness carnivalistic performance of self-recognition to 'real' human situations in society at large.

Foucault's fifth principle is that, 'Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 26). Thus the ritual of embarkation is vital in *Anything Goes* and we get this in the first chorus 'Bon Voyage' with its traditional gestures of goodbye and Porter's self-consciously 'sophisticated' lyrics glossing French with vernacular American. However, this first chorus is rather unconventionally positioned after an opening scene, set ashore in a cabaret bar and featuring Reno's rendition of 'I Get a Kick Out of You'.

In terms of the carnivalistic performance world aboard the ship this first scene is perhaps no opening at all. It rather serves as a mere prelude for the traditional opening chorus ('Bon Voyage') because undulations of waves implied in the lilting, Latin-styled accompaniment of the song's verse suggest that the narrative proper is only initiated by the next scene. It is this scene and not the opening one that puts the characters at sea for real (see Figure 4).

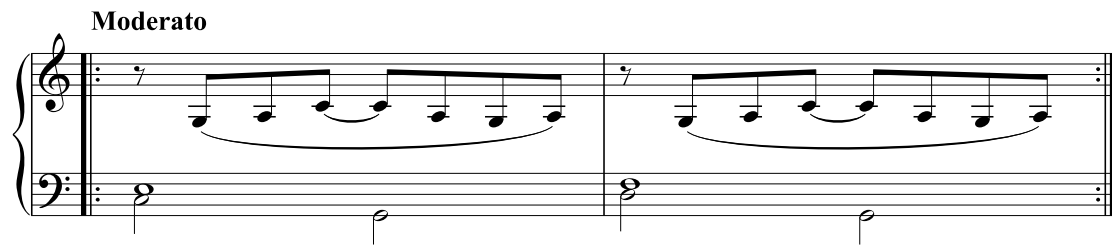


Figure 4: Accompanying vamp for verse of 'I Get A Kick Out of You'.

A preamble to the second scene, played before the curtain, sets up the narrative for the all-important carnivalistic reversal of class and celebrity statuses in the show via a clutch of journalists and photographers sensationalising the impending departure of the ship. A dialogic world of social deviation is thereby opened to the passenger-protagonists and audience that, while reminiscent of the world they know, is necessarily entirely transient, deviant and removed from it. Here our hero Billy can impersonate a gangster, a sailor, an upper-class lady or even a Chinaman but, as I've suggested, it is only in the closing scene, when he is found hiding in the Oakleighs' conservatory, that such impersonation ultimately fails or, indeed, succeeds as he finally gets his girl. He gets his comeuppance as Hope reveals her 'true' ethnic ancestry in 'The Gypsy in Me' but the experience of the show suggests this might be just as much a performance as one of Billy's impersonations aboard ship. This seems to point towards a broader social message concerning the falsity of any seemingly indisputable identity and social hierarchy and indeed the whole moral universe that extends from it. It implies these phenomena are always based on pretence and are just ideals that are only tenable because of repressed social transgressions. Thus it seems the underlying social message of *Anything Goes* seems to be that we need such

heterotopic spaces as musical comedies and ships to re-orientate society's moral compass by providing a place to indulge in social deviancy for a while.

Foucault's sixth principle is thus that, in relation to all other spaces, heterotopias function somewhere between creating a 'space of illusion that exposes every real space, all sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory' and creating a compensatory 'other' space 'which is as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled.' (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 27). There is no doubt that the narrative of *Anything Goes* is messy and illusory in its trajectory of desire: could heiress Hope and clerk Billy or singer Reno and British peer Evelyn realistically sustain their relationships in the face of the highly class-conscious society ashore? It seems highly unlikely, but the illusory trajectory of musical comedy narrative relies, of course, on the organised resolution of all such impassable obstacles in the finale, even in the face of their seeming impossibility. While achieving this resolution might be nothing but transitory and illusory for both characters and audience, it is nevertheless a journey worth taking for the work it does *en route* in reflecting and subverting social values. Furthermore, it envisions the possibility of a society in which we can be less anxious, especially about such things as our proximity with others and the relative cultural value of musical comedy.

'There's No Cure Like Travel', a song that originally formed a counterpoint with 'Bon Voyage' but was cut before the show's opening, tells us in its refrain that 'packing a suitcase and sailing away' helps us 'unravel the worries of living today' and soon has us 'singing 'Home, Sweet Home' (Porter 1989: 60). The therapeutic function of the carnivalistic-heterotopia is as clear here as the implications of the song's list of 'other' European cities on the Grand Tour that enable the curative

reflection on vexing issues at home in Depression-era America. Furthermore, in the ultimate finale of *Anything Goes*, the chorus reprise the title song but it is now changed in the B section of the AABA form, taking new lyrics to express something of the transformative socio-critical journey, albeit a transitory and illusory one, that has been afforded by the experience aboard ship. This transformation is most obvious in the way the tense of the lyric has altered to bring the lessons of the ship to fulfilment in social renewal. By moving away from suggestion (e.g. ‘if driving fast cars, you like’) into a generalised reflection on the here-and-now of contemporary society (‘The world has gone mad today, / And good’s bad today’ etc.), the chorus (society) offers the carnivalistic realisation (‘I know that you’re bound to answer, / When I propose, / Anything goes’) (cf. Porter 1989: 60).

The changed lyrics of ‘Anything Goes’ thus illustrate how such carnivalistic heterotopias offered by musical comedy and ships are not just places for escape but also vehicles for subjective-social re-envisioning. Although nothing may change in society ‘outside’ while aboard ship or in the theatre, the changed lyric of ‘Anything Goes’ helps to illuminate how the carnivalistic heterotopia affords both characters and audience important time out for recognizing themselves in relation to that ever-changing society, which ultimately, of course, acts so as to renew that society itself.

It is no wonder then that, at the end of his ‘Of Other Spaces’ lecture, Foucault suggests, ‘The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of pirates’ (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 27). *Anything Goes*, as a shipboard musical, has shown that musical comedy can be viewed as just as vital a space for keeping dreams, adventures and even pirates alive and well for the benefit of a progressive society free from Depression-era angst.



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<sup>1</sup> There are, for example, at least four Rodgers and Hart shows of the late 1920s that feature passenger ships prominently in their narratives. These include *Lido Lady* (1926), which has its third act on the liner 'Futura'; *Peggy-Ann* (1926), which begins its second act on the luxury yacht 'Peggy'; *Present Arms* (1928), which begins its second act on the 'SS Edna'; and *Heads Up* (1929), which has a plot based on the luxury yacht 'The Silver Lady'. I am indebted to Dominic Symonds for this information.

<sup>2</sup> It is suggestive of my overarching thesis that Porter's employment of Latin American melodic and rhythmic features are reminiscent of 'Begin the Beguine' (1935), a song written while Porter was on a Pacific cruise, aboard Cunard's *Franconia* (Cryer 2008: 86-69).