

McNair Scholars Journal

Volume 16 | Issue 1

Article 11

2012

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Recommended Citation

Vanderhoof, Bridgett (2012) "From Politics to “Popular”: Commercialization of Broadway Musicals and How It Affects the Public Sphere," *McNair Scholars Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol16/iss1/11>

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From Politics to “Popular”: Commercialization of Broadway Musicals and How It Affects the Public Sphere



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“Are people born wicked, or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?” This play on Malvolio’s musing from William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* appears in the first scene of the contemporary musical *Wicked*, stated by Galinda as she explains to the citizens of Oz the death of the Wicked Witch of the West. It wholly summarizes the grand question of the musical: are people actually wicked, or are people labeled wicked when they step outside of the normal bounds or society? What is good and what is evil? It is a hefty question for certain, and one that a stage musical may not be able to answer.

The musical *Wicked* follows the green-skinned governor’s daughter, Elphaba, from Munchkinland, to her time at Shiz University and to her supposed death at the hands of Dorothy from Kansas. The musical highlights the friendship between Elphaba and her roommate Galinda, who eventually becomes Glinda the Good. *Wicked* opened in October 2003 at the Gershwin Theatre in New York City. It is currently the 12th longest-running Broadway show ever, having had 3,749 performances as of November 11, 2012 (Internet Broadway). The musical has become a worldwide phenomenon since it premiered, expanding out to five more North American productions, two national tours, and several international productions. The immense reach and popularity of the production is reason enough to dissect and examine it.

The musical *Wicked* is based on Gregory Maguire’s 1995 novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. The book is both a prequel and sequel to L. Frank Baum’s 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. This book follows Elphaba from her time as an infant, through her time at Shiz University and the Emerald City, and to her eventual slip into madness shortly before her death (Maguire). The book briefly shows the aftermath of Dorothy’s trip to Oz.

The novel, in that it dwells on political, religious, and social problems, has an extremely different tone than the

musical. The question, “Are people born wicked, or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?” is a minor theme at best in the novel. Things are not as simple or straightforward as they are in the musical version; there are more nuances in this story. This difference in message and tone from the book to the musical could be written off as a change necessary for the story to be entertaining to a wider public. This is true to a certain extent, but there are many reasons, both historically and culturally, for this change during adaptation, and there are serious implications from this kind of streamlining.

Many essays and articles such as Paul Laird’s *Wicked: A Musical Biography* celebrate *Wicked* and its creators Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman. Stacy Wolf’s *Changed for Good* offers a rare critical examination of the play’s traditional structure, as well as the role of the ‘diva’ in *Wicked*. In this piece, I will reference Laird’s summary and comparison of the two works, and build on Wolf’s structural analysis to explore how commercialization and spectacle affect audience expectations, and how these factors lead to the deterioration of the public sphere. The adaptation of *Wicked* proves to be an interesting example, as there is a clear deviation from its literary source material. This comparison shows how much is lost in the process from book to stage and what consequences can arise from over-simplification. *Wicked*’s popularity and reach give it a definite place in the contemporary public sphere, but the larger issue is how effective *Wicked* and other musicals are in introducing ideas for discussion in the public sphere in comparison to their theatrical predecessors.

Theatre and the Public Sphere

In the thirteenth century, a new social order started to take shape. When trading began, the ruling class retained control of commerce rules and regulations. However, long-distance trading gave birth to newsletters and other forms

of communication. With this boom of communication and mercantilism, a new socio-economical class formed of educated people; the bourgeoisie emerged. The bourgeoisie consisted mainly of prominent shopkeepers and landowners, or people who ran the “town.”

The need for this long-distance communication was the basis for the idea of a public sphere. As Jurgen Habermas states in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. (27)

This sphere of private people coming together to critically examine their world politically and socially was preceded by their ability to debate theatre and other arts.

Before the eighteenth century, theatre was written for the popular audiences in mind, but it was still regulated by the aristocracy. There were many restrictions on what could be performed, but playwrights found a way around the limits placed on religious and political commentary. In this way, theatre has always had two sides: it is meant to entertain the public and also inform, but there were certain restrictions that limited its critical nature. Regardless of how creative they were about avoiding constraints, actors and playwrights were controlled by the court, and their success was determined by whether or not they pleased the ruler(s). This type of theatre, created solely for the affirmation of a few people’s ideas, was limited in its critical commentary. For example, Molière had to edit the ending to *Tartuffe* multiple times to please King Louis XIV so that he could produce his show.

With the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century, theatre shifted from being about and for aristocrats, to a form of entertainment for the quickly emerging middle class. The bourgeoisie was holding the money, which resulted in a change in subject in popular

theatre. This also marked the shift from theatre written for the pleasure of the courts, to theatre for mass consumption. Playwrights wrote in middle-class sentiment to entertain and to push culture on the middle class. The change in the audience dynamics and plot lines in the eighteenth century was the same change that happened in the public sphere; the middle-class was becoming more aware of their world and were claiming their part of it. Theatre was also being used to train the public for debate, and for teaching them the workings of their world. For example, merchants in England sent their apprentices to view *The London Merchant* by George Lillo to instruct them on the evils of the world, and to warn them of the consequences of getting involved with wicked women.

The bourgeoisie, who were the new middle class, started using theatre as a way to discuss new ideas: Psychological interests also guided the critical discussion sparked by the products of culture that had become publicly accessible: in the reading room and the theater, in museums and at concerts. Inasmuch as culture became a commodity and thus finally evolved into “culture” in the specific sense (as something that pretended to exist for its own sake), it was claimed as the ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented subjectivity communicated with itself. (Habermas, 29)

Even though theatre and other arts ‘pretended’ to exist outside of the political sphere, it would soon prove to be an integral part of the process that allowed people to contribute to the public sphere.

Eventually, the literary public sphere turned into a political one. Housed within the literary public sphere, which served as middle-ground between representative publicity (the aristocrats in power) and the bourgeois sphere, theatre and other fine arts gave people the reason and practice they needed to think critically and discuss political and social issues. The people then had enough intellect and rational to question the authority of the ruling class. In this way, theatre and other arts inspired the people to find their voice against omnipotent rulers and seek a constitutional

government. As Betsey Bolton states in her book *Women, Nationalism, and the Romantic Stage*:

Late eighteenth-century discussions of theatre and politics tend to dwell on the theatre’s ability to shape a mass of spectators into an audience and, by extension, its power to shape that audience into a nation . . . The restoration of the monarchy had, after all, brought with it the restoration of the English stage; the Glorious Revolution, with its newly minted Bill of Rights, gave focus to the analogy between spectator and citizen . . . Theatre offered a model for a political state in which a socially mixed public held power - if only through the force of its opinions. (11)

Audiences were the public: the public, audiences. The audience controlled the reception of the play, as a public did its leaders. Their opinions were powerful, and the theatre gave the public opportunities to put their opinions into practice.

In the centuries that followed, theatre emerged as a crucial site for inspiring and enacting social change. Theatre has been used by many playwrights to push the agenda of a marginalized group, or to comment on society’s downfalls. At the same time, however, many plays have been written for entertainment purposes only. As Horace said, “The poet’s aim is either to profit or to please, or to blend in one the delightful and the useful (Horace, 74).” In the nineteenth century, Romanticism and Melodramas existed concurrently; Romanticism being for the more gentlemanly crowd, and melodramas for bourgeoisie and below. Melodramas actually dominated the theatre scene then, much like modern musicals. The distinction between then and now is the fact that Romanticism was still a force within the theatrical public sphere. However, a recent increase in mega-musicals have distracted audience members away from rational-critical debate.

The Spectacle of Musicals

Musicals, especially mega-musicals, rely heavily on spectacle to draw in audiences and sell tickets. Due to its multi-disciplinary nature, musical theatre has a good amount

of spectacle. As Scott McMillin argues in his book *The Musical as Drama*:

The musical's complexity comes in part from the tension between two orders of time, one for the book and one for the numbers. The book represents the plot or the action. It moves (in terms borrowed from Aristotle's *Poetics*) from a beginning through a middle to an end.

What makes the musical complex is something the Greek drama had too—the second order of time, which interrupts book time in the form of songs and dances. (6-7)

This suspension of disbelief is common across theatrical productions, but this level of it creates a situation where the audience can have emotional connections to the characters with little desire to debate any issues that arise from it critically.

In addition to this basic spectacle, theatre in general utilizes costumes, sets, lights, sounds, and projections to create the world of the play. Spectacle, however, is the least important element of drama according to Aristotle:

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet. (37)

He places plot, character, thought, diction, and song all above spectacle in his description of the six essential elements of drama (36-37).

Wicked almost directly reverses Aristotle's order, placing spectacle and music above any other element. In this way, *Wicked* resembles the mega musicals of the 1980's and 90's, with its "catchy music, clever lyrics, quirky and recognizable characters, huge sets, lavish costumes, and spectacular special effects, such as robotic lighting, smoke, fire, trapdoors, and flying actors" (Wolf,

200). In scenes where character could prevail, the musical enhances the spectacle so that it overshadows everything else. A specific example comes during the Elphaba solo "No Good Deed." In the song, she is debating the nature of good and evil, and the fact that good deeds are always punished. She laments at how her well-intentioned actions have negatively affected Fiyero, Nessarose, and Dillamond. Even though Elphaba is having a very emotional realization that advances the plot and her future actions, the moment is reduced when the actress playing Elphaba stands over air vents that blow her cape up. This, combined with the intense orchestrations and red lighting, makes the audience realize that this is the moment when Elphaba transforms into the Wicked Witch of the West, but if the audience is not listening very closely, they will miss the character transformation. The audience receives a spectacular show, but at the expense of character and plot.

Spectacle is inherent to all forms of theatre, but *Wicked* and other musicals use it to the extreme and place most of the emphasis on creating a larger-than-life world for the characters to live in rather than the characters themselves. Alan McKee, author of *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*, synthesizes multiple theorists' definitions of spectacle into "three broad distinctions:"

Firstly, it suggests that citizen-consumers are being given flashy, showy forms of communication; visual presentations in particular, rather than detailed and difficult written forms of communication . . . Secondly, spectacles are 'entertainment'¹ they're easily consumed, undemanding, and 'distract' citizens from real politics and action . . . and thirdly (because of their ease of consumption), spectacles encourage passivity in spectators—who watch for easily consumed pleasure. Bodily and concrete pleasures are privileged over difficult abstract and mental work . . . The result of this is that 'individuals passively observe the spectacles of social life'² culture that is easy to understand makes consumers

passive because they don't have to work hard to understand it. (107-108)

With the lack of critical and rational debate, the society that follows spectacle is doomed to become passive and complacent. Spectacle is only one of the symptoms of the modern mega musicals. It lies within the larger problem of commercialization.

Commercialization

Due to the expensive nature of creating a Broadway musical, most creators rely on a certain reliable structure to ensure that their musical will find monetary success once it opens. This process includes making sure that character motives are easily understood, the plot is straightforward and clear, and the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' are clearly delineated. These changes may seem benign, but in the case of *Wicked*, it dumbs down the important thematic elements from the book to create an easily consumed musical.

The use of a template to create entertainment has been utilized before; in the world of theatre, the most notable examples are the melodramas and well-made plays of the nineteenth century:

The real significance of popular theatre in the nineteenth century was the scale on which it operated as it provided entertainment for the new and growing urban working classes. Mostly it was undemanding and had no social or aesthetic pretensions to high culture. Despite its frequently populist sentiments, its ethos was for the most part bourgeois or petty-bourgeois and seldom subversive in any serious way. Its moral values reflected the codes to which the petty-bourgeois aspired. (McCormick, 225)

Melodramas were crafted so that the characters and plot appeal to the audience's emotions. Stock characters and plots were used to support audience expectations. These melodramas used music to highlight events and characters throughout the play, and the term melodrama literally means "music drama." Melodramas are the predecessors to formulaic crime

1. This section of quote taken from Alan McKee's *The Public Sphere: An Introduction* cites other author's works. This particular section is from Douglas Kellner's 2003 article 'Engaging media spectacles' in *M/C: a journal of media and culture*.
2. Kellner, 2003 and Brian Groombridge's *Television and the People: a programme for democratic participation*, 1972.

shows, hour-long television dramas, and of course, the Broadway musical.

The changes mentioned are made to fit the story of *Wicked* into the standard Rodgers and Hammerstein's model, made famous by the duo's hits of the 1940s and 50s. In *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Stacy Wolf outlines the characteristics of these musicals:

The tenets established by Rodgers and Hammerstein and their peers in the mid-twentieth century that characterize the formally integrated book musical include a realist narrative (even in a fantasy locale); an articulate and self-reflexive book; some kind of social commentary; and non-diegetic dance numbers. Other conventions include a leading character (especially a woman in Rodgers and Hammerstein) who is both flawed and admirable; a romance whose development forms the spine of the story; and a chorus that embodies the community and its values. (202)

This structure is recognizable to the public, whether it be consciously or subconsciously, because of its repeated use across media. The story of romance is the most widely used characteristic in musicals, and according to Wolf the "celebration of heterosexual romance is its (the musical's) very purpose" (Wolf, 203). However, in *Wicked* the romance is shifted from a heterosexual focus to a queer focus. The musical focuses on Galinda and Elphaba's relationship, which is a definite shift from the novel, where the two witches' friendship is a very small portion of the plot. Wolf's main argument is that Galinda and Elphaba's friendship structurally takes the place of the standard heterosexual relationship. Wolf discusses this use of traditional structure in her book *Changed for Good*.

Wicked's move away from a traditional heterosexual romance plot is a clear variation from the classic model. Even though this departure allows for more possible social commentary, the musical adaptation of *Wicked* falls short of its potential when it is forced into this traditional structure. The musical doesn't actually do anything with this departure away from the normal except use it as a substitution. It fails to deal with the

political implications of the change, leaving it only subtly implicit. And, in the end, unlike the traditional heterosexual relationship, they do not end up together. The musical 'rights' itself by showing Elphaba and Fiyero together at the end. It also uses recognizable characters from an already beloved film, *The Wizard of Oz*, to appeal to the Broadway audiences.

The Wizard of Oz

Probably the largest sign of commercialization in the musical adaptation of *Wicked* is its blatant use of imagery from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* to appeal to audiences. *The Wizard of Oz* has been an American movie staple since its release in 1939, shown annually on major broadcasting networks, sometimes even more frequently than that. Gregory Maguire's novel seems to be based more on the original L. Frank Baum book, rather than the movie. However, the musical adaptation makes multiple references to the movie, capitalizing on the fact that it is considered the most-viewed film in history. Again, these references are unique to the musical adaptation and not the novel. These references usually bring a laugh or a sigh of recognition from the audience, who feel that they are "in" on something, and who feel included in the story.

The main characters of Galinda and Elphaba are literally fashioned after the movie's versions of those characters. The actress playing Galinda imitates Billie Burke's movements during the first and last scenes, when she is playing the "public figure" part for the citizens of Oz, and the actress playing Elphaba channels Margaret Hamilton's stature and laugh towards the end of the musical when she has seemingly lost everything. Both of their costumes in the second act seem to reflect the same style of the film's costumes, strengthening the similarities between the two versions even more.

The characters of Fiyero and Boq are reworked to cater to the audience's needs. In the novel *Wicked*, Fiyero ends up brutally murdered and Boq becomes a farmer. The musical adaptation takes these two characters and turns them into the Scarecrow and the Tin Man, respectively. They both live, but forever changed.

They both travel with Dorothy to meet the Wizard of Oz, and set out to find the Wicked Witch of the West. Boq, as the Tin Man, is enraged that he was transformed by Elphaba (when actually it was to save his life), and Fiyero, as the Scarecrow, can't remember anything. The Cowardly Lion, although he is not a developed character in the musical, is still present as a lion cub Elphaba saves in class. All characters are accounted for by a back story.

In the novel, the reader is never sure of who the Tin Man, Scarecrow, or the Cowardly Lion are, and neither is Elphaba. Her speculation of who they are is actually evidence for her forthcoming madness. By assigning characters to these film icons, it serves three purposes. First, it alleviates any confusion for the audience about how these characters came to be. Secondly, it satisfies the audiences because they not only get to see the background stories of the Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda the Good, but also of the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion; all characters that the audience were familiar with before the musical started. Finally, it gives reason to the characters who are present in Elphaba's world. Without this reason, as in the novel, the audience/reader could draw the conclusion that Elphaba is making them up in her own mind. She also speculates that the Scarecrow is Fiyero, something never supported in the novel with fact. This speculation only shows how desperate Elphaba has gotten for her long-dead lover.

The Wizard of Oz supplants Madame Morrible as the main villain in the musical. This could be due to the audiences expectations of gender, or to the fact the Madame Morrible is not a character in the 1939 film, and therefore not as recognizable as the Wizard to mass audiences. Both probably play a factor in this change, but the change remains one of the largest between the novel and musical versions.

Characters

In the novel and the musical, Elphaba is the focus. However, the musical also brings Galinda into the forefront. These two main characters are set up as opposites of each other. Elphaba is shy, bookish,

and an outcast; Galinda is blonde, popular, and self-absorbed. The musical characters of Galinda and Elphaba are merely caricatures of their novel selves. The characters that are represented in the musical version simplify the character traits of each girl to uncomplicate the interactions. If one is popular and one is an outcast, the audience will be able to identify immediately what will happen: they won't get along. This relationship has been played out in multiple teen movies throughout the years, and there is nothing different about this friendship. The audience can even guess the trajectory of the relationship before the two girls become best friends almost overnight. To support this relationship even more, the musical places the natural magical power in Elphaba, rather than Galinda, who possesses it in the novel. This way, Elphaba has something to give Galinda (asking Morrible to include Galinda in the sorcery class), and her actions throughout the rest of the musical are justified by her magic. Galinda, then, is grateful to Elphaba, which strengthens their friendship, a friendship that was made for the musical.

Their relationship is secondary in the novel; more important are Elphaba's relationships with Fiyero, Boq, Nessarose, Nanny, Liir, and Sarima. Their friendship in the book is simply that of college roommates who drifted apart due to certain circumstances. The musical places Galinda as the foil to Elphaba - she undergoes a major personality change throughout the course of the musical, but she exists primarily to contrast with Elphaba. Her transformation is even more realistic than Elphaba's in that her change is gradual and Elphaba's is immediate. With the enlarging of the Galinda character, other characters had to be minimized.

Fiyero's role in the novel is fairly extensive. He is an important character at the height of the time when Elphaba is a political rebel. Even after his death in the novel he remains influential in the plot when Elphaba travels to the Vinkus to live with his widow, Sarima, and his children. In the musical, he is Elphaba and Galinda's mutual lover, but his relationships are downplayed so that the audience is not confused as to which relationship is at the center of the story.

Like Fiyero, many characters are downplayed, or they were written out of the musical completely. Nanny, a main character from the novel who appears from beginning to end, was cut completely out of the musical. Her character, along with Liir, Elphaba and Fiyero's son, were used in the novel to show Elphaba's self-centered personality and her progression into madness. Of course, these traits would have been undesirable for a main character of a musical, so these important characters were dropped from the storyline. In addition, if there are too many characters in a two and a half hour show, the audience will get confused about the relationships between them. Boq, who appears in the musical as Nessarose's boyfriend turned man-servant turned Tin Man, plays an essential role in Elphaba's quest to learn more about the differences between animals and Animals. In the novel, he is also not connected to Nessarose in any way, nor is he turned into the Tin Man at the end. Additionally, Fiyero is not turned into the Scarecrow, but is brutally murdered, again to play into *The Wizard of Oz* expectations.

Plot

A large section of the book deals with Elphaba traveling to Kiamo Ko to beg forgiveness from Fiyero's widow Sarima, as she feels that it was her fault that he died. This section, which spans almost the last third of the book, was eliminated, along with the character Sarima and her sisters, Manek, Nor, and Irji. Again, the amount of characters in this section in addition to the characters from Elphaba's time at school would prove to be extremely confusing to the audience. Her Shiz University peers Averic, Crope, Tibbett, and Glinda's nanny Ama Clutch, were all cut from the musical.

In general, the book is much darker than the musical version. Many people die, whereas in the musical, only Elphaba's parents die. In the book, Madame Morrible sends her robot Grommetik to stab Doctor Dillamond, and she drives Ama Clutch crazy, eventually killing her. Madame Morrible tries to brainwash Elphaba, Galinda, and Nessarose in the novel, something that may have actually happened and is never proved otherwise.

Nessarose has no arms and she can't walk because of balance issues. Fiyero and his widow Sarima are both brutally murdered by troops trying to find Elphaba. Most interesting is the change of Elphaba's actions from the novel to the musical. Elphaba is an extremist, and this view on life eventually leads to her journey into madness. Her views also contribute to a few dark events that would not be suitable for a family-friendly musical. Elphaba is determined to murder Madame Morrible, but she finds her already dead in her bed. She proceeds to bash in her skull, because seeing her deceased was not enough for Elphaba. She also kills Sarima's son Manek by willing an icicle to fall on him because he annoyed her.

Obviously, these events characterize a different Elphaba than what is presented in the musical version. If she performed these evil tasks on stage, she would lose that "admirable" quality that is so essential to Rodgers and Hammerstein's lead characters. Audiences would not feel an emotional connection to her, because they do not want to empathize with a murderer. Elphaba can be considered evil by the rest of Oz, as long as the audience knows she really isn't. Her flaw in the musical is a "positive" one: she speaks her mind and is not afraid to stand up for what is right. This "flaw" gets her and others that she loves into trouble, but never causes any fatal damage. Her flaws in the book are more complicated; She is so passionate about what she believes, that she is sought out by the government to be eliminated, which leads to the deaths of both Fiyero and Sarima. Elphaba embraces her role as a political extremist in the novel, but this characteristic, along with her religious beliefs marginalize her for the mass audiences, making her an unsatisfactory main character. In the musical, she is portrayed as a victim, playing into stereotypical gender roles, which are utilized to make the product more digestible to the audience members who are accustomed to females being victimized.

Gender Roles

In the novel, the power is given to the females. Madame Morrible is clearly the most evil character in the novel, committing the most murders and crimes

out of anyone. She is the one that Elphaba seeks to destroy, not the Wizard. Yet, in the musical, Madame Morrible is decreased to an evil sidekick of the Wizard. She holds the power to change the weather, but never actually kills anyone. She just makes things difficult for Galinda and Elphaba. She is, without doubt, very evil in the musical, but she is much less extreme.

The musical character of Elphaba plays into a traditional female stereotype throughout the entire musical. She just wants to fit in at Shiz, and she wants Fiyero to like her. These goals seem trite compared to her goals in the novel. Novel Elphaba seeks to understand the world around her and to change the injustices that characterize Oz. This eventually becomes a goal of musical Elphaba, but her relationships with Galinda and Fiyero take precedence. A noticeable difference between the two Elphabas is how they came to have the title of Wicked Witch of the West. Alissa Burger states about the novel:

In earlier versions, the Munchkins designated each witch as 'good' or 'wicked'; however, in *Wicked*, rather than being truly evil or even magically gifted, Elphaba simply names herself a 'witch' in response to her position on the fringes of community, and for the freedom of movement and power the title affords her. As Elphaba tells her old classmates Boq and Milla, "I call myself a Witch now: the Wicked Witch of the West, if you want the full glory of it. As long as people are going to call you a lunatic anyway, why not get the benefit of it? It liberates you from convention" (Maguire, 357). Elphaba understands the role of a constructed, public identity and its effect on individual acceptance and sociocultural power. (128)

Elphaba names herself in the novel, but in the musical it is the society and the ones in power who assign her the title of "wicked," stripping her of the power of self-identification she possessed in the novel. She embraces her position as the marginalized other in the novel, reveling in the freedom she receives because of it, whereas in the musical the act of being marginalized from the mainstream is the main evil act.

Melena, Elphaba's mother, is the daughter of the current Eminent Thropp, or leader, of Munchkinland, and is married to a poor minister. The nobility in the family is on the female side, allowing her a certain power that is shifted to the father in the musical. Elphaba and Nessarose's father is then the governor of Munchkinland, eliminating any confusion in gender roles.

Consequences of Commercialization

The changes made to the musical from the novel show the commercialization of theatre. The changes were made to make the story feel familiar to the audiences who are used to traditional gender roles, happy plot lines, and have seen *The Wizard of Oz*. *Wicked* is not the only musical that utilizes these same methods to sell tickets, but they are easily pointed out due to the fact that the source material is readily available.

Some people would say that musicals are this way because "that's what audiences want." This statement may be true, but what should be investigated is *why* the audiences want it. They want it because it is the same as what they have been delivered their whole lives. The musicals affirm their beliefs and actions, clearly designating what is wrong and what is right. It delivers to them a story that they can relate to and engage in. The problem is that the audience isn't engaging in a critical way, only emotionally.

There have been artists since Rodgers and Hammerstein's days that have created musicals that are more than fluff. Stephen Sondheim, Jason Robert Brown, and Brian Yorlkey have created musicals with meaning, commenting on society's shortcomings in musicals like *Company*, *Parade*, and *Next to Normal*. Sondheim, being of an earlier generation of theatre artists than the others, was still able to garner enough funds to produce his alternative shows. Brown and Yorlkey's shows are usually smaller and require less spectacle than their mega-musical counterparts. They are also less widely recognizable than *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, and *Wicked*. Stephen Sondheim himself has said:

You have two kinds of shows on Broadway -- revivals and the same

kind of musicals over and over again, all spectacles. You get your tickets for 'The Lion King' a year in advance, and essentially a family comes as if to a picnic, and they pass on to their children the idea that that's what the theater is -- a spectacular musical you see once a year, a stage version of a movie. It has nothing to do with theater at all. It has to do with seeing what is familiar. We live in a recycled culture. (qtd. in Rich)

There are still plays that are released that do introduce topics of discussion, but unfortunately commercial musicals are garnering most of the attention and funds. Musical are very expensive to produce, but also make larger profits than straight plays. *Wicked* cost \$14 million, but it only took 14 months to make back that investment (Cash). In comparison, the 2009 revival of the straight play *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, by Neil Simon, cost \$3 million to produce, but only made \$124,000 in its eight preview performances, and was shut down shortly after opening (Healy). Broadway has become about the profits that can be made, rather than the art. Investors and producers are more likely to put their money and time into a musical with a predictable storyline, rather than a straight play that tries to break the rules. Straight plays are struggling to receive recognition outside a small group of avid theatre-goers. Most straight plays that do open on Broadway and receive widespread recognition are either revivals of old classics (like *Brighton Beach Memoirs*), or transfers of off-Broadway shows. This is due to the fact that the cost of advertising has skyrocketed in the past two decades, and straight plays find it hard to accrue the needed funds (Teachout). This doesn't only hold true for straight plays, but also for musicals that deviate greatly from the expected.

Conclusion

Audiences who have grown accustomed to the recycled storylines about romance and good triumphing over evil expect more of what pleases them. Since a show can not survive without ticket sales, creators take the "safe" bet and work their story into what they know the masses will eat up. There are no new creative ideas, just ideas disguised as groundbreaking.

On a general scale, we can even compare this to the commercialization in movies and on television. Our society as a whole is commercialized, stunting the growth of alternative ideas and beliefs. Without new and creative ideas, the theatre world may lose its place as a center for rational-critical debate. If spectacle is outweighing substance, and ticket sales are the end goal of the creators, then musical theatre can not contribute to the public sphere. The audiences are caught up in the aesthetic of the production, and are therefore being steered away from thinking critically about what they have seen. Simplifying a story and watering down information, as musicals do, is leading to the deterioration of theatre in the public sphere. There will always be spectacle in theatre, but the goal should be a balance of spectacle and substance, where substance takes precedence. Otherwise, theatre will be characterized by spectacle and commercialization, and popularity will triumph over social concerns.

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