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The Golden Age Exposed: The Reality Behind This
Romantic Era

Danny Adams

Honors Research

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In the spring of 2016, I took a class called “Music Theatre History and Literature” which is about exactly what it sounds like: a course on the history of music theatre and how it evolved into what it is today. From *The Black Crook*, the first known “integrated musical” in 1866, to *In the Heights* and shows today, the class covered it all. The part of the class I found most interesting was the section on the “Golden Age” of music theatre. The writers during this era wrote with a great amount of emotional depth, intelligence, thought provoking ideas, and progressive positions on difficult subject matter. It is the era which changed the game in musical theatre both in subject matter and form. What I found out, being in the class, is some of my peers, who prefer contemporary musicals over Golden Age pieces, appeared to miss what these shows are actually saying and by extension their value. The misperception that these shows are old-fashioned often interferes with an appreciation of their importance and significance in the transformation of the genre and often diminishes Golden Age pieces to being of no value other than nostalgic entertainment. This perception of lacking “value” in essence hampers the ability to appreciate and engage in this literature in ways that keep it fresh and vibrant. For me, an appreciation of Golden Age musicals is imperative to understanding all musicals that have come after. So, highlighting the many thought provoking topics that they explore is imperative. I want to expose the reality of what these Golden Age pieces were trying to say to their contemporary audience and how they speak to my contemporaries today. I am not changing these shows or showing something different than what is in the original text. I am simply pointing out what may have been missed by not taking the time to really dig into all they have to offer.

When an audience sees a musical, there are many things to take in; beyond the plot, character development, musicality, and themes, there are sub textual nuances and social issues that may be missed in a single viewing. Often, people get lost in the melody of a song or the

beauty of an extended dance sequence. Underneath all the nostalgia and romantic music, lighting, costumes, and set designs lie gritty pieces of music theatre often exploring problems we as a country still struggle with today. In order to illustrate my thesis, I have selected three topics that are hallmarks of the Golden Age of music theatre. These are the celebration of American idealism, American conflicts over race and ethnicity, and American shifting social conceptions about gender roles. This subject matter plays a big role in explaining why these Golden Age pieces are still topical today.

Let me first establish some vocabulary and context that may be unfamiliar to those who have not had the opportunity to study the history of musical theatre. The Golden Age of music theatre, which scholars define starting in 1943 and ending in 1964, was the era in which the form of the musical matured into an accepted practice. The structure became what is called the “integrated musical play,” meaning all elements of the production- song, dance, text, direction, choreography, sets, costumes, lights, and sound- were unified in service to the narrative. The songs and dances were woven seamlessly into the action of the script in order to elaborate the plot or show the psychological state of the character. *Show Boat* was one of the first productions to test this form out in 1927 with Oscar Hammerstein II writing the book and lyrics, and Jerome Kern writing the music. The show is based on Edna Ferber’s novel, *Show Boat*, comments on the lives of the entertainers and dockhands on the “Cotton Blossom” boat, which ran on the Mississippi River between the years of 1887 and 1927. The show explored themes of race in a post Civil War America. Even though *Show Boat* is considered the birth of the modern integrated musical, it did not signal a drastic change in the form the way *Oklahoma!* would sixteen years later. While *Show Boat* attempted to fully integrate all aspects of the show, there were still a couple of musical numbers not fully integrated into the narrative or action. These

songs like “Dance Away the Night” and others are there just as “show girl” numbers. Although *Show Boat* represents the birth of a new form of music theatre, the advent of the financial crisis that led to the Great Depression during its run is what most scholars feel interrupted a desire to replicate the formula. Audiences simply were not in the mood for a show about social change that asked them to grapple with thought-provoking ideas while being entertained. People were looking for escapist musical shows like burlesque, which were shows using music and text but mainly exploiting the female body for the mainly male audience. Audiences wanted to see musical comedies, a show which had a loosely written script with songs and dance numbers dropped into the storyline rather than rising out of the action. There were also operettas, which the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* defines as “A light opera with spoken dialogue, songs and dances” (Leve 30). There were also different variety shows like vaudeville, a form which is just a collection of entertaining acts of song and dance. Audiences also flocked to see Minstrel shows, which used blackface to mock the “mannerisms of black slaves and free blacks,” and spectacles like the “Ziegfeld Follies” which featured show girls and a number of vaudeville headliners to create a showcase of popular songs. All of these different forms of entertainment remained the standard and drew in large audiences through the dark decade of the 1930s, but Oscar Hammerstein II did not give up his belief that the musical could be and do more than just entertain and provide an escape from reality.

In 1943, *Oklahoma!* changed the game of music theatre for decades to come. After producing many different plays, Theresa Helburn, who was one of the main founders of the Theatre Guild, wanted to try a musical. The Theatre Guild was known for producing critically acclaimed but financially disastrous revivals of classic as well as new plays. Mrs. Helburn had a high respect for “musicals” like *Porgy and Bess* and *Show Boat* and wanted to see if producing a

new musical might turn around their financial woes. As she was deciding on what play she held the rights to that might be musicalized, she was reminded of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, a play the Theatre Guild had produced successfully years earlier. She first approached Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart to create the musical since many of their shows were wildly successful in the 20s and 30s. Although Rodgers agreed to take part, Hart was not fully on board. Because of Hart's alcoholism and increasingly erratic behavior, Rodgers decided for this project he would work with someone else. He chose his old college friend, Oscar Hammerstein II. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Helburn were all taking a risk in the creation of *Oklahoma!*, and no one was assured that this grand experiment would work. In creating a musical driven by plot and character development where songs rose from the action, they knew they needed a production team who would understand this new level of collaboration. They looked to the critically acclaimed theatre and film director Rouben Mamoulian and modern dance choreographer Agnes de Mille to helm their grand experiment. Both choices proved to be a stroke of genius. Coming from a concert dance career, de Mille "struck a delicate balance between classical ballet and popular dance, articulating the dramatic and emotional content of the story..." (Leve 17). Along with Lemuel Ayers designing the set, and Oliver Smith the costumes, *Oklahoma!* eclipsed *Show Boat*'s success and set a new standard. Why did this show specifically change the game? From this point on, the well-made musical play became the industry standard, and theatre contemporaries adopted this new approach in their work. The way song, dance, and text seamlessly arose out of the action and unified the story became the new benchmark for quality. Although musical comedies and operettas remained popular, the rise of the musical play transformed the expectations of how to write across the genre. Even today when Lin Manuel

Miranda composed *Hamilton*, he focused on the characters and action of the story. He was writing a musical play just like Rodgers and Hammerstein did seventy-four years earlier.

Three innovations *Oklahoma!* explored became hallmarks of many Golden Age musicals: the conditional love song, the dream ballet, and the integrated musical scene. The conditional love song is a duet where two lovers are unwilling to admit or cannot admit to their love yet, so they sing conditionally about being in love, or about the idea of loving each other. Hammerstein had played with this convention in *Show Boat* with, “Only Make Believe,” but his collaboration with Rodgers on “People Will Say We’re in Love” in *Oklahoma!* became a standard of the new musical form. In *Oklahoma!*, the principal young lovers, Laurey and Curly, tease each other about being together, but at the same time reveal their desire: “Don’t take my arm too much/
Don’t keep your hand in mine/
Your hand feels so grand in mine/
People will say we’re in love!
Don’t dance all night with me/
Till the stars fade from above./
They’ll see it’s alright with me/
People will say we’re in love” (Hammerstein 37). On the opposite side of the spectrum, rather than mocking the idea, some musicals play with the future, and what it would be like to be in love. In *Carousel*, both Billy and Julie think about what life would be like “if” they loved each other in “If I Loved You:” “If I loved you,
Time and again I would try to say/
All I’d want you to know” (Hammerstein 109). Audiences can find the conditional love song in many contemporary musicals in songs like “Falling Slowly” from *Once* and “Perfect for You” from *Next to Normal*. In the Golden Age, the dream ballet became a much more important convention, integral to the story telling. The dream ballet revealed a “psychological dimension” to the characters which could not be expressed by any sort of text whether spoken or sung. As James Leve says in *American Musical Theatre*: “The ballet heightens the dramatic tension...” (18). Even more writers, directors, and choreographers began to add dance as a key component of

storytelling in shows like *West Side Story*, *On the Town*, *Carousel*, and others. The final convention created during the Golden Age was the integrated musical scene/song. The songs in the “integrated musical play” help to “advance the plot, songs flow directly from dialogue, and song expresses the characters who sing them” (Leve 4). These three conventions helped to make Golden Age what it was and influenced writers from generation to generation.

The Golden Age provided writers the freedom to speak their mind in many different ways. The “musical” was something specifically American in its creation. Authors Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer, and Dave Walsh said, “the musical has been a primary and widely accessible voice through which the American way of life has expressed itself to people in the USA and too much of the rest of the world. The combination of song, dance and drama, which distinguishes musical theatre from other theatrical genres, is linked both to historical circumstances and ideological beliefs” (385). The musical is American in that it is a “synthesis of high and lowbrow art forms” (Donovan 1). It combined the higher art forms like opera with lower art forms like vaudeville.

Many writers throughout the Golden Age either supported or poked fun at the ideals of being an American. Whether it be about coming together as a nation, workplace struggles, or being a dreamer, lyricists, book writers, and composers all did their part in writing about American ideals. In 1943, in between the events of Pearl Harbor and the Normandy beach strike, America searched for a rationale to fight in the war. Rodgers and Hammerstein were the ones to provide many soldiers with this justification by creating an American made musical.

Oklahoma! (1943) is an example of American idealism being addressed as a subject. Set in the territorial disputes between the farmers and the cowmen of what is now Oklahoma in 1906, the show, at first glance, is about a love triangle between the niece of a farm owner, Laurey Williams, one of her Aunt’s farm hands, Jud Fry, and a cowman Curly McLain. In the

end, Curly marries Laurey elating on the idea of becoming both a farmer and a cowman. The farmers and the cowmen celebrate the new territory they have come together to create called Oklahoma. While the show can be perceived as a light-hearted, superficial musical, it is riddled with thought provoking explorations on gender roles, sexuality, racial intolerance, and what it means to be American identity.

“The Farmer and the Cowman” is a song in *Oklahoma!* which provides a viewpoint on American ideals. A key component of the show, and something necessary in its delivery, is the American ideal of two people having opposing views coming together and putting their pride aside to create something bigger than themselves. In the song Andrew Carnes, a farmer, states the issue and the solution from the beginning of the song:

“Oh the farmer and the cowman should be friends./Oh the farmer and the cowman should be friends./One man likes to push a plow./The other likes to chase a cow./But that's no reason why they can't be friends./Territory folks should stick together./Territory folks should all be pals./Cowboys dance with the farmer's daughters./Farmers dance with the rancher's gals” (Hammerstein 52).

Curly then adds his viewpoint into the song: “And when this territory is a state,/An' joins the Union just like all the others./The farmer, the cowman, and the merchant/Must all behave their selves and act like brothers” (Hammerstein 54). These lyrics resonate with the ideal standard of many Americans living in a democratic civilization. There is a reason the musical was named *Oklahoma!* instead of the original title *Away We Go*. Rodgers and Hammerstein knew the underlying message they were trying to relay was being united rather than divided. Another Rodgers and Hammerstein piece filled with American ideals is *Allegro*.

Allegro (1947) is an example of Hammerstein talking about the superior and inadequate parts of the American Dream. The musical tells the story of the life of Joseph Taylor Jr. told with the help of a “Greek chorus” as he struggles to find what he wants to be in a clustered American society. With the opportunity of becoming a successful physician in Chicago and having those opportunities at his helm, he realizes his true dream is to go home and be happy assisting his father as a physician. Hammerstein was smart about the way he discussed how American life was operating and how it “ran.” With the title song “Allegro,” it discusses the fast pace Americans moved at and how you need to always be active in order to keep up. In the song, the characters Joe, Charlie, and Emily sing,

“We know no other way/Of living out a day./Our music must be galloping and gay./We muffle all the undertones,/The minor blood-and-thunder tones;/The overtones are all we care to play./Hysterically frantic,/We are stubbornly romantic/And doggedly determined to be gay!” (Hammerstein 253).

Hammerstein was trying to discuss some of the issues with the ability of finding your own American Dream. With the ideals of many people saying the American Dream is about somebody rising to a successful position and being affluent, this is not Joe’s. Joe discovers his true American Dream is to be settled at home; to live and work around the people he loves rather than working to the point of exhaustion in the city. In the song, they discuss the resilience and strength you need to combat being occupied all the time. There is never a moment of tranquility in the city life for them, because there is always a new problem awaiting. Another musical that not only makes comments on American ideals, specifically in the workplace, but pokes fun at them is *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying, the 1962 Pulitzer Prize winning musical, is a satire about American ideals in the workplace. Throughout the show, Abe Burrows, Jack Weinstock, and Willie Gilbert add humor to how everyone acts in the workplace. There is the nephew of the boss who is hired out of obligation; The corporate men who are in opposition to someone climbing to the top; The secretaries who are there for work or “play.” These authors added countless one liners poking fun at the corporate men who came to see the show. As Rosemary, a secretary, begins to fall for Finch, the protagonist, he does not seem to be giving her much attention.

Rosemary: Oh, I don't know. He's... he's... Smitty, what's the opposite of a sex maniac?

Smitty: A business man. (Burrows, Gilbert, Weinstock 20).

Of course, the musical also deals with the issue of sexual harassment in the work place. The song “A Secretary is Not a Toy” is an illustration of this. As Hedy LaRue, the new sexy secretary, walks in to start working for the company, the men all begin to beg for new secretaries. Mr. Bratt tells them: “A secretary is not a toy,/ No, my boy; not a toy/ To fondle and dandle/ And playfully handle/ In search of some puerile joy./ No, a secretary is not/ Definitely not, a toy” (Loesser 37). These lyrics take an evident stance on a topical subject at the time with many secretaries having problems with being sexually harassed in the workplace. *How to Succeed* talks about its repulsive and inappropriate behavior.

The way these Golden Age shows dealt with the American Dream and the ideals of America help contemporary audiences to see how Golden Age writers felt about the subject. Even with contemporary musicals, like *Hamilton* and *Ragtime*, writers still discuss the importance of the American Dream, and why it is so crucial to American idealism. In *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel writes about how any person, regardless of background, can become something

bigger than them in America. *Ragtime* also deals with struggles surrounding the American Dream through three different storylines with immigrants and minorities. Another subject many authors touched on in the Golden Age was issues dealing with race and ethnicity.

No Strings (1962) furnishes an example of a Golden Age musical about racial discrimination and intolerance. The show is about Barbara Woodruff, an African American model from America living in Paris, France and David Jordan, a novelist from America who has had trouble writing since being in Europe. Throughout the show, they function as a normal couple would until the end, when they come back together and plan to live with each other in America. Samuel A. Taylor writes this dialogue:

David: Ah, what a damned foolish thing it is.

Barbara: What?

David: That your warm lovely world should be so bad for me, and the world I'm going back to so impossible for you

Barbara: David, I'm going with you.

David: No, you're not.

Barbara: David!

David: No, I won't let you. This is your home. You're going to stay here, where you belong. (Rodgers and Taylor 2-43).

Ethan Mordden, author of *Open a New Window*, talks about *No Strings* saying: "Love is the true bond. They carry on an interracial romance without even referring to it... What was special here was the worldly European acceptance of Barbra and David as a couple. Not a single line of the text dealt with race until the show's last few minutes" (137). This was a risky subject to deliberate in 1962, the heat of the Civil Rights Movement. It was the first show to have an interracial couple on stage. But like Ethan Mordden states, there is a favorable reception of them being a couple, because it does not take place in America. It is comfortable to watch because Americans could detach themselves from something which took place in a foreign setting.

The show never discusses or mentions Barbara's race until it is brought up at the end of the piece. It specifically states as an author's note at the beginning of the script: "The part of Barbara Woodruff in *No Strings* is designed to be played by an American colored girl in her early twenties. The play itself never refers to her color" (Taylor). Taylor is executing a progressive initiative by writing a character whose race is never mentioned, because the color of one's skin is not important to maintaining a healthy relationship. 14 years earlier, there was a show which also took a stance on this issue.

The Pulitzer Prize winning musical, *South Pacific* (1948), is another sound example of how Golden Age musicals took on the subject of racial intolerance. Set in the South Pacific during World War II, the show is about two romantic couples Nellie Forbush and Emile De Beque, and Lt. Joseph Cable and Liat, a Tonkinese girl. Both couples are untroubled but then when having to face the struggles of race and the realities of what society would think of their relationship, things get rocky. For Emile and Nellie, Nellie comes to an understanding that Emile had children with a Polynesian woman who she cannot comprehend, but in the end, is able to overcome her prejudice and love him and his children. For Cable and Liat, the ending is not as happy. Cable realizes because the social teachings he has learned as a child- to not respect another based on the color of their skin- he cannot love Liat and ends up going into a dangerous mission and being killed. One example of issues on race in the show is the song "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught." The song, as John Bush Jones puts it, is "Cable's epiphany about the irrationality of learned bigotry" (Jones 152). Cable says it is something not born in you but taught as you grow up. He sings, "You've got to be taught to be afraid/ Of people whose eyes are oddly made,/ And people whose skin is a different shade,/ You've got to be carefully taught" (Hammerstein 346). Although this song shocked audiences seeing it at the time, the more

prominent example, in my opinion, is the scene at the end of act I. As Nellie is introduced to Emile's children, she becomes hesitant with him:

Nellie: Emile, they *are* yours!

Emile: Yes, Nellie. I'm their father.

Nellie: And...their mother...was a ...was...a...

Emile: Polynesian.

(Nellie is stunned. She turns away, trying to collect herself.)

and she was beautiful, Nellie, and charming, too.

Nellie: But you and she...

Emile: I want you to know I have no apologies. I came here as a young man. I lived as I could. (Hammerstein 331-332).

This reaffirms the antagonist is not anyone in the story, but the bigotry and integrated prejudice within themselves. Racial bias for Nellie and Cable is not something they chose but something they were surrounded with as children. She even says toward the end of the scene: "Oh, this is terrible! I won't be able to face the girls at the hospital. You can't imagine the way they look at you when you come in late..." (Hammerstein 331). What was unique was the element of *South Pacific* being "the first time the actual drive mechanism of the show was prejudice and tolerance" (Jones 149). It is hard to laugh at such difficult subject matter, but a musical in the 1940s, handling both racial discrimination and comedy, did it well.

Finian's Rainbow (1947) is an example of a satire riddled with views on racial intolerance. The show is about an Irishman Finian McLonergan and his daughter Sharon moving from Glocca Morra to Missitucky, U.S.A. He brings over a pot of gold to plant in the Rainbow Valley and see it multiply in hopes of becoming richer. Senator Rawkins, the corrupt politician, realizes this is the only piece of land that is private and cannot be owned by him. When he goes to try and convince Finian to sell it to him, Sharon sees how poor he treats his colored servants and wishes he experienced the same treatment. On saying that, she turns him into a black man, and he is chased away. Later, Og meets him in the forest trying to convince him to be a kinder

man. Sharon wishes him back to becoming a white man, and he is kinder to all. The way Yip Harburg and Burton Lane composed Senator Rawkins was a progressive way in attempting to show Americans the harsh and sick attitudes many citizens still had towards black people. Chase Bringardner, of Auburn University, says, “While Harburg intended Rawkins’ transformation as a politically radical moment – having a white man experience life as a black man – the realities of the material, theatrical representation for the original production undercut this progressive gesture” (124). He goes on discussing the use of blackface with black actors on stage, and the ultimate transformation to becoming a white privileged man undercuts Harburg and Lane’s argument for racial equality. Bringardner’s argument is valid. The presentation of blackface on stage is a harsh and offensive reminder of the entertainment known as Minstrelsy. In the revival in 2009, instead of using blackface on the actor playing Rawkins, they exchanged the white actor for a black actor in order to be politically correct, but to still impart the point of the musical. In my opinion, there is no undercut to the argument; in fact, the use of blackface may even make it stronger. By having this onstage, it brings up a haunting and racist past which Harburg and Lane are presenting with the character of Rawkins. It is an offensive form of entertainment, and in *Finian’s Rainbow*, it is there to make a point on how politically incorrect the entertainment form is and was. Bringardner goes on to say how even his transformation with magic undercuts the argument as well: “Magic must intervene where reason and empathy come up short, further undercutting the show’s ability to advocate for social change” (126). *Finian’s Rainbow* is intentionally set up with fantasy along with loads of realism. The magic and leprechauns contribute to establishing the musical as a satire, but it nevertheless, *Finian’s Rainbow* takes bold steps in the discussion of social change as well as furthering the discussion of racial inequality and treatment in America. As Og tells Rawkins in act II: “But whichever color you are, you’re

still a person—you can still taste bee honey and listen to bird music. A rose is still a rose despite the color of your nose” (Harburg, Saidy, Stone 417).

Issues towards race and ethnicity is a topic many authors shocked audiences with in the Golden Age and still in contemporary musicals. In some musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) and *West Side Story* (1957), the plot line is injected with mass amounts of racial discrimination as the underlying tension in these stories. Another subject riddled throughout the Golden Age was gender roles along with women’s ability to express their sexuality, and a 1945 musical does it to a great degree.

Carousel (1945) is an example of the Golden Age challenging gender roles. The story, based on Ferenc Molnár’s *Liliom* and set in New England, is about a carousel barker Billy Bigelow, and a mill worker Julie Jordan who, after meeting in each other in a pantomimed prologue, meet back up and ending up marrying each other. Although Billy’s abusive behavior does not turn Julie away from him, he proceeds to be somewhat distant from her, but once she informs him of her pregnancy, he takes on this new sense of responsibility to care for his child whether it be a daughter or son. In order to obtain money for his family, he schemes with an old friend Jigger to take money from a wealthy man. When he gets caught, he tries to run, but ends up dying by his own blade sending him to a “purgatory” and away from Julie. As he talks to a Starkeeper before getting to the gates of Heaven, he is asked whether or not he wants to redeem his behavior on Earth. The Starkeeper tells him he needs to help his daughter Louise before being able to get into heaven. After Billy goes down to Earth and gets frustrated talking with Louise, he slaps her on the hand pushing her further away from him. He tries yet again to redeem himself at her high school graduation to convince her to join in with the rest of the school singing “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” After telling Julie he has always loved her, the Starkeeper lets him

enter into the gates of heaven, and he earns his redemption. Although this story looks at first like it is about Billy, the show can also be about Julie and how she deals with Billy alive and dead. Julie Jordan can be pigeonholed as this naïve ingénue, but Oscar Hammerstein II wrote her in the opposite manner. In the stage directions, it reads: “Julie is more complex, quieter, deeper” (Hammerstein 93). Throughout the entire show, she makes active decisions for herself and not anyone else.

Carousel was the first musical to openly discuss issues on domestic violence because in 1945, it was regarded as more of a personal problem than a social one. Luckily, there were writers like Rodgers and Hammerstein to bring this subject to light. Even Patricia Alvarez Caldas says, “The reasons behind his abuse could be attributed not only to economic motifs, but also to an uncontrollable wrath and a sense of social inferiority on the part of Billy” (Caldas 30). Many people challenge “What’s the Use of Wonderin’,” a song about Julie’s attitudes toward Billy’s abusive behavior. In the song, she says: “Common sense may tell you/ That the ending will be sad,/ And now’s the time to break and run away./ But what’s the use of wond’ring/ If the ending will be sad?/ He’s your feller and you love him,/ There’s nothing more to say” (Hammerstein 153). She makes an autonomous decision to stay with him knowing that when he hits her, it is not out of hate towards her but hate within him, and she is there to pick him up and love him regardless.

The bench scene, at the beginning of the show, is an example of a scene displaying Julie’s character. As Ethan Mordden puts it: “*Carousel* dealt with gender conflicts- why women and men don’t understand each other or even why women understand and men don’t” (85). Furthermore, in the bench scene, Julie controls the scene. With Billy reminding her that he has a reputation of taking money from girls, she stands her ground saying, “You couldn’t take my/

money if I didn't have any/ And I don't have a penny, that's true./ And if I did have money,/ You couldn't take any/ 'Cause you'd ask an' I'd give it to you!” (Hammerstein 107). He continues to tease her, but she sticks to her morals: “I'm never gonna marry if I was gonna marry,/ I wouldn't have to be such a stickler./ But I'm never gonna marry,/ And a girl who don't marry/ Has got to be much more partic'lar” (Hammerstein 108). Billy Bigelow has always had his way with women and has never been put to the challenge of trying to get them; Julie is the opposite. She forwardly displays her independence and is not willing to fall for his charm and stature. In this situation, he falls for her charm and independence. Although Ethan Mordden says, “*Carousel*'s central problem: men are an eternal problem and women must suffer” (95), Julie Jordan is strong willed and independent enough to move past the pain of losing her husband to take care of her daughter and to ensure Louise has a stable life while Julie is a single mother.

On The Town (1944), with the ground breaking female co-book writer/lyricist Betty Comden, proves to be an example for women challenging the social model in 1944 as well as them expressing themselves as sexual women rather than suppressed. The musical is simply about three sailors having twenty-four hours in New York City to spend as they like before traveling off to war. The main action is involved around Gabey getting help from his friends Chip and Ozzie to try and score a date with Ivy Smith, who is “Miss Turnstiles” for the month of June. While trying to find her, Chip and Ozzie find girls of their own, Hildy Esterhazy and Claire DeLoone. As the night ends, saying goodbye to their ladies, a new cycle begins and three new sailors rush off the boat getting ready for their twenty-four hours in New York City. Hildy Esterhazy is an example in this show of challenging the gender norm. Her song “Come to My Place” has her boy, Chip, as the submissive to her sexual desires. He is strictly trying to find Ivy

Smith for Gabey, but she is trying to convince him to come up to her place instead of thinking about Gabey:

Chip: They told me I could see New York/ In all its spreading strength and power/
From the city's highest spot,/ Atop the famous Woolworth Tower.

Hildy: The Woolworth Tower?

Chip: The Woolworth Tower.

Hildy: Beat me, Daddy,/ Did you say the Woolworth Tower?

Chip: I won't beat you,/ But I said the Wool-/ (Hildy brakes again.)/ Did you stop
for hey what?

Hildy: That ain't the highest spot./ You're just a little late,/ We got the Empire
State!/ Let's go to my place!

Chip: Let's go to Cleopatra's Needle./ Let's see Wanamaker's Store./ Let's go to
Lindy's, go to Luchow's;/ Let's see Radio City and Herald Square./ Go to
Reuben's! Go to Macy's!/ To the Roxy! Cloisters! Gimbel's!/ Flatiron Building!
Hippodrome!!

Hildy: My place!!! (Comden and Green 310-311).

The women throughout the show are independent and express their desires freely. Since women at this time were becoming more involved in the workplace, the audience sees all of the women working, and the men going off to war. With the women having jobs, it makes it look like a normality when in reality before and after the war, it was not. Even with Claire DeLoone expressing her sexuality so freely in the song “Carried Away:”

Claire: Modern man, what is it?/ Just a collection of complexes / and neurotic
impulses / that occasionally break through.

Ozzie: You mean sometimes you blow your top, like me?

Claire: I do./ I try hard to stay controlled/ But I get carried away,/ Try to act
aloof and cold,/ But I get carried away. (Comden and Green 316).

Both of these girls show Betty Comden’s genius writing and her way of presenting women from a woman’s perspective..

My Fair Lady’s Eliza Doolittle is a character constructed in the Golden Age who Dominic McHugh says in the book *Loverly* “is the ultimate Broadway heroine because from start to finish she embodies the triumph of aspiration as well as being a representative of feminism,

women's suffrage, and social mobility" (McHugh 201). Adapted from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the musical is about a lower class flower seller, Eliza Doolittle, being taken on by an upper class phonetics author, Professor Henry Higgins, to be taught how to be a lady and teach her to speak proper English and be presented at an Embassy Ball, based on a bet he made with another man who studies dialect, Colonel Pickering. As Eliza and Higgins struggle, Eliza finally understands how to speak proper English, but realizes she has lost her sense of independence. Eventually, she takes a stand and leaves him for a boy she met, Freddy Enysford Hill. As Higgins sings being "Grown Accustom to Her Face," he listens back to a tape of her learning phonetics, and in the doorway, Eliza appears to be coming back to Higgins. The ending of this show is subjective and leaves a great deal of room for questioning whether or not she left Freddy, or if she is going to be with Higgins. From the beginning of the show, Higgins is vile to Eliza and treats her like dirt using her as his experiment. When she finally leaves him toward the end of act II, she sings "Without You:"

"You, dear friend, who talk so well/ You can go to Hartford, Hereford and Hampshire/
They can still rule the land without you/ Windsor Castle will stand without you/ And
without much ado we can/ All muddle through without you./ I shall not feel alone
without you/ I can stand on my own without you/ So go back in your shell/ I can do
bloody well/ Without you" (Lerner 249-250).

Here, she curses him using words he taught her and spiting them back in his face. She stands her ground saying he is not anything special but just another person whether they are lower or higher class, man or woman. The other song in the musical which helps to empower Eliza's character is "Show Me." McHugh says in: "'Show Me' Eliza's fury is dazzlingly presented in this way: it is almost as if she is in such control of her world now that she can move through multiple meters

without losing her way” (132). She has struggled the entire show to have a real understanding of who she is. Being frustrated over the lack of affection men show her, she sings this to Freddy: “Don't talk of stars, burning above/ If you're in love, show me!/ Tell me no dreams, filled with desire/ If you're on fire, show me!” (Lerner 232). Both of these songs, “Without You” and “Show Me,” express an independent, thoughtful, emotional, and self-invested woman who is willing to be who she is whether it be with a man or not. She is sick of all the empty promises and poor treatment from the men in her life, and finally has the confidence to express it to them.

Schmidt and Jones's shows *The Fantasticks* (1960) and *110 in the Shade* (1963) were able to tackle the topic of gender roles in two different ways. In *The Fantasticks*, it was with fantasy and magic. In *110 in the Shade*, it was with the simplicity of a statement. *The Fantasticks* is the story of Matt and Lusía, who are in love with each other but not able to see one another because of a fence built between their houses by their parents. This feud is not real, but set up by their parents to have Matt and Luisa be together. The parents set up a mock abduction for Luisa, and Matt rescues her, so they can be together. Matt and Luisa figure out it was all a set up and do not want to be together. After they both experience what the “real” world is like through the help of El Gallo, they come back together more mature and end up renewing the love they had for one another. The interesting part of *The Fantasticks* is the sequence when they are both experiencing the real world. The song “Round and Round” involves El Gallo taking Luisa around the world showing her how wonderful it all is behind a mask, but when it is taken away, it can be disturbing. At one point, El Gallo and Luisa travel to Venice:

Luisa: Look at the peasants. They're lighting candelabras. No. I believe they're lighting torches. Yes, see- They've started burning the palaces!... That Man— look out; he's burning. My God, he's on fire!

El Gallo: Keep on dancing,

Luisa: But he's burning!

El Gallo: Just put up your mask. Then it's pretty.

Matt: Help!

Luisa: Oh. Yes, isn't he beautiful!... You look lovely! (Jones 99).

The use of this mask throughout the song is for illusion. As Bradley Stephenson puts it, “the use of the mask as a filtering device that makes everything seen through it beautiful implies that the very perception of truth is perhaps illusory in nature. Seeing may be believing, but the nature of truth itself becomes troubled” (124). El Gallo uses this mask to cover up the horror in the world, and what women should view it as. Stephenson agrees with this interpretation saying, “More cynical interpretations of ‘Round and Round’ might understand the dance to embody the loss of innocence in the Girl. She is horrified by the scenes of torture that the Boy experiences out in the ‘real’ world, but El Gallo makes her wear the mask that blurs her view of the ‘truth’, thus stripping her of compassion so that the torture is just another performance for her amusement” (125). *The Fantasticks* operates on the stereotypical gender roles of the time: the man has the power, and the woman is the submissive, but it adds a bit of a twist. It is a warning as to the harm it causes to “put the mask up” and hide the truth. By putting up the mask, it is a man sheltering a woman from a dangerous world. Because Luisa is not able to see the evil in the world, she will not be able to know what is good and what is bad. In my opinion, *The Fantasticks* creates a unique way showing how woman overcome the shelter of a man to see things for what they truly are. She sees how wounded Matt is when he comes back from the “real” world and knows the vicious ways which El Gallo was not showing her.

In *110 in the Shade*, the protagonist Lizzie learns to accept herself instead of conforming to man's ideals of her. Set during a drought in “a western state,” the town is looking for any sign of rain. Lizzie Curry is an independent woman in all areas except for the fact that she has never had a man outside of her family love her or call her beautiful. Even though she is pursued by

File, the local sheriff, a man from out of town named Bill Starbuck comes in. With his proposition of being able to make it rain in town, H.C. Curry, Lizzie's father, gives him money to make it happen. Along with this, Starbuck is a dreamer and a con man and wants to run away with Lizzie saying, "Dream you're somebody—Be somebody" (Jones, Schmidt, Nash 2-2-5). After she tells him all she wants is something simple and to be a plain woman, he tells her she is beautiful, and she believes it. In the town, Lizzie has a decision: to live a plain life with File who loves her or to dream and live a fake life with Starbuck. She chooses File, and as she accepts herself, it begins to rain. Starbuck ends up running off with the money leaving the town, and Lizzie and File live a happy plain life. With no magic or theatrical conventions, *110 in the Shade* does a significant job of using the text to solidify the independence of Lizzie. Starbuck comes in and shakes up Lizzie's world saying she can be anybody she wants to be. After stating that she is plain, she and Starbuck have an important dialogue:

Starbuck: Please! Now close your eyes, Lizzie—keep them closed! Now—say: I'm pretty!

Lizzie: I—I'm—I can't!

Starbuck: Say it! Say it, Lizzie!

Lizzie: I'm—pretty!

Starbuck: Say it again!

Lizzie: (with a little cry) Pretty!

Starbuck: Say it! – mean it!

Lizzie: (exalted) I'm pretty! I'm pretty! I'm pretty! (Jones, Nash, Schmidt 2-2-10)

Giving her this confidence to say it, she puts her faith in him until the very end. When given the choice to go with him or stay with File, she makes an easy choice:

Starbuck: You come with me and you'll never be Lizzie no more—you'll be Melisande!

Lizzie: Oh, Starbuck, you said the wrong thing!

File: Melisande? Her name's Lizzie Curry!

Starbuck: It's not good enough—not for her!

File: It's good enough for me!

Starbuck: Come on!!

Lizzie: No—I've got to be Lizzie! Melisande's a name for one night—but Lizzie can do me my whole life long. (Jones, Nash, Schmidt 2-5-37).

Although, she finally has the love of a man, it is not the only thing she needs. She needs that man to accept her for who she is in all degrees before being with them. Her response to be herself and not conform for the ideals of Starbuck makes her a strong independent woman in a time where in America women still struggled under the ideals of what a man wants a woman to act and be like.

A variety of other shows challenged gender roles the same way these examples do. In *The Pajama Game* (1954), the audience sees this strong minded man, Sid, trying to woo Babe, one of the female workers, and she does not seem to fall for it at first. Even during the show, they end up on opposite sides of a strike which lets the audience interpret Babe as a woman who will not change her morals or opinions even if it means disagreeing with her man. In *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1960), the protagonist Molly Brown has the tenacity and drive to become whatever she wants to be which ends up being higher class Denver royalty. She is not willing to let the opinions of the people around her shake her. Instead, she uses their sneers and jabs to motivate her to have the classiest friends, which end up being European royalty; she even ends up saving people off of the Titanic. In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), the character Philia uses her sexual expression as a woman to uphold her independence. She may come across to an audience as dim witted or just self-invested about her looks, but actually it is what she takes her independence in. It is what makes men attracted to her. While Hero sees her in this position of being lower as a courtesan, she sees it as a positive circumstance knowing that she is “happy being lovely.” She swoons Hero with her song “Lovely” because she is confident in herself and sucks Hero in with the confidence she possesses. In *Fiorello!*, the 1959 Pulitzer Prize winning musical, Thea, Dora, and Marie are all independent, passionate, and

loyal women who men fall for because of such passion. Both Dora and Thea fight for the rights of women which both Fiorello and Floyd, a cop, fall in love with. Marie stands independent with her song “Marie’s Law” stating her guidelines for what a man needs to do for her rather than what she needs to do for a man.

Many of these Golden Age writers presented women who were strongly independent, confident, expressive in their sexuality or ideals, and in the end, chose the man because it is what they desired to do. Audiences can find independent women in many different contemporary musicals like *Waitress* and *The Color Purple*. In *Waitress*, the story surrounds Jenna, a pie baker and worker at a local diner and her search for independence from her abusive husband which in the end, she is able to achieve. In *The Color Purple*, it is about Celie, an African American woman from the south, and her journey to discover her own self-worth and love throughout the hardships of her life. The same strength can be found in the Golden Age with women like Julie Jordan, Lizzie Curry, Hildy Esterhazy, Nellie Forbush, and many others. The Golden Age is the place where this type of progressive writing all began. With men and women writing these characters and musicals into existence, musical theatre institutes writing towards the progressive discussion of gender roles.

Starting this project, wanting to show my generation the importance and relevance of these shows, I knew there were certain shows like *South Pacific* and *West Side Story* which I knew had bigger messages, but I never realized the important topics so many Golden Age musicals tackled until I started to research and familiarize myself with the era. Although the list of musicals I have used to highlight my argument here is short, the list is actually much longer. I purposely narrowed my research down to a few important examples versus creating an exhaustive list. There are musicals which used certain provocative topics as the main driver of

their shows like *South Pacific* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and others which used it as the background of the story like *The Pajama Game* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. After picking all of these musicals, I looked through different academic journals, books, and articles to find different interpretations and academic examples of why and how these Golden Age pieces talk about difficult subject matter. With all this, I knew I not only wanted to write a paper, but I also wanted to illustrate my argument by having performers of my generation present the material publicly. It is not enough to read about the performing arts in order to understand their meaning, so I invited my classmates to join me in being part of a lecture demonstration. Having an audience see my generation performing these songs and scenes helps to illustrate the universal power of Golden Age musicals, and how they remain topical today.

I want to expose the material of these Golden Age pieces for people who may have negative preconceived notions about them. Many of these selections talk about subjects that populate a class in contemporary issues in the theatre, topics like American idealism, race, and gender roles. Musical like *South Pacific*, *On the Town*, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Finian's Rainbow*, and others were written in a progressive manner hoping to get society to think about difficult topics while still being entertained. Although it may be cloaked in the melody line of a song, the lyrics and dialogue in these shows point towards a more forward thinking and developing America. Preconceived notions of musicals like *Oklahoma!* and *The Fantasticks* can be wiped away once an audience looks with fresh eyes at the intent of these artists. The Golden Age is an important part in the history of musical theatre, and I hope I have exposed its value to my generation in highlighting the reality behind this romantic era.

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