

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by DONOVAN SHERMAN, WITH CHRISTOPHER FERRANTE

The Song Is You: Musical Theatre and the Politics of Bursting into Song and Dance

By Bradley Rogers. *Studies in Theatre History and Culture*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020; pp. xiv + 276, 10 illustrations. \$55 paper, \$55 e-book.

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Bradley Rogers's *The Song Is You: Musical Theatre and the Politics of Bursting into Song and Dance* begins with *My Fair Lady's* showstopping number "The Rain in Spain," in which Eliza Doolittle, Henry Higgins, and Colonel Pickering burst into song and dance, performing a tango, mimicking a matador and bull, and clicking their heels and shouting "Viva!" Rogers points out, early in the Introduction, that in this Lerner and Loewe show, supposedly an exemplar of the integrated musical form, the number does nothing to advance the show's story. Indeed, as Rogers notes, Eliza has been attempting to imitate Higgins, but as soon as she does this successfully, pronouncing "the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain" the way Higgins pronounces it, the three characters burst not only into song and dance but into "another imitation," in this case of their "kitschiest fantasies of Spain" (3). For Rogers, this moment is illustrative of "the logic central to all musicals: the transitive force of musical imitation, with one imitation prompting yet another, bodies imitating other bodies, all unleashed in the moment of bursting into song" (3). *The Song Is You* takes this as its key problem—the question of how musicals imitate the bodies of others, how they ask us in the audience to imitate them, and what these multiple copies, these mimetic performances of song and dance, have to teach us about how musicals imagine subjectivity as such.

Central to *The Song Is You* is a revision of the commonly held wisdom that "musicals burst into song when words will no longer suffice to carry the emotion" (5). Rogers modifies this claim to argue "that musicals burst into song—and dance—when one *body* will no longer suffice to carry the emotion" (5). In many ways this is a revision, too, of Scott McMillin's *The Musical as Drama* (2006), which claims that characters are doubled and sometimes tripled while singing and dancing—during what McMillin calls "lyric time." Rogers's point here emphasizes the way that musicals disperse the character not only through

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the lyrical multiplication of character traits but through the characters' performances of identification across, most important, race, ethnicity, and gender. *The Song Is You* gives us repeated examples of musicals in which characters identify improbably across race and ethnicity by accessing what Rogers calls the "exotic/erotic dynamic," which, he argues, "points us toward the essential psychic operations of musical theatre—ones that involve performance across different types of bodies" (120).

Another of the central claims of *The Song Is You* is that musicals are not integrated, indeed that "integrated" is a label that attempts to do the ideological work of covering over precisely the identifications across bodies that the genre performs. Certainly, the idea of integration as a rubric for thinking through musical theatre—and its historical evolution as a theatrical form—has been critiqued before now, and Rogers is indebted to Bruce Kirle and Scott McMillin here as well. But what *The Song Is You* does differently is to make the beautifully Foucauldian move of asking *why* it is that we're so invested in integration, what promises integration seems to offer us, and what possibilities integration obscures within musical theatre historiography. *The Song Is You*, in other words, addresses one of the core concepts of musical theatre history not as an attack on integration but as an inquiry into the desiring operations that brought integration into existence in the first place and maintain its conceptual currency.

Rogers makes sense of integration and our desire for it through seven chapters, the first group of which addresses some exemplars of the integrated musical. Chapter 1 discusses *Oklahoma!* by way of *The Black Crook*, examining how the conventions of melodrama persist in both shows, and how integration serves to contain the specter of female sexuality. Chapter 2 examines the Princess Theatre Musicals, "an early landmark in integration" (54); Rogers's theoretical approach here—asking what integration obscures—allows him to focus on the way the usual story of the Princess Theatre Shows excludes producer Elisabeth Marbury, "who reinvented the portrayal, management, and marketing of women in theatre" (55). Chapter 3 analyzes Wagner with his *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Brecht with his opposition to integration, finding that although the two theorists are often opposed to one another in musical theatre historiography, what their work has in common is that both attempted to control the unruly power of music on audiences. This third chapter also gives us intriguing readings of *Gypsy* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* while emphasizing the legacy of burlesque in the musical. Rogers's fourth chapter examines yet another landmark in integration—*Show Boat*—by addressing the way the musical is dependent on Blackness and blackface minstrelsy. This chapter is particularly incisive, demonstrating how *Show Boat's* plot has its Black characters generously teaching its white characters specific music, a dramaturgical trick designed to grant the musical's white audiences permission to exploit and enjoy performances of Blackness.

The case studies in the remaining chapters of *The Song Is You* explore various authors' attempts to deal with the problems of integration, from the Hart–Weill–Gershwin *Lady in the Dark* and David Henry Hwang's reimagining of *Flower Drum Song* to the through-sung shows of Jerome Moross and John Latouche and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. These final chapters examine the future of the form and wrestle with musical theatre's continued dependence on burlesque, melodrama, and minstrelsy and the cross-ethnic, cross-racial, and cross-gender performances the musical inherited from them.

That Rogers's book appears in Iowa's Studies in Theatre History and Culture series is significant. This is a book of theatre historiography that examines some of the foundational concepts of musical theatre in the United States. It is worth noting, however, that this book's subtitle also promises Rogers will analyze "the politics of bursting into song and dance." *The Song Is You* is a historiographical text to be sure, but for Rogers the work of writing history is also the work of exploring how audiences identify with musical theatre performances and how musicals ask us to imitate, desire, and possess the bodies of others, especially those whose experiences we perceive as different from our own. These are political questions, and *The Song Is You* is a necessary and exciting exploration of these politics, filled with insights and provocations that promise to push the field in important new directions.

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In Concert: Performing Musical Persona

By Philip Auslander. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021; pp. x + 293, 22 illustrations. \$90 cloth, \$39.95 paper, \$39.95 e-book.

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In Concert: Performing Musical Persona is a book about musicians, not a book about music. In other words: the objects of analysis in this book are performers, not their performances. Such an approach, Philip Auslander makes clear, is animated by a few concerns: first, that he is far more interested in *how* musicians perform rather than *what* music is performed, and second, that there are many musicologists who are well-prepared to focused on musical sound and its role in musical performance. (He identifies Nicholas Cook as a prime example of this, though there are many others Auslander cites who do this work beautifully: Susan Fast, Jairo Moreno, Simon Frith, Christopher Small, and Sheila Whiteley, among others.) For those familiar with Auslander's work, his interest in music as primarily something that musicians do will not be surprising; his earlier work, including *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (2006), similarly takes up musicians and their work through the lens of performance theory. Fortunately, some of the theoretical paradigms that make the earlier text so productive appear throughout this contemporary publication—a retrospective of his work—including his interest in parsing performers' multiple levels of identity (the so-called real person, the performance persona, and the character that surfaces in specific performances) and the way discursive frames inform audiences' interactions with musical performances.

In Concert comprises work that Auslander published between 2003 and 2015 and has revised for inclusion in this collection. The overarching questions that frame this book are those that Auslander has been asking for decades now: Why