

David Savran

TOWARD A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE POPULAR

The greatest challenge that theatre scholars face today—as we watch the seemingly inexorable march of U.S. imperialism and capitalist globalization—is to *remember*; to historicize rigorously and resourcefully, to render events (in Brecht’s words) “remarkable,” to “expose the world’s mechanism on a grand scale and to copy it in such a way that it would be more easily serviced.”¹ When we practice a mimeticism that keeps “impermanence always before our eyes, . . . our own period can be seen to be impermanent too.”² We must remember in order to be able to demystify the pieties disseminated by our politicians, pundits, and journalists who so blithely disregard the brutalities and deceptions that structure the histories they glibly rewrite that one would think they sprinkled water from the River Lethe on their Cheerios every morning. For remembering, as Pierre Bourdieu points out, represents a reconstruction not only of the past but also of the dynamics of disavowal and forgetting. To historicize means to “reconstruct the history of the historical labour of dehistoricization [italics in original quote].”³ This reconstructive labor seems all the more urgent during a period when theatre scholars (who have long been considered more or less irrelevant within the humanities) must face the increasing corporatization of the universities for which we work, the continuing intellectual paralysis of the Left, the relentless commercialization and retrenchment of American theatre (for better or worse), and the rise of a discipline, performance studies, that is challenging, reinvigorating, and partially displacing theatre studies.

Confronting unprecedented global and disciplinary crises, we must, I believe, continue to expand our fields of study by interrogating and setting aside our Eurocentrism and cultural elitism. This project requires that we intervene on (at least) two fronts: first, by active engagement in internationalist and intercultural practices, histories, and modes of analysis; and second, by overruling of long-standing, class-based prejudices about the superiority of art to entertainment. Because I know that at least one other contributor is tackling the first issue, I will take up the second (which is also more closely related to my

David Savran is a specialist in American theatre, popular culture, gender studies, and social theory. He is the author of seven books, most recently, A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre (Michigan, 2003). He is the Vera Mowry Roberts Distinguished Professor of American Theatre at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the editor of the Journal of American Drama and Theatre.

current scholarship). Theatre historians looking to have a greater impact both within and without the profession could do worse than to reconsider the kinds of theatrical practice that have held millions spellbound but have been routinely dismissed by scholars. I am referring here to popular-theatre traditions of the past century. Forms like Roman comedy, medieval pageants, *commedia dell'arte*, and melodrama have long been legitimized as objects of study. Countless scholarly works have appeared on these and other genres linked to producers and audiences identified (variously) as plebian, peasant, or working class. Until very recently, however, historians and critics of twentieth-century theatre have obstinately (if inadvertently) endorsed the binary opposition between highbrow and lowbrow—which in fact was consolidated only at the end of the nineteenth century—privileging elitist, modernist, and avant-gardist forms at the expense of those deemed merely and regrettably popular. This is due less to the influence on the field of mandarins like Theodor Adorno than to the fact that in the United States at least, theatre and popular culture have largely gone their separate ways since the 1920s. As the so-called legitimate theatre became increasingly and irreversibly literary, high modernist, and *haut bourgeois* to distinguish itself from motion pictures, the theatrical forms categorized as popular have declined or expired—with the important exception of the Broadway musical.

Yet theatre cannot be disentangled easily from popular culture, in part because of the latter's slipperiness and mutability. As Brecht insists, "what was popular yesterday is not today, for the people today are not what they were yesterday."⁴ And the term, "the people," is a notoriously contentious category whose significance has been heatedly debated by countless intellectuals, dating back to the rise of industrial capitalism in the West. Beginning with Johann Gottfried Herder and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "the people" have, as Stuart Hall notes, implicitly been defined as "working people, the laboring classes and the poor," those, in other words, who had to be trained and disciplined to supply the relatively compliant manpower demanded by the Industrial Revolution.⁵ Raymond Williams points out that the very word, "popular" (derived from the Latin, "belonging to the people"), has had, at least since the sixteenth century, a double valence that persists to the present day. On one hand, it has long been derogatory, seen from the position of "those seeking favour or power from" the people. By this definition "the people" are identified with the "low" or "base," as are those who are seen trying to curry favor with them. On the other hand, although a more affirmative sense meaning "well-liked by many people" dates back to the same century, it did not become widespread until the Romantic period.⁶ It was during this age, as Peter Burke observes, that popular culture was constructed in opposition to "learned culture" (anticipating the later distinction between lowbrow and highbrow). Early nineteenth-century intellectuals, revolting against the neoclassical rules of art (and aghast at industrialization and urbanization), extolled the traditional virtues and artifacts of "the people," that is, the rural working classes.⁷

Modern theatre historians, however, have been far more equivocal than Rousseau and tend to dismiss twentieth-century theatre that lacks an obviously

modernist pedigree, aims chiefly to produce pleasure, and remains too scandalously intimate with mass culture. This dismissal, moreover, functions to reconfirm the marginalization of modernist theatre and to ignore entertainments that have had a far greater and deeper impact on far more people than *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. No form provides a better example of the problems and challenges facing a historiography of the popular than musical theatre, despite the fact that the bulk of its audience, since the 1920s, has come not from the working class but a broad (if lofty) swath of the middle class. Although examples of its dismissal are legion, let me cite an emblematic one. In *Century of Innovation* (1973), Oscar Brockett and Robert Findlay devote a mere two paragraphs (in 780 pages!) to the musical, despite their concession that it represents “the most popular form” of theatre. Their brief narrative, moreover, consists of little more than a list of titles and the well-worn, unsubstantiated—and inaccurate—assertion that *Oklahoma!* signaled a paradigm shift insofar as it represented the first “fully integrated” musical.⁸ The anxiety aroused in modernists by this damnably popular form has led, on one hand, to its near erasure from the standard histories and, on the other, to the development of a cottage industry of works that focus narrowly and myopically on musical theatre (beginning in 1950 with Cecil Smith’s *Musical Comedy in America*).⁹ This bifurcation has had sorry consequences both for panoptic histories, which omit a huge part of the story, and for genre histories, which routinely neglect to relate the musical to other theatrical and cultural developments. It is perpetuated, moreover, by the fact that what passes for musical-theatre scholarship—with a handful of notable exceptions—oscillates between dreary, encyclopedic catalogs and wildly impressionistic flights of the imagination.¹⁰ Certainly no other theatre form has inspired such a cornucopia of idolatrous and anecdotal narratives that scorn analysis in favor of narcissistic rumination and fantasy.¹¹ And although the field has become more fashionable of late, the proportion of new, able scholarship to inept remains roughly the same as in the bad old days.

The methodologies of the few consequential works about American musical theatre suggest that the undeniable popularity of the form requires even the most theoretical interventions to bow to the exigencies of production and consumption. For, like other forms of popular culture, the musical is first and foremost a product of the marketplace in which the aesthetic is always—and unpredictably—overdetermined by economic relations and interests. (This fact doubtlessly exacerbates the hostility of those who champion a sacralized modernist theatre that allegedly transcends the market.) As such, the musical is able to provide a virtual laboratory in which to study the circulation of the artwork-as-commodity.

Although this popular form raises many historiographic problems, I want to outline the ones I consider most provocative and important. If I were a more dedicated taxonomist, I might divide my list between history and theory, between socioeconomic issues closely linked to production and consumption and theoretical issues that have of late dominated conversations in theatre, performance, and cultural studies. But I believe that the historiographic importance of the field lies precisely in the challenges it poses to the distinctions

between history and theory, economics and aesthetics, praxis and theory. It proves (if such proof be needed) that in consumer society, art is always already commodified. Nonetheless, let me begin by considering problems linked to both the noisy realm of theatres and the silent jurisdiction of archives.

As historical artifacts, Broadway musicals present unique challenges for those concerned with questions of authenticity and evanescence, challenges redoubled by the centrality of performance and the form's vaudevillian (i.e., improvisatory) patrimony. Like other forms of nonliterary culture before the 1960s, the musical was often regarded as throwaway entertainment; and many original materials (including songs, libretti, orchestrations, and promptbooks) have long since disappeared. Many of the most important achievements of the pre-*Oklahoma!* era (before original-cast albums and the routine publishing of libretti) remain in archives and private collections, if they exist at all. Although the progress narrative that relegates all pre-*Oklahoma!* musicals to the Dark Ages is deeply problematic, Rodgers and Hammerstein were undeniably instrumental in securing the permanence and widespread dissemination of their plays (and, in the process, building a business empire that continues to exercise draconian control over their works). And they did so in part by promoting the very progress narrative their works allegedly produced. While most post-*Oklahoma!* musicals are now performed professionally with the original books largely intact (although often reorchestrated), musicals from the 1920s and 1930s, casualties of this progress narrative, have long been deemed hopelessly and embarrassingly dated and have usually been completely rewritten, even for producing organizations like New York's City Center Encores! that are ostensibly committed to historical reconstructions. For one of the debilitating side effects of musical theatre's status as a popular art is the assumption that every production must renew the work's contemporaneity. While commercial producers would not dream of reorchestrating *Don Giovanni* or rewriting *Tartuffe*, the Broadway musical has refused its historicity. Most pre-*Oklahoma!* musicals thus function as palimpsests in which the partially erased originals can be glimpsed—if they can be glimpsed at all—only through later accretions.

In the field of cultural production, problems of text and performance open up a number of crucially important questions for a history of popular-theatre forms: How can claims of authenticity obtain when original texts have disappeared as well as the performance styles and traditions that made the pieces work? If musicals are the most collaborative and conventionalized of theatrical forms, what is the value of a theory of authorship? Does it suffice to describe *Lady in the Dark* (1941) as a Kurt Weill musical? Or as a Kurt Weill—Ira Gershwin—Moss Hart—Gertrude Lawrence musical? Or does one need to mobilize a different model of cultural production? Perhaps one in which questions of authorship are displaced from the individual maker to a collective subject? Or to the history of conventions? Or to the class habitus of the producers?

Any historiography of production is inextricably linked to modes of consumption, which are especially important in musical theatre because of its history as a popular form, patronized (at different times in different venues) by

fractions of the working, lower-middle, upper-middle, and even upper classes. Musical theatre, moreover, has been mythologized in the United States and transformed into a kind of middlebrow, urban folk culture far more successfully than any other kind of theatre (albeit in part because of the success of motion-picture versions of classics, from *Show Boat* to *Chicago*). Long before the characters from *Star Wars* became part of a national tradition, the songs of Berlin, Kern, Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and many others were monuments of a shared, participatory culture—the so-called pop standards that, between the 1920s and the 1960s, were listened to, sung, and applauded by millions on the radio and in high schools, summer camps, cabarets, piano bars, and countless theatrical and quasi-theatrical entertainments. Even today, long after the pop standards have been eclipsed by rock ‘n’ roll and hip-hop, Richard Rodgers remains the most widely performed composer in the world, while “Sing-A-Long” screenings of *The Sound of Music* delight crooning hordes of middle-class families from New York to Stockholm, Seattle to Des Moines. For most of the twentieth century, musicals were the only form of legitimate theatre that most working-class and lower-middle-class Americans knew—and loved. And I suspect it was in part precisely this popularity among the knish-, garlic-, and chittlin’-eating masses that motivated theatre historians’ extreme discomfort with the form during a period when the cultural hierarchy was widely believed to be a universal system of classification and theatre studies itself was fighting for legitimacy and a respectable place in university curricula.

Yet the cost of erasing musicals from the history of American theatre is high. For musicals are neither outside the tradition of theatrical modernism nor transparent cultural texts. Indeed, because of their status as popular entertainments, they often take up—more explicitly and pointedly—many of the same historical and theoretical problematics that allegedly distinguish canonical modernist texts. (Despite the fact that the Broadway musical no longer figures as vitally in popular culture as it did before *Hello, Dolly!* [1964], the last to supply a number-one pop hit, I want to provide examples both pre- and post-*Hello, Dolly!* to suggest some generic continuity.) These problematics include industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of commodity culture (*Show Boat*, *Ragtime*); the crisis of the subject, marooned in capitalist modernity (*Lady in the Dark*; *Sweeney Todd*); American imperialism (*The King and I*, *Pacific Overtures*); national identity (*Oklahoma!*, 1776); so-called social and racial problems (*West Side Story*, *Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk*); political struggle (*Strike Up the Band*, *Hair*); independent-minded women in the marketplace (*Anything Goes*, *Sweet Charity*); popular versus elite traditions (*On Your Toes*, *Sunday in the Park with George*); a near-obsessive reflexivity (*Gypsy*, *The Producers*); lively, antirealist, formal experimentation (*Candide*, *The Wild Party* [LaChiusa—Wolfe]); sophisticated estrangement devices (*Allegro*, *Chicago*); and questions of textuality, authenticity, and performance (*Pal Joey*, *A Chorus Line*).

The status of musical theatre as a popular form (at least until the 1960s) raises a number of issues that have increasingly come to preoccupy theatre studies. First, questions of interdisciplinarity. No form of Western theatre (with

the possible exception of opera) uses as many different media to produce a totality that is always far more than the sum of its parts. As a result, analysis requires an implicit or explicit theorization of multiple (and often conflicting) systems of signification as well as at least passing familiarity with musicology and dance scholarship.

Second, problems of genre. No theatre form is as expansive and difficult to categorize generically, since it includes musical comedy, musical drama, opera, revue, musical satire, and hybrids of all these genres, incorporating a multitude of different song forms, arias, dance breaks, ballets, recitatives, book scenes, satirical sketches, soliloquies, and so on.

Third, the politics of pleasure. No theatre form is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away. This utopian—and mimetic—dimension of the musical (linked to its relentless reflexivity) makes it into a kind of hothouse for the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced.

Fourth, identity politics. Since the genre was consolidated as an art form by marginalized social groups—first the Irish, then Jews, African Americans, and gay men—all these groups have extensive histories in the genre, both as producers and consumers. Several of the most valuable recent books in the field have focused on the production (and consumption) of the Broadway musical by these subcultures, on the double- and triple-coding of texts, and (more generally) on popular culture as a vehicle for assimilation and Americanization. Moreover, although the genre has long been dominated by female performers (and male creators), the postwar “integrated” musical is sorely in need of being further demythologized, perhaps by studying how, in reaction against the unprecedented economic mobility of women during the Depression and World War II, it engineered an increased emphasis on the production of *male* interiority (viz., the “Soliloquy” in *Carousel*) and endeavored to reassure audiences that an independent-minded, unruly, or shrewish heroine would be tamed by the final curtain (viz., *Kiss Me, Kate*).

Fifth and finally, American musical theatre offers an important site for an analysis of antitheatricality. For it has been ignored or scorned not only by most theatre historians but also literary scholars, musicologists, dance scholars, and cultural-studies specialists. Neither as exalted as literary drama nor as working-class as cinema, musical theatre since the 1920s has epitomized middlebrow culture, the most loathed category for those with the leisure and ambition to map American cultural production.¹² And even for many devotees of the so-called straight theatre, musical theatre remains (at best) a guilty pleasure—a little too gay, too popular, too Jewish, and too much damned fun. A study of antitheatrical discourses, however, must not fixate solely on those often unnamed others who harbor an animus toward the form. For many who write about it (including me), the modernist hierarchy of taste that dismisses the form is routinely reconfigured as an alternative hierarchy that—for apparently unimpeachable yet finally highly subjective reasons—separates the shows we love from the ones we hate. (I doubt, for example, that early modern theatre scholars, over glasses of Merlot,

compose the kinds of heated encomia to and denunciations of particular works that fill the private conversations of so many musical-theatre scholars.) This violent hierarchization, moreover, tends to be echoed in our scholarship by the sequestration of the criticism we admire from that which we scorn. Why else would I have expended so much energy in this essay belittling scholarship I consider negligent, or in my new book attacking a musical that for me epitomizes everything I loathe about contemporary American culture (*Rent*)?¹³

The snobbism, in other words, that I critiqued at the beginning of this essay almost inevitably finds a way of reconfiguring and reasserting itself. And I point this out not to undercut or disown my analysis, but to demonstrate how persistent and volatile the prejudice against popular forms remains (despite the rumored triumph of postmodernism) in an academic culture that continues to valorize the transgressive over the normative, theory over practice, and minoritizing over universalizing interpretive paradigms; and a society that continues—belligerently—to legislate cultural boundaries and police the production and consumption of pleasures.

ENDNOTES

1. Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), 91–9, at 96–8; Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), 67.
2. Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, 179–205, at 190.
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 82.
4. Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 68–85, at 83.
5. Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 227–40, at 227.
6. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), 198–9.
7. Peter Burke, "The 'Discovery' of Popular Culture," in *People's History*, ed. Samuel, 216–26, at 216–17.
8. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since 1870* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice—Hall, 1973), 567.
9. For a review of the field, see Alicia Kae Koger, "Trends in Musical Theatre Scholarship: An Essay in Historiography," *New England Theatre Journal* 3 (1992): 69–83.
10. Among the few valuable works of scholarship I would like to cite Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1987); D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
11. For an important critique of this scholarship, see Alisa Roost, "Before *Oklahoma!*: A Reappraisal of Musical Theatre during the 1930s," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16.1 (Winter 2004): 1–35.
12. See my essay, "Middlebrow Anxiety," in *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3–55.
13. See *ibid.*, 34–46.