

BOOK REVIEWS

## Lying in the Middle: Musical Theater and Belief at the Heart of America

By Jake Johnson. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2021.

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Jake Johnson's consciously playful, deeply interdisciplinary intervention into the study of musicals offers an expansive outlook on the creative potential of musicals in our "post-truth" moment. Johnson's bibliography is eclectic and evocative, bringing together anthropologists, pop music scholars, theater practitioners, political commentators, artists, and poets to demolish the disciplinary silos that so often limit our reach in studying musical theater. His book is critical, prescriptive, and in the end *hopeful*, offering a way through the post-truth condition that disorients us all.

Johnson's title, *Lying in the Middle*, centers on two ideas that are critiqued and played with throughout the book. "Lying" refers to both placement (i.e., to "lie down") and the idea of deception, in both the theatrical and ethical sense. Johnson uncouples the idea of lying from ideologies associated with morality by discussing what anthropologists have called "prosocial lies" and using anthropological methods to better understand the cultural taboo as a concept of "out of place."<sup>1</sup> In this context, Johnson sees "lying" as "stories out of place," considering their usefulness as both a creative art and a social tool with the potential to do good. The idea of the "Middle" is similarly multivalent here. Its most obvious reference is to the central geographic region of the United States that theater historians have ignored, social commentators have caricatured, and Broadway musicals have romanticized (as Johnson says, "rural America is a strategy for a show, not a reality" (15)). Indeed, all of his case studies are located in the geographic Middle. Johnson also ties the Middle to notions of "out of place-ness," focusing on the liminal spaces, places, and communities that inform his analyses.

The book is comprised of seven chapters and an extensive bibliography. The first two chapters act as a twinned introduction, first laying out problems familiar to anyone living in contemporary American society: Attitudes are fatalistic, apathy runs wild, social groups are fractured, and people are particularly receptive to lies. Johnson then proposes the solution: We need to learn to tell better stories—to lie better—in order to build stronger group bonds. Finally, he critiques the traditional musical theater histories that center Broadway, major coastal cities, and commercial endeavors, which limit our ability to tell better stories. Chapter 2 offers an alternative history of the American musical, which "re-replaces" the Middle, not simply encompassing its geographic meanings, but all of the liminal places that the musical reaches, including virtual spaces. This chapter also makes the case that musical theater studies would benefit from the methodologies of pop music studies—particularly ethnography. This resonates with Johnson's other work, which has questioned why two disciplines that are ostensibly linked—by the sheer commercial popularity of their subject of study—are so very dissimilar in their approaches.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Here Johnson borrows from anthropologist Mary Douglas's phrase "matter out of place"—i.e., dirt is only "dirty" because a society deems it so. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Wolverhampton: Keystroke Jacaranda Lodge, 1966; New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>See, in particular, Johnson et al., "Divided by a Common Language: Musical Theater and Popular Music Studies," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 4 (2019): 32–50. The article was written with Masi Asare, Amy Coddington, Daniel Goldmark, Raymond Knapp, Oliver Wang, and Elizabeth Wollman, all of whom (with Nina Eidsheim and Shana Redmond, moderated

Chapters 3 and 4 connect with Johnson's previous work on musical theater and religion, exploring the roles that they both play in "inviting its disciples to worlds yet to come"; after all, as he provocatively claims, "all musicals are misused religion" (25).<sup>3</sup> He begins by explaining how religious fundamentalism and musical theater require the same ingredients in order to cook up new worlds: Charisma and good storytelling (i.e., lying). He teases out this link by focusing on an adaptation of *The Sound of Music* by members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), the famously polygamous sect of Mormonism. This reimagined production, retitled *The Re-Sound of Music* (available on YouTube), includes a version of Maria who joins Captain von Trapp and his current wife as a second wife (alongside the outrageously "poached" song "You Two" from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*), and ends with the family preparing to move to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Johnson uses Anne Sexton's configuration of "small wires" (as in, "my faith is a great weight hung on a small wire") to explain how these ideas about world building in musical theater made their way to the FLDS community—these small wires (film, radio, sheet music, and the values they impart) are essential to understanding musical theater's "everywhere" nature and its (religious) power to build new worlds.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Chapter 4 looks at the appeal of the theatrical to religious communities by exploring a production of *Samson* put on by the Sight and Sound Theatre in Branson, MO. Catering to evangelical Christians, these productions are valued not only for their theatrical (i.e., fictional) qualities, but also for their connection to religious truths, or what one theatergoer termed "biblically accurate" stories. This contradiction does not seem to bother audiences; indeed, just like any musical theater production, deception, or the suspension of disbelief, is central.

The next two chapters move out of the realm of religious fundamentalism to other outsider communities, including elderly performers in the Senior Follies movement and the legion of young people who dream of making it to the Broadway stage. Johnson reinforces a truth to which all musical theater performers are aware: Musicals are complicit in the "master narrative of decline" that society maps onto old age. The elderly, like the other subjects of Johnson's study, lie in the Middle and are virtually invisible in commercial stage productions (save for a few exceptions, like the trope of the Diva). The Senior Follies movement, however, pushes back on this. Through Johnson's own involvement as the musical director for the Oklahoma Senior Follies, he looks at how these celebratory, comic productions render the decline narrative "farcical" (77). Johnson also does a deep dive into the history of the Oklahoma musical theater scene, looking particularly at Lyric Theatre in Oklahoma City, which from the 1960s to the mid-1990s employed mostly local talent. This changed when Lyric Theatre became an Equity theater; from then on, lead roles mostly went to Equity actors who were invariably from big cities like New York. This both pushed out local talent and made it less likely that aging actors were cast in a given production. Chapter 6 builds on this theme of displacement, paying attention to the movement from the Middle to Broadway, and back. This chapter looks primarily at the Broadway voice and is greatly aided by Johnson's expertise as a vocal coach. Johnson makes the case that Broadway's utopian dream—of belonging and happily ever after—attracts people from the Middle ("many of them queer, and most others out of place") and celebrates their individuality only to flatten their voices into sameness (97). Johnson details the physiological and aural qualities of vocal production at a helpfully granular level, teasing out the tension between articulation, resonance, and the Broadway belt. The compromise—a loud, powerful voice than can manage the Middle (this time referring to the vocal *passaggio*)—has, as Johnson points out, become part of a vocal "franchise" that is ultimately owned by corporations. This is the voice that students in musical theater programs are trained to cultivate, and many of the most well-respected programs, including Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, are (not coincidentally) located in the Middle region of the United States.

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by Mitchell Morris and Robert Fink) were participants in the symposium, "Estranged Partners?: The Place of Musical Theater Studies within Popular Music Studies," February 22, 2019, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>3</sup>Jake Johnson, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup>"FLDS Productions—Re Sound of Music 3," September 27, 2022, YouTube video, 8:00.

<sup>5</sup>Anne Sexton, "Small Wire," in *The Awful Rowing toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

Johnson argues convincingly that this franchised voice has come to signify emotional “truth” in contemporary musicals.

Johnson’s closing chapter is more urgent and concludes by setting three scenes: “The End of Lying,” “The End of the Human,” and “The End of Truth.” These three scenes artfully weave together an analysis of former U.S. Vice President, Mike Pence’s infamous visit to *Hamilton*, Broadway casting, optics and representation, climate change, world war, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s impact on Times Square, and *A Prairie Home Companion*. In the end, Johnson concludes that in order to harness the altruistic powers of lying (to lie “healingly, charitably, humanely,” as he quotes Mark Twain), we need to learn to lie, and to lie well (126).<sup>6</sup>

At times Johnson is so focused on teasing out specific metaphors, pulling at disparate threads, and weaving together simultaneously academic and creative arguments, that the experience of reading can be a bit disorienting. I get the sense, though, that Johnson is quite consciously teasing the reader, reminding us that theatricality, or lying, is also part of academic writing. Johnson’s provocative claims and lingering questions will haunt you as you hum along to your favorite cast album, prepare your class syllabi, attend your first community theater performance since the beginning of the pandemic, and think about why so many contemporary musical theater songs sound like evangelical worship music. This book belongs on the shelves of American music and musical theater scholars, musical theater practitioners, and anyone else invested in the Middle. Graduate students and advanced undergraduates will benefit from the questions Johnson asks and solutions he proposes.

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## Músicas coloniales a debate: Procesos de intercambio euroamericanos

Edited by Javier Marín López. Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2018.

## El villancico en la encrucijada: Nuevas perspectivas en torno a un género literario-musical (siglos XV–XIX)

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In recent decades, especially since the publication of the important ten-volume *Diccionario de la música española e hispanoamericana* (1999–2002), Spanish musicology has embraced a much wider range of topics than ever before, including Latin American music. The publication of the

<sup>6</sup>Mark Twain, *On the Decay of the Art of Lying* (Hartford, CT: Antiquarian Club Lecture, 1880; Portland, OR: Floating Press, 2008).