

## Queer Representation and Public Pedagogy in American Musical Theatre

Craig M. McGill<sup>1</sup>, Alan J. Chaffe<sup>2</sup>, and Kyle W. Ross<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kansas State University

<sup>2</sup> University of Victoria

<sup>3</sup> Oregon State University

### Abstract

This paper explores the Broadway musical as a site of queerness and queer representation through the lens of queer public pedagogy.

*Keywords:* Broadway musical, queer public pedagogy, queer theatre, queer identity

In heterocentric societies, how do queer people learn to construct their identities? People are not schooled in queer identity. They observe, consciously or unconsciously, through cultural spaces what it means to be queer and how to behave. Public pedagogy offers “spaces of learning” in which “our identities are formed...Master narratives of adult identity—who we are with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on—are portrayed to us and perpetuated through various public pedagogies” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 5). Consuming popular culture helps to teach us who we are, what roles we play in society, and how we should behave.

Theatre is an important site for public pedagogy (Chaffe, 2021; Hickey-Moody, 2014; Katz-Buonincontro, 2011). To name one prominent example, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* (2015) has become a cultural phenomenon, a place where people learn about historical events that shaped the American political landscape. The Broadway musical theatre, as a genre, has been a significant purveyor of *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich, 1980). The paradox of the Broadway musical is that despite being a refuge for queer people and being largely supported and produced by queer people, it has been a significant site for the unequivocal endorsement of heteronormativity. While Broadway has been critiqued for lack of representation of marginalized and minoritized groups (Gentry, 2017), we remain skeptical that there has been much improvement of queer representation recently.

Scant literature has considered the Broadway musical through the lens of public pedagogy: what people are learning *about* their queer identity from these popular culture texts, and what people in majority groups are learning about minoritized and marginalized populations. This paper explores the Broadway musical theatre as a site of queerness and queer representation through the lens of queer public pedagogy.

### A “Place for Us”: Queer Public Sphere

In considering the Broadway musical as a site of public pedagogy, we consider three broad aspects in which queerness can be understood: structure of the musical form, character representation and tropes, and queer themes and messages. Through all of this, we acknowledge and examine two parallel tensions: the journey of self-discovery is both uniquely personal and private as well as a social behavior explored within the larger context of a community. So too is the Broadway musical, serving as a private and solitary act of pure ecstasy and fantasy and also a shared public space for queer community (Clum, 1999; Halperin, 2012; Miller, 1998).

#### Genre & Structure

Regardless of the actual content of the musical, the musical as a genre is and of itself queer (Clum, 1999; Halperin, 2012; Miller, 1998). The biggest complaint about musicals is that

characters break into song for no logical reason. For some audiences, this absurdity is too much to overcome. These objections are not held for opera as genre: because every word is sung, there is not an oscillation between speech and song. In other words, the structure of the musical is queer because of the mode-shifting that takes place between song and dialogue. Musical theatre composers, lyricists, and librettists have grappled with this very issue almost since the beginning of the form in the 1920s (McMillin, 2014). In the early decades, songs in musicals were dispensable and interchangeable: a song could be removed from one show and then inserted into another. As the integrated musical developed beginning in the 1940s, writers like Rodgers and Hammerstein developed characters who sang when their speech alone could not adequately express their emotions. The songs were intricately tied to context and thus, could not be easily inserted into other shows at random.

### **Character Representation & Tropes**

Theatre has long served as a space where people could see the lives of characters examined. LGBT legal victories together with the dramatic improvement in social acceptance towards the queer community has led to an increase in explicit queer representations in Broadway musicals (Lovelock, 2019).

Up to the late 1960s, gay men were not directly represented in Broadway productions (Colleran, 2020). However, queer presentation of characters through innuendo has been documented since the beginning of American musical theatre (Colleran, 2020). Early characters were termed “pansies,” to which gay audiences related. Pansy characters would come up over time in musicals like *Anything Goes* (1934) and *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948). These characters received mixed responses from queer people. On one hand, these characters would be received positively because at least there was some level of queer representation at a time in which there could be no explicit queer representation. However, activists criticized the pansy characters because they were playing to stereotypes of gay men, reifying societal oppression.

The 1969-1970 Broadway theatre season was a watershed. Two supporting characters in high profile musicals were explicitly queered: the first openly gay character was Sebastian Baye in *Coco* (1969) (Kenrick, 2017). Sebastian was the antagonist, and was criticized as a stereotypical, excessively flamboyant caricature (Cantu, 2018). The first openly gay character that was portrayed in a positive, non-antagonistic, and sympathetic manner in a Broadway musical was Duane in *Applause* (1970) (Kenrick, 2017; Cantu, 2018). Both musicals were a commercial success.

Somewhat surprisingly, there have been few explicitly gay characters in the years since the 1970s. However, contemporary musicals have complicated gay characters. Rather than employing idealistic or stereotypical gay characters, musicals like *Falsettos* (1992) and *Fun Home* (2013) demonstrated the struggles straight women faced when married (and divorced) to gay men. There have been demonstrably fewer trans characters (Snook, 2018) and lesbians for Broadway productions (Colleran, 2020). Additionally, bisexuality is often minimized in mainstream musicals (Whitfield, 2020). While openly bisexual characters do exist in musical theatre, these characters often fall into several stereotypes, such as the bisexual character wanting to sleep with anyone or being incapable of monogamous relationships (Whitfield, 2020).

Despite the lack of explicit LGBTQ representation until recently, queer people, and particularly gay men, found a gay subtext that “offered personal, emotional, and cultural validation” (Wolf, 2002, p. 21) in Broadway musicals. Despite explicit queer characters in the past, it is through three narrative tropes—the drag queen, the drama queen, and the dancing

queen—that queer audience members found gay representation in Broadway musicals (Lovelock, 2019).

The drag queen character trope challenges hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes, as the male performer embodies femininity without necessarily revealing their sexuality (Lovelock, 2016). The archetype of the drama queen describes musical characters who face personal tragedies and are often denied a happy ending. The dancing queen trope is “a threefold conflation between camp, homosexuality and musical theatre, without promoting any alternative representations of queer characters” (Lovelock, 2019, p. 190). The dancing queen is often presented as an “exuberant and frivolous” character (Gowland, 2019, p. 48). Gowland (2019) proposed the trope of fabulous as a companion to the drag queen and the dancing queen. Fabulous articulates “the visceral nature of spectacular looks” (Moore, 2018, p. 23) and “emerges from black gay culture, and particularly from the social world of voguing” (Moore, 2018, p. 24).

The significance of these tropes is they simultaneously proclaim a sense of “inclusivity for a heterosexual (male) audience while continuing to display the level of ‘camp’ traditionally associated with musical theatre” and gay men (Lovelock, 2019, p. 187). Sontag (1978) differentiated between two kinds of camp: “the camp of failed seriousness” (p. 280) (naïve/pure camp) and intentional or deliberate camp in which an artist is aware of what they are doing. Thus, the campness of the Broadway character tropes provides a way for queer audiences to insert their queer selves into the heterosexual narratives, resulting in a queer reception of the performances and a resistance to the heterosexual world they are viewing onstage (Barnes, 2015; Gowland, 2019).

When gay men lacked representation, they often turned to “strong” female characters like Mama Rose in *Gypsy* (1959) and Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), who were written by gay men, like Stephen Sondheim and Jerry Herman respectively (Colleran, 2020). These “strong” women dominate the men they are connected to in the storylines, and gay men identified with those women more than they would with the male characters. Such strong female characters are considered “divas.” Our performance is different on the stage we are performing on. A backstage performance would be something like the performance in front of a mirror in the bedroom. The diva gets to be something that a gay male is not allowed to be in society. But the gay male wants to perform that way, so what they see in the diva’s performance is their backstage performance, and that’s their true selves. Which is why the gay male may connect or relate to these divas.

### **Themes and Messages**

One powerful aspect of musicals is social and collective learning can serve as a catalyst that empowers audiences to advocate and champion for larger social justice movements. Musicals also can affect public opinion like other popular culture media (Heide et al., 2012). By adding melody to text, dramatic moments become more memorable and may evoke emotional reactions by the audience that can lead to attitudinal shift over the theme(s) of the musical. These messages do not have to be explicit within the content of the musical itself. The author’s original intention is less important than how the audience constructs the message (Barthes, 1967). In the 1980s, musicals with explicitly queer characters also included musical numbers that encouraged community building and belonging, especially during the AIDS crisis. *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) presents an explicitly-queer message. A number from *La Cage Aux Folles* is “The Best of Times Is Now,” which emphasizes living life to the fullest, is implicitly an anthem to the surging gay rights movement. With the AIDS crisis looming at the time this musical premiered, it became an anthem of hope for queer people. Regardless of lyricists’ intent, queer audiences still

built community, fostered a sense of belonging and hope, and called for social activism and change. Queer audiences read and interpret these messages, shaping the Broadway musical as a site of queer public pedagogy, both in the concrete space, and in the larger popular public.

### **The Broadway Musical: A “Safer” Place for Queer Public Pedagogy**

Despite an ever-growing body of work, issues of how public pedagogy is practiced has not received enough research, and the concept itself is still under-theorized (Burdick et al., 2014). Queer aspects of musicals ought to be explored because public pedagogy scholars are “well situated as specific intellectuals whose writing might aid in the insurrection of subjugated knowledges that have been overlooked, buried, and obscured by established educational discourses and modes of academic inquiry” (Brass, 2014, p. 101).

Musical theatre can be a site of acceptance of queer identity and learning to defy toxic heteronormative scripts. Because of societal heteronormativity, much of the learning adults must do to challenge the patriarchy involves “unlearning” societal messages they have internalized over their lifetimes. As a location of concrete publics (Savage, 2014), theatres can be viewed as classrooms in which attendees are provided opportunities to “move beyond the boundaries of what they know and are familiar with to take an active part in a learning process that engages multiple ‘texts’...as a path to understanding” (Mackinlay, 2001, p.15). The multiple texts consist of the visual, audio, collective dialogue and interaction, embodied, and the performing self. In this way, musicals teach as they entertain and entertain as they teach (Weiner, 2001). Thus, musicals have the potential to serve as a space for transformative learning about queer identity.

Theatre allows patrons to suspend social norms of the outside world and to “behave with abandonment and freedom away from the constraints of the everyday” (Pielichaty, 2015, p. 235). Behaving with abandonment and freedom provides an opportunity for audiences to “perform their vulnerable and authentic queer selves, to experiment with their identities, and to openly question their beliefs and identities” (Chaffe, 2021, p. 252). Thus, theatre can serve as a space to empower queer people to act with agency and fosters identity development. Overcoming queer shame results in improved personal security, sense of worthiness, self-acceptance, self-esteem, happiness, and mental health, causing individuals to embrace their queer selves and live more authentically (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996).

In addition to serving as a site for queer people to explore and experience their own queer identity, musicals also hold the potential to change minds and hearts about queer identity and life. Although under-theorized in the research literature, musicals can serve as a vehicle to transform societal attitudes about queerness. Heide and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that musicals have the power to change societal perceptions of social issues. This area holds much promise for future researchers.

Finally, the central power of musicals is their ability to cultivate a sense of hope. Creating spaces of hope fuels possibilities for transformative learning. Feeling hopeful is significant because it increases confidence and provides a sense of agency, which results in and encourages individuals to change their behavior (Lopez, 2013). Musical can temporarily suspend structures or spaces of society and offers attendees a glimpse of a world that might be—one that is queerer. Having hope is significant because it provides physiological and psychological benefits, including increased happiness, reduced stress, positive emotions, and promotes healthy behavior (Lopez, 2013). For hooks (2003) “hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time” (p. xiv).

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