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Life-Like: American Society and the Early to Mid-Twentieth Century Musical

Musical theatre has been a beloved form of entertainment for many years now. Many people have found themselves in the seats of a theater watching a marvelous spectacle of song and dance, and observing a new story unfold before their eyes. Some may consider this kind of entertainment as a form of escape or distraction from one's everyday life, but that might not be truly so. Musical theatre, just like any other of the fine arts, is still subject to the values and conditions of the culture and time where and when it was written. "As a form of popular entertainment for fairly broad based audiences, throughout the twentieth century musicals variously dramatized, mirrored, or challenged our deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs." Musicals reflect the social and political values of culture (American culture, in most cases during the twentieth century), and almost all musicals either explicitly or unknowingly provide a viewpoint on the culture of their time.

As previously stated, musicals of the twentieth century are typically most affected by American society and culture. In the more limited versions of musical theatre that preceded this time, the main source of material or inspiration came from European influences, such as opera or comic opera. However, around the turn of the century (from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, to be specific), a shift began to occur. American composers began to take center stage in the world of musical theatre by providing uniquely American voices to their productions. This led to America and Broadway in particular becoming the unofficial headquarters for this genre.

The beginning of a new century in American musical theatre came alongside a strong sense of national pride, and this patriotism was reflected in the musicals of the time. One strong source of national pride came from the boom of industry in the United States, which was constantly growing and seemed limitless at the time. Industry was what led to the United States becoming a world power, so it only seemed appropriate to include it on the stage. Many

of these shows have strikingly similar plots in which the American protagonist is a race driver who ends up winning a race and the heart of an all American sweetheart while defeating the typically foreign antagonist.

Another common thread in many musicals before World War I was the idea of the American dream, and how anyone could make their lives better if they worked hard enough. "The hero's ultimate triumph over family objections- his own family's or the girl's- advocated romantic love while reinforcing the notion that there are no class barriers in the United States." The ideals of love and hard work triumph over inherited money and fortune. While a sense of nationalism can seem like a positive aspect of these productions, there was also a negative aspect. With American pride came a prejudice against people of other cultures and nationalities, which can seem strange because America is often characterized as a melting pot culture.

Another display of nationalism through the use of musical theatre came in the form of the gunboat musical. These productions were meant to display the power and strength of the U.S. Navy. The Navy was considered to be of a higher caliber than the Army at the time, and so using the Navy's military strength as a subject for entertainment seemed like the right way to go to boost American morale. The plot of these shows usually involves an American getting entangled in foreign affairs only to be saved from the conflict by the Navy at the end of the show while also demeaning and vilifying the foreigners in a tying together of nationalism and xenophobia.

African Americans also suffered at the hand of racism, even in musical theatre. "Throughout the entire period, black Americans suffered segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, racist political demagoguery, and racial violence that nearly always went unpunished and often won applause from whites." The objectification and suffering of African Americans seemed to be approved by the audiences of musical theatre before the beginning of

World War I. Not only were the depictions of black characters often inaccurate and demeaning, but they were also normally performed by white actors in blackface makeup.

In the year 1914, the world was shaken by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and suddenly many countries found themselves thrown into the midst of the first World War. While not many musicals used the war as a topic, several wartime revues were performed in support of the troops. The ideas of war having a sense of heroism and romanticism were still alive on the American stage, even though those ideas were abandoned in Europe.

After the conclusion of World War I, America came into a period of time of widespread prosperity during the roaring twenties. The American economy was in a state of almost constant growth, and with that economic growth came a love of the superficial and the indulgence in frivolities by the general American public. With the widespread prosperity came an explosion in the number of Broadway musicals produced. Between the Broadway seasons of 1919-1920 and 1929-1930, more musicals were produced than any other eleven year period to date.

The economic boom of the twenties led to a change in the composition of the audience that would fill the theater. People from the working class could afford to go out for a night of amusement without having to drain their bank accounts. "The 1920's was one of the last decades of the century when ticket prices rose so slowly that the incomes of the working-class and middle-class Americans could more than keep up with them."

The main objective of the musicals of the roaring twenties was to provide a diversionary form of entertainment. Settings in which the stories took place could either be exotic or set in contemporary America. Shows set in the United States typically had music written in a Tin Pan Alley style that was common in much of the music of the era.

Very few of the productions of the twenties were on any specific political subject. An extremely high number of productions can be categorized as "Cinderella" musicals. The term

“Cinderella” in this case refers to a female protagonist who overcomes her circumstances as a working class American (usually Irish-American) to both rise in social class and win the heart of a man. This whole subject is very similar to many productions that came before this time, but the main difference is the change in gender of the main character from male to female.

The theme of the American dream was still readily apparent, although the female character could either rise in status through her own hard work, through marriage to an all American man, or a combination of the two. The fact that the main character was usually Irish-American might have been to demonstrate to recent immigrants that the American ideal was attainable for almost everyone.

Another important development in musical theatre during the roaring twenties was the progression of the African American musical. One stepping stone for the African American musical was achieved by the production team of the musical *Shuffle Along*, which premiered in 1921. This production, unlike many that came before it, was notable for being performed on “almost Broadway”. While the 63rd Street Theatre was on the edge of New York City’s theatre district, it was much closer than any African American production had ever been. Also, the musical featured a sincere love duet between two black characters, which was considered taboo at that point in time. *Shuffle Along* “afforded a real opportunity for numerous blacks to achieve true recognition, even stardom, in a theatre world dominated by whites both on stage and in the audience. Further, the success of *Shuffle Along* “legitimized the black musical. It proved to [white] producers and theatre managers that audiences would pay to see black talent on Broadway.”

Perhaps the most well known African American musical is Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern’s *Show Boat* (1927). It was considered controversial and progressive for several reasons, most prominently for idea of a mixed cast as opposed to an all African American or all white cast. It also included an interracial marriage between the characters Julie and Steve and the show explores the societal conflicts associated with their relationship.

With the stock market crash of 1929 came the Great Depression, which extended to Broadway during the 1930s. The fall of the economy led to less support from the public for the arts because the public could no longer afford to attend Broadway musicals. Therefore, those involved in show business had to adapt by making productions be less extravagant. Many people couldn't afford to go to shows, so the theatres couldn't afford to put on big budget musicals.

There were two main developments in musical theatre during the Great Depression, and those were the use of naturalism and the use of satire. One significant example of the use of naturalism in musical theatre was Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), which was also a milestone for African American musicals. *Porgy and Bess* made use of a combination of operatic elements and a bluesy jazz sound, and it had a cast almost exclusively of African Americans. Gershwin, the composer of this musical, took special care to try to accurately depict a culture that he was not a part of, as opposed to relying on stereotypes to tell the story. As a result, the audience gets to see a very realistic setting of a lower class African American community which Gershwin called Catfish Row.

Satire was also used in the Broadway musicals of the Great Depression. This genre of musical fit the era because satire feeds off of the societal turmoil for its source material. Economic downfall led to a rise in liberal thinking, which allowed for the satirical commentary on the nation's condition. Some satirical musicals of this time include *Strike Up the Band* (1930), *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933). The composition of satirical musicals greatly decreased after the Great Depression, and of those composed after this time only a few have had much success.

World War II was the main event of the 1940s, and this war made Americans spring into action both overseas and on the homefront. Many men volunteered to fight in the armed forces, meanwhile women joined the workforce. Bond sales were through the roof thanks to widespread propaganda that encouraged Americans to buy war bonds. However, most of the

war propaganda was spread through the use of radio and the film industry. Therefore, the Broadway musicals of World War II did not deal directly with the war itself. Also, the fact that many soldiers were sent off to war through New York City's port did not encourage the use of the subject of war on stage. The troops, who could oftentimes stop and see a show before they left, did not want to be reminded of what they were about to do while they were deployed.

Instead of writing directly about the war in the form of a musical, many Broadway composers would write popular songs in support of the troops and our country. Irving Berlin was one of these composers, and his song "God Bless America" is a well-known example of this.

After the war, a dynamic duo took over the Broadway scene, and their names were Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. These two would dominate Broadway from the year 1943 to the year 1959, and they established a new form of musical that could be both entertaining, "idea bearing", and financially successful. Most of their shows emphasized a theme of "eradicating racial, ethnic, and cultural prejudices", and "promoting tolerance and acceptance of differences". This can be seen in the musicals *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and many others. Many parts of these shows outrightly addressed the problem of prejudice based on class (like in *Oklahoma!*) or based on race (like in *The King and I*) and called for social change.

So, an in depth look at the musicals of the early to mid-twentieth century musical clearly reveals the influence that American culture had on the subjects and plot lines of the productions of the time. They often reflected the nation's stance on race and social class, as well as the country's reaction to world events such as the World Wars. Overall, this thoroughly American genre both sought to entertain and to provide a reflection of who America was at that time in history.