

Death Comes to the Broadway Musical

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Abstract: The Broadway musical is an excellent prism for viewing the narrative of American life – as it is, has been, and perhaps should be. In the first part of the twentieth century, musicals viewed life through rose-colored glasses; musicals were equivalent to musical comedy. Starting in the 1940s, the mood of musicals darkened. One indication of the new, serious tone was that characters in musicals died in the course of the show. This essay examines several questions relating to death in the Broadway musical, such as who dies, when in the course of the drama the death occurs, and how the death is marked musically. It concludes with a look at musicals involving the deaths of historical characters and at AIDS-related musicals, works whose assumptions and ideals are very far from those of the musical comedies of the early twentieth century.

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Bertolt Brecht called the Broadway musical “the authentic expression of all that is American,”¹ but he did not mean that as a compliment. Compared to the serious, politically engaged theater pieces that Brecht preferred and wrote, the Broadway musicals he saw seemed trivial and superficial. Many authors would agree that the Broadway musical is an excellent prism for viewing the American narrative; moreover, they would not be dismayed by this idea. Indeed, several books, including literary scholar Andrea Most’s *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* and musicologist Raymond Knapp’s *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, have made the case that the Broadway musical not only reflects American mores and values but, by holding up a mirror to the nation, actively shapes the American psyche.

During the first third of the twentieth century, the Broadway musical was equivalent to musical comedy. It had much in common with the movie genre now called rom-com, or romantic comedy. Musicals of the 1920s and 1930s had happy endings – specifically, endings that, after tribulations or at least complications, united the young lovers, presumably to live happily ever after. Characters in these musical comedies were often one- or two-

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dimensional at best, what Stephen Sondheim describes as one-adjective, one-noun personalities. (In *Finishing the Hat*, Sondheim gives as examples “the conniving slave, the lecherous husband, the braggart warrior” who appear in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Though written in 1962, *Forum* makes ample use of traditions from earlier decades.²) Consequently, the people who wrote the books for musical comedies, putting one-dimensional characters through their paces to arrive at foregone conclusions, were seldom the most respected members of the team creating musical comedies. As one theater historian explained, “Books in themselves had a function but little quality. They were either serviceable or unhelpful.”³ Thus, the songs had to carry the emotional weight of the drama. Although in some sense generalized (that is, not specifically suited to unique characters), the songs were what lived on after the musical comedies were no longer on the stage.

During World War II, death came to the Broadway musical, particularly in musicals by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. Jud Fry dies in *Oklahoma!* (1943); Billy Bigelow dies in *Carousel* (1945); Lieutenant Cable dies in *South Pacific* (1949); the King of Siam dies in *The King and I* (1951). This was the moment when the narrative shifted. Musical comedies now had to make room for musical theater and musical plays, works whose aspirations were greater; could take on any subject that spoken plays could; and could enrich the narrative with music as well. Some wags have noted that at this point, we began to have musical comedy without the comedy. My interest here is in one specific aspect of the American musical’s turn toward the serious: namely, how death enters the narrative.

Deaths, onstage or offstage, and songs about them had been partners in Western

music drama for centuries. The first operas for which the music has survived, Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice* and Giulio Caccini’s opera of the same name, both dealt with Orpheus’s response to the death of his bride. *Porgy and Bess* is the more immediate predecessor to Broadway musicals that feature characters’ deaths. To this day, debate continues on how to classify *Porgy and Bess*; opera, folk opera, and musical theater have all been suggested. Its New York premiere took place not in an opera house, but at the Alvin Theatre, which had housed Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes* the year before; revivals have been staged on Broadway and in opera houses in the United States and abroad. How the several deaths in *Porgy and Bess* are treated musically deserves consideration, and I return to this topic later in the essay.

Popular songs and ballads that dealt with loss and death were another contributing stream. Most of these songs were not staged, and those that were did not play a part in a greater dramatic narrative. Rather, the drama played out within the song, whose language was the popular vernacular. Barroom ballads and the blues are beyond the scope of this essay, but two songs deserve mention, if only because their authors also made major contributions to musical theater. Cole Porter wrote “Miss Otis Regrets” in 1934 in response to a bet with his friend Monty Woolley.⁴ The meaning of the first and last lines, “Miss Otis regrets she’s unable to lunch today,” become clear in the course of the song, as we learn she must miss lunch because she is about to be lynched for shooting her lover. The ironic tone, a mix of comedy and tragedy, served later theater songwriters well in certain situations. Another song about lynching, this one entirely, and painfully, serious, is Irving Berlin’s “Supper-time.” Written for the newspaper-themed revue *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), it was first sung

by Ethel Waters in a scene titled “Unknown Negro Lynched by Frenzied Mob.” In a perfect embodiment of benumbing grief, the singer explains that the simple act of putting supper on the table for herself and her children has become an almost insuperable burden because “that man o’ mine ain’t comin’ home no more.”

Unlike nineteenth-century opera, in which characters, whether stabbed, suffocated, or poisoned, are allowed to comment on their own deaths – sometimes in extended scenes – before they die, the deaths of characters in Broadway musicals of the 1940s and 1950s either are noted only in the dialogue or are marked musically by the survivors. Hence, if one’s knowledge of *South Pacific* came only from a recording of the musical numbers, one would not know that Lieutenant Cable dies.

In the great operatic fountainhead of death coming to Broadway, *Porgy and Bess*, there are several deaths and various musical responses. In the first act, after Robbins is killed by Crown, his wasteful death is lamented first by the community at large (“Gone, Gone, Gone”) and then by his wife Serena in the deeply moving song “My Man’s Gone Now.” The second act features a choral lament for the people who died in a hurricane (“Clara, Clara, Don’t You Be Downhearted”). When Porgy kills the villainous Crown, the musical response is not a lament but Porgy’s triumphant exclamation to Bess: “You’ve got a man now. You’ve got Porgy.”

Jumping ahead twenty-two years, we can look to *West Side Story*, a musical work whose stature is equal to *Porgy and Bess*, for an entirely different treatment of death. Leonard Bernstein had much deeper roots in the classical music tradition than did George Gershwin. Aspiring to the status of opera, *Porgy and Bess* has no spoken dialogue except that from the alien white men who visit Catfish Row. The creators of *West Side Story* were wary

of being too operatic; Tony’s death is unsung – literally. There is a response with spoken dialogue and with instrumental music and movement, but neither Maria, who survives him, nor Tony’s fellow gang members sing a lament. Bernstein struggled with this decision, remarking, “I tried to set it very bitterly, understated, swift. I tried giving all the material to the orchestra and having her sing an obbligato throughout. I tried a version that sounded just like a Puccini aria. . . . I made a difficult, painful but surgically clean decision not to set it at all.”⁵ The gang fight between the Sharks and the Jets is set to music, but the deaths of Bernardo and Riff are also unsung. Or, more accurately, death is treated musically in the larger context of its relation to love. Anita scolds Maria for her continuing loyalty to Tony. At the height of her anger, Anita sings, “He’ll murder your love; he murdered mine.” But love overcomes both anger and grieving, as both women proclaim, “When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong. Your love is your life.” At the end of *West Side Story*, as Tony is dying, he and Maria sing a fragment – only six measures – of “Somewhere.”

In *L’opéra, ou, La défaite des femmes*, philosopher and novelist Catherine Clément suggests that nineteenth-century opera is particularly hard on women. In contrast, when death first came to the Broadway musical, it mainly took male characters. In *West Side Story*, Tony dies but Maria lives on – a striking deviation from the source story. Indeed, in most musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, the men die and the women are left behind to mourn. An important exception is Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene* (1947), in which an unfaithful wife is murdered by her husband.

The men who are killed off do not fall into one personality type. Jud Fry in *Oklahoma!* is unsavory, but *South Pacific*’s Lieu-

tenant Cable is a war hero. *Carousel*'s Billy Bigelow dies after an attempted robbery, while Johnny Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* dies when the tunnel in which he is working collapses. Most die violently, in the prime of their lives, but King Mongkut in *The King and I* dies of natural causes – presumably in the fullness of years – passing on his kingdom to his son.

Death can be accommodated at different places in the narrative of the Broadway musical. If there are many deaths in the course of the musical, they may be distributed throughout the work. If there is only one death, near the end of the story is a likely, but by no means the only, place to put it. Death may be the conclusion of the action or the springboard for the action to come, and there are interesting variations on these possibilities. In *Oklahoma!*, though Jud Fry dies near the end of the final act, his death is, in a sense, celebrated, or at least musically marked, in the Act I duet “Pore Jud is Daid,” sung by Curly and Jud. In *Ragtime*, the death of Sarah at the end of the first act causes the dramatic reversal of all the action to come.

In *Les Misérables*, we see the deaths of many of the characters we have come to know by name – Fantine, Gavroche, Éponine, Javert – as well as those of an unknown number of anonymous figures. *Les Misérables* is sung through, and the deaths are treated in different ways musically. The deaths of Éponine and Javert are dealt with operatically: as she dies, Éponine sings a duet with Marius; Javert has an extended aria before he throws himself into the Seine. Marius sings a lament for his many fallen comrades after the failure of the insurrection, “Empty Chairs at Empty Tables.” The death of Jean Valjean at the very end of the work, and his ascension to heaven, is treated with the full-blown musical elaboration that puts it in company with Marguerite's death in Charles Gounod's *Faust*.

Another interesting variation is death as backstory. In musicals using this device, a death of great significance to one or several of the characters in the drama has occurred before the action of the drama begins. This situation presents the problem of how the departed characters can participate musically. In *The Secret Garden*, Lily, the dead wife, appears in flashbacks. *Next to Normal*, cunningly enough, initially hides the fact that the young man we see (Gabe, Diana's son) is a figment of Diana's unmoored mind: he died before the action of the drama begins.

In time, death in the Broadway musical assumed a variety of treatments and expressions – deserved or undeserved, sentimental or comic, individual or anonymous. *Candide*, the musical Leonard Bernstein composed the year before *West Side Story*, introduces, among other things, anonymous deaths and death treated with astringent black humor. One aspect of this new stance – death not as an individual tragedy but as something omnipresent in society – is inherent in the source material for the musical, Voltaire's satirical novella of the same name. The young Candide tries to believe that things are “all for the best, in the best of all possible worlds,” despite the natural and man-made disasters all around him; by the end, he acknowledges that the Leibnizian optimism he was taught is a pack of lies. But in the course of the show, death and dying are mocked and trivialized. Some characters are killed, then brought back to life. In the soaringly beautiful duet they sing upon being reunited, Cunegonde asks Candide, “Dearest, how can this be so? You were dead, you know. You were shot and bayoneted, too.” Candide counters, “Ah, but love will find a way.” In a shocking juxtaposition, as anonymous victims of the Inquisition are about to be burned at the stake, the

chorus jauntily sings, "What a day, what a day for an auto-da-fé." Writer Ethan Mordden has commented that "after *Candide*, anything was possible because, suddenly, nothing was unthinkable."⁶

Two later musicals, *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), are drenched in death; they provoke a complex set of emotions of which simple sorrow is not the predominant feeling. By the end of *Little Shop of Horrors*, all the principals in the cast have been devoured by a carnivorous plant, which appears to be turning its attention to tasty morsels in the audience. In *Sweeney Todd*, Sweeney's understandable desire for vengeance against Judge Turpin and the Beadle morphs into malice toward all. A large number of anonymous men are dispatched ("They went to their Maker impeccably shaved," the chorus remarks) and recycled into meat for pies. The complex, emotional tone is set at the end of the first act by the comic duet for Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett, "A Little Priest," in which they gleefully imagine the different flavors of pie the various professions of the slaughtered men will produce. There are notable points of contact between this duet and "What a Day" from *Candide*, particularly the anonymity of the victims and the black humor with which death is treated. Both *Candide* and *Sweeney Todd* suggest a broad concern with social injustice, but the message is, if not impure, certainly not unmixed.

The convergence of death and entertainment is a central feature of *Chicago* (1975). The women in jail for murder perceive that by giving a story the right spin, the media and the justice system can be manipulated. In their defense the women declare, "He had it coming." It is the Hungarian woman, whose simple defense is the declaration "Not guilty," who is hanged onstage. In all these works, whether death comes to anonymous figures or

to the central characters of the drama, the sheer number of people who die helps numb the audience's reaction to the dreadfulness of death; these shows portray the banality of death. But more important than sheer numbers is the general tone determined by the musical setting. The sense that death is all around us conditions the atmosphere of several musicals that take place in periods of war. In *The Sound of Music* (1959), set in Austria before the Anschluss, and in *Cabaret* (1966), set in Berlin in the 1930s, the main characters escape death, but the audience knows that many others "in real life" did not.

Once the ground had been prepared by finding several ways to deal musically and structurally with the subject of death, the Broadway musical was better able to handle more complex political and social issues. In particular, the AIDS epidemic elicited many theatrical and musical responses, the most important for the purposes of this discussion being *Rent* (1996) and *Falsettos* (1992). Both works explore the joys and sorrows of being part of a subculture. In *Rent*'s operatic predecessor, Puccini's *La Bohème*, Mimi dies of tuberculosis; the Mimi of *Rent* dies of the new scourge cutting people down in what should be the prime of their lives: AIDS. Whizzer, the character who dies of AIDS in *Falsettos*, is given an embittered and impassioned song to sing, "You Gotta Die Sometime." He is also allowed a deeply moving farewell duet to sing with his lover, Marvin. At the moment that Whizzer dies, the music we hear is from Marvin's son, Jason, chanting his Bar Mitzvah portion, producing a complex mixture of youth, death, and religion for the audience to contemplate at the end of the show.

The inclusion of nonfictional characters in a musical's cast helped reinforce the idea that the musical was not an escape from the world outside the theater but

rather a means to examine that world more closely. Of course, the appearance of a non-fictional character is not a sufficient condition for making a musical serious. Despite the presence of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as played by George M. Cohan, in the satirical musical *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), the action focuses on the problems of a young couple who wants to get married, not the economic and social problems of the Depression. But the presence of non-fictional people in a musical in which characters die demands that the audience take notice in a different way. *Ragtime* sets out a clash of different social strata, encompassing fictional characters – an all-American family, an immigrant father and daughter, and an African American couple – as well as nonfictional: Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman, Henry Ford, Booker T. Washington, and Evelyn Nesbit, among others. All of them participate, willingly or not, in the social upheavals of the time.

Four musicals that not only contain nonfictional characters but are built on historical events – *Floyd Collins* (1996), *Parade* (1998), *Assassins* (2004), and *The Scottsboro Boys* (2010) – deserve attention here. All seem to be a hard sell. In *Floyd Collins*, a young man is trapped in a cave, where he eventually perishes while a

media-frenzy carnival develops above him. In *Parade*, Leo Frank is unjustly convicted of murder and is lynched. In *The Scottsboro Boys*, the unjust sentencing of nine black men on rape charges is told in the context of a minstrel show. *Assassins* brings together the deaths of Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy, but the central characters of the musical are not the victims but the men who caused their deaths, along with several men and women who made failed assassination attempts on other American presidents. None of these musicals started out on Broadway, although all of them eventually spent some time there. Indeed, they are so far from their Broadway musical predecessors that some commentators call them anti-musicals – questioning, indicting, or redefining the mythology of the American dream.

Someone once said that there are only two worthy subjects for a drama: love and death. The Broadway musical celebrated love from its earliest days. Death, as part of the narrative or even as the central subject, arrived decades later to produce, by the end of the twentieth century, musicals showing a darker but also a richer and more sophisticated view of life.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Quoted in Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 484. The quote originally appeared in Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays*, vol. 7, ed. Ralph Manheim and John Willet (London: Methuen, 1976), 420.
- ² Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954–1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 80.
- ³ Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 72.
- ⁴ According to musical theater historian Robert Kimball, “Monty Woolley suggested the title to Porter, which he accompanied with a wager that Porter could not write a song to fit the title”; Robert Kimball, ed., *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 274.
- ⁵ Quoted in Stempel, *Showtime*, 405.
- ⁶ Ethan Mordden, *Coming Up Roses: The Broadway Musical in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 170.