



## **Contexts and Strategies**

THE AMERICAN MUSICAL is one of three distinctively American and widely influential art forms that took shape in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Like jazz and American film, whose histories intertwine significantly with its own, the American musical has continued to evolve into the present, both accommodating changes in American culture and society and, in turn, helping to shape their development in profound ways. And, like jazz and film, the American musical has developed and maintained a solid core of dedicated and highly specialized practitioners, along with an audience that ranges outward from a nucleus of ardent, knowledgeable devotees to a broader public who partake of its products and byproducts in various ways and to varying degrees. These three art forms have become nearly ubiquitous in the United States, each aspiring to the status of art while remaining thoroughly enmeshed with commerce, each capable of embracing interests and attitudes ranging from the most serious to the most playful, from the most religious to the most secular, and from the most complex to the most reductively simple.

If scarcely anyone in the United States has thus not been influenced by, amused by, inspired by—and, yes, annoyed by, but yet somehow deeply affected by—each of these art forms in turn or in some combination, their practitioners and devotees have nevertheless had to contend with troubling issues of cultural prestige. Can American film and the American musical *truly* be thought of as art forms on the same level as, say, Shakespeare's plays and Mozart's operas? Can jazz *truly* be compared to the achievements of Bach and Beethoven? Still, despite entrenched opposition, the cultural prestige of jazz has grown tremendously in recent decades, while that of American film has grown nearly apace—the latter thanks to both a cadre of French theorists writing in the 1950s and the self-serving efforts of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the American Film Institute, and similar groups. But if American musicals have also increasingly been taken more seriously in recent years, they have only rarely been seen to transcend a medium and venue that has seemed inherently flawed—even though the specific “flaws” of the American musical are virtually the same as those that jazz and American film have to some extent surmounted on their way to achieving the relative cultural prestige they now enjoy. Thus, to enumerate: the musical is a highly col-

laborative art form that inevitably dilutes whatever individual genius may contribute to particular creations; it draws heavily on elements of society much lower than its well-educated, more aesthetically minded elite; it appeals broadly to educated and uneducated alike; it responds shamelessly to commercial stimuli; and, worst of all, it has managed to grow largely independent of its European roots, from which it might usefully have absorbed that sense of aesthetic elevation Americans have so often found lacking in their indigenous artworks.

Yet, it may be argued, the sharp rifts that developed in all three of these art forms between American practices and their European-based counterparts (if any) were precisely what enabled them to emerge as specifically American, answering to specifically American demands and shaping American experiences more directly than arts imported from Europe could ever have managed to do. While developments in these art forms have been driven to an extraordinary degree by market demand, this may in itself be seen as quintessentially American, enabling and managing a rapid development that has been highly responsive to commercial realities. Which is to say: all of these art forms succeeded because they—as art forms and as individual creations—provided what audiences wanted. Which is to say: all of these art forms are *connected* in vital ways to their American constituency, with a connection more reinforced than undermined by their collaborative and broadly democratic participatory basis. Arguably, then, questions of artistic stature (or, perhaps, merely prestige) must yield to questions of relevancy. Over the course of the twentieth century in America, jazz, film, and the musical have achieved and maintained relevance to greater proportions of the population than any other performance-based arts, notwithstanding the erosive effects on that relevance, especially in the case of film and jazz, by television and rock-and-roll beginning in the 1950s. (Indeed, the advent of the “lower orders” of television and rock-and-roll have a lot to do with the emergent prestige of film and jazz.)

When we in the United States come to study the histories of these three art forms, there is much more at stake for us than when we study Shakespeare and Mozart, whose supposed universality seems plausible to us only because their works are clearly not about us as Americans, yet can matter tremendously to us as human beings. Claims for the universality of jazz, American film, and American musicals are easier for us to see through, and so we tend, as a culture and as custodians of culture, to devalue these forms according to this criteria; by the same token, however, because these art forms are so much about us, we care tremendously about how their histories are told. Thus, for example, telling the history of jazz has been a singularly fraught venture, as its various communities have attempted to define themselves as the mainstream. The issue of race, in par-

ticular, has become especially charged in debates over jazz history, which speaks directly to the importance of jazz to a national culture that has been from its beginnings virtually obsessed with race. We may, perhaps, learn a lesson from these debates: through contemplating the embarrassing legacy of early historians of jazz, who saw its strongest line of development only among whites, we may also come to reject as equally problematic more recent accounts that exclude whites altogether from the narrative on the basis of the supposed purity of an essentialized African-American tradition. The real alternative is not to choose along racial or other divisive lines, but to take greater care to construct nonexclusionary histories.

Race and ethnicity matter tremendously as well in the histories of American films and musicals, not only involving divisions between whites and blacks, but also involving Irish, Jews, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans, among others. But if the more basic lesson for us to learn from race-centered jazz narratives, with respect to contemplating the history of the American musical, is that we should take care not to exclude obviously central groups, then we must take due note from the outset of the relatively high proportion of (often closeted) gay men within the central communities of the American musical theater, as creators, performers, and devotees. The highly charged “camp” atmosphere that devolves from this circumstance is and has long been a central component of American musical theater, which is reason enough to make gay sensibilities central to our account.<sup>2</sup> More pressingly, however, we should realize that the strong gay presence in musical theater has had much to do with an entrenched general reluctance to see the art form as contributing centrally to American culture, and thereby to our collective image of ourselves.

The situation has much in common with an earlier reluctance among conservative whites to acknowledge the importance of blacks to the development of jazz and related popular musics. The first impulse in the face of what appears to be an important contribution by a marginalized and maligned group—and this is true for both jazz and musical theater—has been to devalue the product; the second to devalue the specific contribution of the group in question. More broadly, with regard to gays in music, there is a third possibility not plausibly available with regard to blacks in jazz, which is to claim that sexual orientation itself is not relevant, a fact of biography that leaves no trace on the artifacts we study. Taking seriously this time-honored but wholly untenable claim allows us, for example, to note as biographical marginalia the homosexuality of Aaron Copland, while maintaining that his sexual orientation is irrelevant to the legacy of “American” music that he left us. But this is patently impossible in the American musical theater, where we may all too easily witness both the visual and musical presence of gay sensibilities on stage, as well

as its responsive presence in the audience. While I will here resist the impulse to tell the history of the American musical as an *exclusively* gay tradition (a perhaps understandable reaction that would result in a more obvious falsification than rendering jazz as an exclusively African American phenomenon), the contributions and perspectives of gays must at the very least occupy a prominent position in the story.

While the principal thrust of this book is to tell a coherent story, there are several reasons why adhering strictly to chronology does not seem to me the best approach to take. To the extent that a case needs to be made that American musicals are worthy of study at all, whether because of their cultural relevance or their aesthetic merit, that case can surely be made best with more recent musicals than with largely irretrievable musicals from earlier in the century. Relevance is more easily shown when it can also be experienced, and memorable shows from the more recent past provide crucial evidence. Aesthetic merit (or interest), for its part, may be most easily established and explored within more specific contexts than a belabored chronology permits; moreover, the case is a more difficult one for many earlier works, to which strict chronology would have to give literal precedence, no matter how harshly we may judge some of those works by later standards. There is, too, the problem of establishing a full sense of a show as a basis for discussion; while filmed versions of stage musicals, whatever merit they may have as films, only imperfectly reproduce the shows on which they are based, they are considerably better than nothing, so that we may much more usefully engage with musicals that were filmed after the adoption of synchronized sound, and still more usefully with musicals (mostly from recent decades) that were filmed or videotaped in their original staging. And, of course, the question of whom this history is *for* affects how we tell it. Since this book is intended to serve as both a course textbook and, more generally, a way for those interested in the American musical to extend their knowledge and explore more fully the musicals they already know, it behooves me to move fairly quickly to musicals that may be seen as central works in the tradition, a strategy in direct conflict with chronological concerns.

But there are more fundamental reasons to forego strict chronology. The specific structural design I have adopted for this history emerged forcefully, first, when I started asking pointed questions about why musicals have mattered and to whom, about what specifically they have given us and how; and second, when I considered anew that this history, like most histories, is not a single story, but rather a set of intertwined stories that a master narrative simply cannot do justice to. I therefore decided early on to present the subject thematically, to be concerned first and foremost with what musicals *do* within culture—that is, how they engage with central issues that concern us as Americans—and to impose this approach



**Figure 1.1.** The implicit gay subtext of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878)—easily the most influential work for the early development of the American musical—was splendidly brought out in *Pinafore!*, Mark Savage’s adaptation of the show staged in 2001 by the Celebration Theater in Los Angeles. Here, a supposedly “straight” Dick Dockstrap (Christopher Hall) sings “The Nightingale,” while being admired by the rest of the crew (Seán Snow, Neal Allen Hyde, John Brantley Cole, Jr., and Jason Boegh). (Photograph by Johnny Nicoloro. Used by permission.)

hierarchically by considering them within specific thematic tropes and traditions. Clearly, individual musicals do many things, serially and at once, and discussions must be flexible enough to accommodate that circumstance. But by organizing the discussions here primarily by themes, I hope not only to enable more focused discussions of those themes and the specific ways in which individual musicals articulate them, but also to establish a structured focus to the discussions of individual musicals even as I consider other aspects of them. (Incidentally, the latter consideration dictates that I treat musicals holistically, rather than discuss them piecemeal, according to the many separate themes each may be seen to take up.)

The four themes I explore in this book all center around political considerations, of how musicals have helped us envision ourselves as a nation of disparate peoples, functioning within a world of even more extreme differences. I start my consideration of these themes with “Part II: Defin-

ing America,” which is, arguably, *the* central theme in American musicals, to which the other themes relate in both obvious and subtle ways. It is surely no accident that many accounts of the history of the American musical begin with *The Black Crook*, which was first presented the year following the end of the Civil War, and was much revived in the following decades. The specific task of reunification in the recently re-United States, along with Western expansion, the approaching Centennial celebration, and the rise of nationalist ideologies in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century—all served to heighten the need to define and *re-*fine what precisely it meant to be American. Musicals eventually proved to be a particularly effective place to do that, since what happened on stage not only brought a specific audience together within a constructed community, but also sent that audience out into a larger community armed with songs to be shared, providing at least some basis for achieving a sense of unity among the increasingly varied peoples of a country expanding rampantly both geographically and through immigration. Nor was it an accident that Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore*, appearing just after the Centennial celebrations, provided a particularly strong push in this direction, since *Pinafore* both demonstrated the capacity of musical comedy to express a national identity and provided Americans of a later generation with the opportunity to indulge their own smug belief, as they laughed both *at* and *with* the show’s presentation of British foibles and preoccupations, that they had outgrown their principal European “parent.”

From these starting points, well before the turn of the century that would give birth to jazz and the film industry, the American musical had a jump start in acquiring the specific capacity and implicit charge of projecting a mainstream sense of “America”—of what America was, what it was not, and what it might become. And since, in many ways, questions of *what* America was and should become involve, as a fundamental question, *who* America was and should become, I begin specifically with that question in a preliminary form (chapter 5, “Whose [Who’s] America?”) and return to it after considering, in their chronological development on the musical stage, “American Mythologies” and “Counter-mythologies” (chapters 6 and 7). Thus, “Race and Ethnicity” become central preoccupations in musicals early on; almost necessarily, then, this will be the second of the larger themes we take up (chapter 8), as the first part of considering how America has worked around the difficult issue of who might not so easily belong to its much ballyhooed “melting pot” (Part III “Managing America’s Others”). The final two themes reconsider the first two within a broader context; thus, chapters 9 and 10, “Dealing with the Second World War” and “Exoticism”—the latter especially as it emerges after the war—are obviously natural extensions of chapters 5 through 8,

taking the more local issues of nationalism and ethnic identity to a larger stage.

More immediately than they explore broader issues such as these, however, musicals routinely occupy themselves with the formation of difficult romantic relationships. Whatever larger problems may be posed in a particular show, their working out will frequently involve an interpersonal conflict among or between the lead characters, so that the success or failure of their personal relationship(s) may be seen as an emblem for larger possibilities, as a marker for the resolution or continuation of conflicts between larger antagonistic forces. In this way, relationships provide a readily adaptable dramatic “surface” for musicals, with the shining possibility of marriage standing allegorically for the resolution of seemingly incompatible peoples—or families, classes, races, ideas, ideologies, or whatever—into a stabilized partnership. The trajectory of a successful if rocky courtship provides a sturdy narrative backbone, and offers standardized modes of expression along the way, for the optimistic comedies that are the mainstay of the American musical, and it does so most powerfully when the rocky courtship being related may be seen to embody or symbolize larger issues. Time and again, within a structure we might usefully term the “marriage trope,” we will find couples whose individual issues mirror or embody larger ones that turn out to be what the musical in question is “really” about.<sup>3</sup> (For now, I will put off discussing the other side of the “marriage trope” to a second volume, where I will consider how musicals deal more directly with projecting the individual identities and relationships we actually see on stage; see chapter 11, “Afterword.”)

To set the stage properly for these separate thematic surveys, I will consider, in chapters 2 and 3, important antecedents from the late nineteenth century. In considering both imported and domestic varieties, I will bring the focus more quickly to particulars than is typical in historical surveys of this kind, and indulge rather more in probing how these antecedents worked as musical shows. Thus, “Nineteenth-Century European Roots: Models and Topics” considers in some detail how and why *The Black Crook* and *Pinafore* appealed so strongly to American audiences, and how their success helped shape later developments. In chapter 3, “Early American Developments: Minstrelsy, Extravaganza, Pantomime, Burlesque, Vaudeville,” I have endeavored (without spending more time than is warranted on these more peripheral types) to explain why these antecedents, so embarrassing to the aesthetic ambitions of the American musical “proper” (especially minstrelsy), must be embraced more fully than historical accounts have tended to in the past, as something more than mere oddities but nevertheless already qualitatively different than the American musical as it was already beginning to develop. In chapter 4, “American Song through Tin Pan Alley,” I return to what will be the dominant

mode of the book, to consider how the tunes actually work, in some detail but without requiring a particularly high technical knowledge of music. Of special interest here will be the rapid maturation of the genre of song that came to dominate the musical stage in America between the two world wars.

American musicals represent a large slice of our national life and heritage and, as such, include much that we today find dated and, worse, often obnoxiously so, embodying attitudes and traditions of representation that we have grown to detest. Perhaps the most difficult dimension of this heritage as it manifests itself in musicals is the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, which has stained the history of musical theater in America with the seemingly indelible imprint of burned cork, grotesquely painted smiles, and whitely protruding eyes. Even in films and musicals that seem to embody values we might want to preserve and identify with as part of our collective past, racist attitudes appear with unsettling frequency. Especially resonant with blackface minstrelsy is the continued stereotyping behavior and appearance of African American character actors on stage and screen. Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) brings the full destructive force of this tradition to the fore by imagining a contemporary resurrection of the minstrel show and demonstrating vividly a line of representation that stretches unbroken from whites and blacks in blackface, to contemporary black sitcoms on television.<sup>4</sup>

If we ask, however, why this vestige of the minstrel tradition persisted with such tenacity in twentieth-century America, we cannot simply conclude that it was a malicious plot to defame blacks as a race, although it surely did that. Among the cultural needs it served in the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, blackface minstrelsy—with its personae as rigidly established and predictable in behavior as any from the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*—served to reassure white audiences that the social order in America was just, and that blacks on the whole did not deserve better than they had. But it answered more fundamental needs, as well. Through its carnivalesque comedy of inversion, it also gave them or their stand-ins a potentially subversive voice, through which figures of authority and established order could be ridiculed and undermined with impunity. Under the protection of a scurrilous, primitivist persona, and in the guise of humor at that persona's expense, an actor could do or say—or sing—virtually anything. If the repugnant images associated with the tradition now seem to us paramount—for images are, after all, the easiest for us to recapture—we must remember that these images were in large part a mask that was put on so that the performers could say inappropriate things, perform objectionable music, and generally misbehave, which together provided the real point of it all for audiences. The mask of blackface was thus a particularly effective enabling device, allowing au-



**Figure 1.2.** A very young Al Jolson getting into blackface. Jolson (ca. 1886–1950) appeared in blackface from 1906 on, most famously in the first commercially successful sound film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927); his 1928 *The Singing Fool* (with one blackface number) is believed to be the top grossing film in America before *Gone With the Wind* (1939). (Culver Pictures. Used by permission.)

diences to take pleasure in kinds of humor and music to which loftier sensibilities had otherwise denied them access.

The mechanism involved in blackface is one of deflection, and it is undoubtedly pernicious, as it seeks out the most vulnerable targets available, makes them ridiculous and even more vulnerable through exaggeration, and then uses them as a conduit for whatever might be seen as culturally dangerous. Perniciousness aside, however, this mechanism played a vital role in popular entertainment beyond its twisted expropriation of African-American identities, and did so by building on two of the cornerstones that would come to support the American musical, as well: the multivalent nature of theatrical and musical representation, and the liberating potentialities of theatrical exaggeration, particularly when combined with music.

The effect of adding music to a dramatic scene that might otherwise play naturalistically serves to exaggerate its content, adding a dimension of artificiality at the same time that it often also strives to tap into a deeper kind of reality, one accessible only through music. Because the addition of music seems to pull in these two opposing directions, the musical as an art form engages routinely in a kind of stratified presentation in which we, the audience, pay attention to both the emotional realities that music seems to body forth and the performance of that music by the actor-singers on stage. Indeed, we are almost forced into this mode of dual attention, since music notoriously does not unfold in “real time,” but rather imposes a kind of suspended animation so as to intensify selected emotional moments, and through this dramatic hiatus directs us all the more urgently to see behind the mask/makeup/costume of the performer—even as he or she embodies the role being played even more fully through the enactment of song. And, as our perceptions flip between these strata, additional layers may also open up to us in the expanded fermata of interpolated song: perhaps music, which is always more than a mere vehicle, will impose its own imperatives; perhaps we will become more aware of larger themes prefigured in the expanded moment, or of different authorial “voices,” ranging from historical reality and its known associations, to the writers, to the characters, to the actual performers in front of us—each of which may impose a perspective and thus come to occupy a significant stratum in the dramatic texture.

The addition of music to staged, spoken drama thus does not simply heighten emotions; rather, it also imposes, through its obvious and conventional artificiality, a kind of mask that both conceals and calls attention to the performer behind the persona. And, just as in blackface, exaggeration and a ritualized transgression against “naturalness” prove to be liberating; in musicals, however, this plays out differently, as we in the audience pretend through the convention of “suspending disbelief” not

to notice how artificially the emotional level has suddenly shifted into a higher gear—all the while relishing the performance as such, as an event unto itself.

It is this expressive double image, of a heightened sense of reality enacted through the brazenly artificial, that makes the musical an ideal arena for camp. Camp, understood broadly, always involves exaggeration and an expressive lack of proportion, either through investing enormous expressive energy in the trivial or by trivializing the most serious of subjects; this is true whether or not we view camp through the particular lens of gay subculture. To some extent, the musical becomes camp the moment it actually becomes *musical*, for the first notes that sound under the dialogue are like a knowing wink to the audience, a set of arched eyebrows that serves as quotation marks around whatever is ostensibly being expressed, whether musically or dramatically. The element of camp in a musical thus shifts sudden attention to the performed nature of the drama, and in particular to the actual performer, thereby providing a more direct channel of communication between the performer and whoever in the audience may note and relish the artificiality. But if camp thus calls into question the specific content of what is being performed through this use of expressive quotation marks, it is also capable of standing back to reveal that those quotation marks themselves are set off in quotation marks, allowing us to reconnect with the content, but at a much higher emotional pitch than could have been achieved otherwise. In this way, camp can revert to a more normally accepted mode of performance, in which it serves primarily as a vehicle, a realization and embodiment of specific aesthetic content. And, again as in blackface, the manipulation of the mask gives us in the audience access and permission: access to a heightened emotionality and permission either to feel the moment more deeply or to laugh at it—or, somehow, to do both at once, in which case we are also laughing at and with ourselves and, perhaps, more fully embracing our humanity.

Within the traditions and conventions of the American musical, the potentialities of camp are often invisible to large segments of the audience, who have no difficulty accepting, as background, the convention of actors bursting into song at a moment's notice and, indeed, will wait with some degree of impatience if this does not happen fairly regularly. Moreover, so as to encourage this acceptance, the writers, director, and actors often go to great and imaginative lengths to make the transition to singing seem as natural as possible, to weld inevitable exaggeration to its dramatic moment as securely as they can—and thus, seemingly, to move as far away from camp as possible. Yet the mechanisms of camp are always present. No one thinks for a moment that singing happens, fundamentally, for any reason other than that, in musicals, people sing as well as talk; the re-

sulting artificiality may be generic, but that does not make it natural. And, however more “natural” the result would be, few who attend musicals would prefer *not* to have song when it is called for, even if sometimes a good effect can be achieved through delaying (but never altogether withholding) the inevitable song. In a curious way, audiences not only relish the heightened dramatic effect that song can create, but also seem to need the comforting artificiality that comes with it. Through precisely the same mechanisms that operate in camp, the inherent exaggeration of interpolated song allows audiences to experience more deeply the dramatic situation and characters on stage because music, singing, and often dancing decisively remove that situation from anything even remotely like the real world; artificiality thus provides essential protection from the dangerous, potentially destructive effect of emotions felt too deeply.

What separates this transaction from camp has mainly to do with our degree of awareness of the processes whereby we are taken to these levels of involvement, with how aware we are of the manufactured nature of musically driven emotion. This is why, within a single audience, there may often be wide discrepancies in reception, so that a particular musical number might be taken by some as high camp and by others as highly pitched but authentic emotion. More to the point, perhaps, this is why, at certain musical moments, audiences may routinely cry but seldom the performers on stage, who may even have to suppress laughter as they provide the exaggerated representation of feeling their audience needs. And it is surely a mistake to see something wrong in this discrepancy, taken in itself—even if depriving an audience, without prior warning, of their feeling of “authenticity” at such a moment, by laughing or otherwise allowing the element of camp to emerge too overtly, may be reckoned one of only a handful of truly unforgivable theatrical crimes.

While focusing on particular themes, then, we will consider most centrally how the element of exaggeration, specifically musical exaggeration, is brought to bear on those themes. The advent of recording has, of course, served to highlight even more the contribution of music to the American musical, for this is what has been preserved most diligently and directly (although, of course, there are important differences between what one hears in a studio-produced “original cast” recording and what one would have heard in the performance it purports to document). Focusing on the music may thus seem to bend, perhaps too easily, to the imperatives of familiarity and convenience: we know the songs best, and so will spend the most time on them. Yet this kind of focus is as necessary as it is convenient. Specifically *because* the songs have been effectively sprung from their original contexts, through being presented separately from the drama and quite often through their reuse in much different contexts, it is necessary here to reintegrate them, to show how they work both as

songs and within the shows they belong to. Secondly, it is also important either to begin with or to arrive at what is most familiar in a decisively central way, in order to chart a path toward a deeper, more grounded understanding of what is already (partially) known. And, of course, it is above all else its treatment of music that defines the American musical; thus, if this book is to serve as a textbook, it will most likely be for a course given in music history. And, finally, showing how and why the music and songs do what they do in musicals, and showing this in a way accessible and valuable to both the nontechnically grounded and the trained musician alike, is what I can most usefully contribute to the larger project of understanding this important American genre.

But what, precisely, *is* the American musical? At the beginning of this chapter I compared the American musical to jazz and American film, art forms with a similar trajectory and intertwined histories. It should be acknowledged, though, that these art forms are also profoundly different from each other, first of all because they refer, respectively, to a genre, a style, and a medium. These categories have significant overlap, since style and medium are important aspects of genre, and, more specifically, since much about the history of jazz and American film suggests that they quite often behave like genres as well. Yet they are scarcely equivalent. In particular, defining a genre, even as opposed to a medium or style, is a notoriously difficult task, and usually involves a complex dance around those aspects that the definer is most interested in; not surprisingly, most attempts to define genres tell us more about the concerns of the definer than about the genre itself.

I am here most interested in the tradition of theatrical presentation that evolves by the third decade of the twentieth century into the semblance of an original, integrated art work intended for a specifically American audience, involving both naturalistic spoken drama and some combination of singing and dancing. Various other staged musical entertainments seem largely irrelevant to this line of development, although they exist side by side: revues, vaudeville, burlesque, and European opera and light opera traditions. While the themes I have chosen dictate that I focus on certain, specifically American, lines of development within more narrative-based traditions, taking too purist a position on what we will consider as a “genuine” American musical may also lead us to be too exclusionary. A more general consideration of the genre would have to give at least token representation, for example, to the several shows that originated outside the United States that have subsequently succeeded alongside indigenous shows. And a more general history of the genre would have to consider—and, I believe, reject—the line now often heard, that the genre has run its course, and that what is now fully entrenched on Broadway is fundamentally different from (and, of course, inferior to) the tradition we are

studying, having become too much the product of corporate America. Nevertheless, now that foreign shows have begun to make significant inroads and now that, indeed, large corporations have secured a commanding presence on Broadway, it is clearly a historical moment for taking stock, of considering the trajectory and possible paths, of continuation for the genre. While I am not directly addressing the very last of these—I do not pretend to be a prophet—I am hoping to bring into sharper focus what is at stake in the history of the American musical: what has been, still is, and might become valuable within this genre and its development, and to whom and for what ends.

But there are good reasons for concern about developments in the last decade or so; both importation and recent fairly successful attempts to move from film to stage do erode the immediacy of the musical for American audiences. The stakes have, in a sense, been raised—in part literally, as it has become increasingly expensive to attend a show, and since “hot” tickets are so hard to come by—so that audiences now feel entitled to *both* the excitement of a live performance and the dependable sameness of a finished film. But raising stakes in this manner is problematic, as it does not adequately account for the fact that these two demands are basically opposed to each other. The immediacy of live performance—an essential component of staged musicals and jazz, but not of film and other recorded media—is not truly compatible with the level of dependability more easily attained in film and recordings and now demanded as well by live audiences.

On the other hand, since musicals have never before been shy about trying to achieve great effects from mechanical spectacle—a legacy, perhaps, of the countless “transformation” effects popular in the nineteenth century—they form a natural partnership with the film industry.<sup>5</sup> Despite a strong, healthy tradition of amateur performances of American musicals—ranging from more modest road productions of elaborate Broadway stagings, to community theater, to college and high school productions—there has always been, as well, the sense that the “real thing” takes place with real stars, flawless stage machinery, elaborate sets and costumes, professional musicians and dancers—and, of course, on Broadway. Why, then, should mechanical spectacle not be pursued aggressively, especially since the results can so obviously serve a fundamental task of the musical stage, which is to create illusion, or more precisely, to give a sense of overwhelming reality to what is clearly not real?

A similar tension, between the immediate and transitory on the one hand and the more permanent and standardized on the other, is endemic to this study—as, indeed, it is to some extent endemic to the historical study of any performing art with a written tradition. There are many and various traces that individual American musicals leave us, most of which

will be useful here; these typically include a preserved paper record of the “work” in the form of the written music and book, and various preserved visual and audio traces of particular performances of the full work or some of its components, ranging from films and videos of whole shows or adaptations, to “original cast” or “soundtrack” recordings, to still photographs, to similar traces of later performances and revivals, to anecdotal accounts of the show in preparation or performance, to arrangements and recordings made separately of songs from a show. (Quite often, as well, these shows or their revivals have been experienced live by the author.) No one component in this mix is necessarily privileged over the others, for no musical truly lives except within the context of necessarily nondefinitive performance, and no performance is possible without the stability of a book and score as a starting point. For us, most centrally, we thus have the “definitive” artifacts of score and show-based audio and video recording, each authoritative in some way, but representing either side of the work-performance divide. Even here, our experience of the show through its recorded artifacts, however immediately felt, is heavily mediated by the mechanical aspects of camera and microphone placement, by the montage/mixing of the results, and more fundamentally by the sensibilities of those who are more-or-less self-consciously “documenting” the work or trying to compensate for media-based shortcomings by adding explanatory words and sound effects (in sound recording) or by cutting to focus on significant detail or to introduce perspectives not available to a live audience (in film or videotape). More fundamentally, these artifacts *do not change* (except to deteriorate); the more we hear or see them, the less they are *a performance* and the more they become *the work* with which we are concerned.

We must, of course, depend heavily on those things we can study—book, score, films, recordings, etc.<sup>6</sup>—not only to avoid relying too heavily on sometimes faulty memory (if indeed, there are direct memories that are relevant), but also to communicate points effectively. These are the most immediately available materials for classroom presentation, and in teaching it is natural to rely heavily on playing out parts of the score, screening films and videos, and playing audio recordings. (Occasionally, more elaborate enactments might be available, but not reliably.) For this study, I am also effectively limited, in discussions of individual musicals, to referring to the written record and to readily available documented performances. And, since I wish not to exclude those who might not read music, I must be fairly circumspect in my references even to the score, and will most often give descriptive accounts that may be verified through listening, while occasionally providing a clarifying excerpt from the score for those readers who do read music. But it will sometimes be pressingly important to bring into play the relative status of my examples to preserve

at least a sense of the fluidity of a genre whose decisive “artifacts,” which determine to a large extent the success of a particular show, are no true artifacts at all, but rather the constantly evolving staged performances of the first Broadway run—which, while depending on a score and book as starting points, and while sometimes leaving important recorded traces in its early phases, is an entirely different thing from either. Our dependence on the concrete as a basis for discussing something much more fluid and ephemeral must be acknowledged up front and reaffirmed constantly as we go along; principally, this will involve as full a citation as possible of the basis in scores and recorded performances for the points we make, which will also, I hope, facilitate and encourage as frequent recourse as is practical to those scores and recorded performances.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it is important to underscore one of the basic strategies in my presentation, which is to provide a rather fuller slate of musicals as exemplars of our themes than might be practical to teach in a single course, particularly if that course deals with more than the four themes included here. In this, I am mindful of many contexts and needs, as well as a pitfall or two. For the instructor, I wish to include a fair range of choice regarding which musicals to focus on, and to leave some room for further elaboration; I expect that only some of the musicals I have selected will actually be studied in any given course, and hope that I have included most of those that a given instructor might find essential to a course on specifically Americanist themes in the American musical. For the student, I wish both to provide some discussion of musicals that she or he might wish to study beyond what a particular course can usefully include, and to indicate how the various themes being studied are worked out in musicals other than those taught in that course. For the independent reader, I wish simply to provide as full and wide-ranging an account as is practical in this format. And, to all, I apologize for leaving out many a favorite musical or song, and for focusing more obsessively on what I consider central issues at the expense of what might well be the life-blood of the tradition for particular readers and approaches, such as the intriguing lives and individual achievements of its many colorful practitioners. But regarding the latter, I may say with some assurance that those readers who care deeply about those aspects do not probably need me to tell them more (but, in case they do, I have provided an extensive bibliography); moreover, it is these readers who may potentially benefit most from this attempt to provide a richer context for what they already know.