

Chutzpah or Cheesy: A Look into Antisemitism and Musical Theater

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Abstract

Musical theater is known for its excess. The artform is a multifaceted work consisting of drama, song, choreography, and set design which can be considered an American staple that stems from the early twentieth century. Musical theater was developed and became widely popular in New York City, a metropolitan hub of immigrants during that time. Eastern European Jews were among this group, and in their efforts to assimilate into American culture, they began to contribute artistically, imparting their values and ideas into this musical art form. Many people today see and hear musical theater as “cheesy,” a characteristic that can be defined as overly dramatic or excessive. Given the history of musical theater and its connection to Eastern European Jewish immigrants’ attempt at cultural assimilation, this essay examines the link between cheesiness and musical theater through the lens of antisemitism in America.

1. Essay

Musical Theater is a genre met with great ambivalence. Many individuals feel there is quite a bit of shame in disclosing their proclivity for the art form for fear of being looked at as “lame” or lesser than. Twitter reveals, upon searching “musical theater” and “lame,” thousands of tweets that flood the timeline expressing embarrassment, qualifying their taste as “lame” or “nerdy.” Within the same search, there were also individuals bashing musical theater, calling it “cheesy,” and “annoying.” These contrasting ideologies existing within the same timeline show that there is deep resentment regarding musical theater in the mainstream social sphere, and that it is not generally welcome in certain spaces. Why do people who either love or hate the genre share the same emotions? Musical theater lovers joke that it is indeed cheesy. But why does cheesy have a negative connotation? Jason Lee Oakes defines cheesy as “music that is overwrought, overdetermined, overemotive, overproduced, overplayed, or generally over the top.”¹ What about musical theater is specifically cheesy, and how did people evolve to perceive it that way? This paper will examine the phenomenon of cheesiness in musical theater; furthermore, given the genre’s beginnings in New York City among Eastern European Jewish immigrants, will investigate the potential connections between the present-day negative perceptions of musical theater and the perceptions and prejudices that Eastern European Jewish immigrants, or Ashkenazi Jews, faced at the start of the early twentieth century, some of which persist in the present day.

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Ashkenazi Jews were forced out of their homes nested in Russia and Poland and chose to come to America in search of economic freedom and prosperity. Antisemitism was on the rise and Europe was leaning towards exiling Jews.² Decades earlier, having capitalized on this growing movement, composer Richard Wagner published his text *Judaism in Music* (1869), antagonizing the Jewish people of Europe. Historian James Loeffler speculates that the motive behind this text was that Wagner felt creatively threatened by his Jewish colleagues, such as Felix Mendelssohn, Heinrich Heine, and Giacomo Meyerbeer. Wagner unleashed a bigoted charge at Jewish people in Europe, claiming that Jews have no authentic culture of their own, and that Jews constitute a transnational category of cultural parasites, merely imitating the various cultures in whose lands they reside. These claims were wildly inappropriate, highly contagious, and immensely dangerous for European Jews. While we can acknowledge that Wagner was merely a symptom of a larger systemic problem, he

codified these notions of antisemitism; thus, dispatching his disciples. Loeffler argues that this ruthless text sowed the seeds for “persistent, dramatic impact of Wagner’s antisemitic myth on the self-conscious development of modern Jewish aesthetics by Jewish artists and intellectuals themselves.” *Judaism in Music* became the blueprint for more modern versions of antisemitism, further invalidating Jews’ existence in artistic spaces.³

Following the release of *Judaism in Music*, and in response to the anti-Jewish pogroms, roughly 2.8 million Ashkenazi Jews fled Eastern Europe to start a new life in the United States, with a large population immigrating to New York City. Jewish immigrants made their home in the Bowery area of the Lower East Side, and an Ashkenazi presence began to grow, rising to a “golden age” seen around Grant Street, East Broadway, and Second Avenue to 14th street. As Jewish neighborhoods were expanding, the desire for a creative secular identity started to emerge. Many Jewish people were left reeling by the Wagnerian rift that strategically targeted Jewish art, yet Ashkenazi Jews were still inspired to create works that identified with their new homeland while drawing upon ancient traditions. Yiddish theater was born. Musicologist Irene Heskes claims, “Based on historic traditions reshaped by dynamic cultural influences in the United States, the music and particularly the popular songs of American Yiddish theater properly belong to the dual continuities of Judaic inspiration and American expression.” Heskes elaborates that Ashkenazi Jews were able to infuse age-old liturgical aspects of Jewish music with more modern secular forms. She concludes, “this art form not only served its special Jewish patronage but was also the portal by which Jewish music entered into mainstream.”²

Abraham Goldfaden is known as the Father of Yiddish theater. A Romanian immigrant who studied as a rabbi in Ukraine, Goldfaden penned operettas that merged Jewish family values with European-style staged performance. Examples of Goldfaden’s works included “Faryomert, Farklogt” (Driven and Blamed) from operetta *Dr. Almosada*, which became the “wandering Jew” anthem that immigrants would sing on the ships that took them to America, and “Rozhinkes mit Mandlen” (Raisins and Almonds) from the operetta *Shulamith*, a story of love in the Second Temple Era. “Rozhinkes mit Mandlen” became a lullaby that many Ashkenazi Jews would sing to their children, maintaining the culture while finding their way a new world.² The translated final verse of this tune is:

And when you become rich, Yidele,
Remind yourself of this lullaby.
Raisins and almonds.
This will be your calling.
You’ll be a merchant of all wares,
But for now, sleep, Yidele, sleep

Goldfaden’s work embodied the American values of longing for a better life and knowing that it was possible, and he believed that his works should educate as well as entertain. These songs were so widespread that they became canonized into folklore. Because of its universal wholesome values, not only did Yiddish theater serve as a way for newer immigrants to connect to Ashkenazi Jews who were living in New York a few decades prior, but it also attracted immigrants of both German and Irish descent, bringing together groups of people like never before. Additionally, Jews flocked to Yiddish theater as an attempt to maintain the community of synagogue, because immigrants faced such taxing working conditions, Jews often were forced to work on the Sabbath and important holidays, and would miss time they would have otherwise spent worshiping at temple.²

As generations passed, around the 1910-1920s, a new wave of Jewish composers became prosperous in New York City. Jewish neighborhoods grew and began to expand their footprints, moving into West 28th Street and Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Music publishing laws became less flexible as the demand for publishing popular tunes grew, and to combat these restrictions composers, lyricists, songwriters, and publishers started collaborating to benefit themselves financially. The neighborhood housing this industry became known as Tin Pan Alley. Vaudeville performers would frequent Tin Pan Alley to purchase composed songs for their performances, and these establishments would have an on-site composer ready to play samples of music that would be purchased. Some of these composers included Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, who created works that would impact American musical culture significantly. Through their distinct composing techniques and celebration of a prosperous America, these composers may have been descended from immigrants, but for the first time, represented Jews as Americans.⁴

Because Tin Pan Alley was flourishing, these composers would take commissions that represented non-Jewish culture, leading to songs like Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas,” and Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*. While Berlin and Gershwin had a significant impact on the trajectory of American music, it is important to acknowledge that these composers also borrowed heavily from Black American musical traditions. Themes of jazz and ragtime made it into these works, and very frequently musicians of color would not be compensated for their contributions.⁴ Theater scholar Warren Hoffman argues that Broadway evolved from Tin Pan Alley to be exclusionary of other cultures by the way

these shows tell their stories. By historically ignoring many of the struggles that Black Americans face, Broadway developed as a form of appropriation and erasure of a large part of American culture. While the descendants of Jewish immigrants cannot be held solely responsible for this phenomenon, it must be acknowledged that, given white supremacist capitalist demands, Broadway became exclusionary of non-white cultures. This often flies under the radar because musicals present themselves as harmless feel-good ventures that depict the American Dream, but Hoffman argues, “that’s precisely one of the grossest misreadings of musicals, that because they seem so frivolous, they can only be about race, gender, class, or other issues of social importance when they explicitly tell us that they are. In fact, many musicals reveal a great deal about such topics, even when they do not appear to, and that is what makes the American musical such a deceptively potent form. It sings, dances, and performs its politics in plain sight, but we the audience are so mesmerized by the spectacle that a show’s social context and ideologies may become difficult to see.”⁵

Examining Hoffman’s argument, perhaps this is a reason that Broadway musicals are depicted today as cheesy. The appropriation of Black culture in American art is not a new phenomenon, and it can be glaringly cringe worthy in some instances. Jason Lee Oakes claims that “cheesy has become the most common term to describe music that is excessively white.”¹ Indeed, by neglecting the stories of Black and indigenous Americans, and instead operating in white-centered narratives, Broadway alienates a significant American population. As important as Yiddish theater and Tin Pan Alley are to a Jewish American identity, we also must acknowledge that they participated in minstrelsy. Contrastingly, it is also important to note that a composer like Gershwin, while borrowing from African American musical styles, advocated for *Porgy and Bess* to be played by an all-Black cast.⁶ Jewish Americans entered the operation in a racist sphere, assimilated into whiteness through appropriation of Black music within that racist sphere, and while it was certainly not calculated, there is merit to saying that the immigrant population was doing what it could to thrive. Additionally, while scholars can easily critique this appropriation a century later, these aspects were simply not considered at the time.

Jewish Americans have faced struggle in carving out their own identity in a new country. Most modern-day Ashkenazi Jewish Americans benefit from white privilege, yet this does not erase the antisemitic behaviors that have been waged toward Jews. Modern antisemitism, codified in the musical world by Wagner, is remarkably pervasive, ranging from covert or subversive antisemitism (more common), such as microaggressions and generalizations, to all out anti-Jewry by threatening Jewish safe spaces (less common). Because Broadway is a staple of Americana brought to the United States by Jews, it is necessary to peer into these microaggressions and align them with the generalizations of why Broadway is perceived as cheesy. According to Lewis Z. Schlosser, some examples of microaggressions towards Jews are telling a Jewish person they are pushy, stereotyping Jewish women as “motherly” or as a “Jewish American Princess,” and the perception of Jewish men as weak and effeminate.⁷ American Jews are frequently reminded that such qualities are not welcomed in White spaces. These microinvalidations pertain specifically to externalizing emotion, and they align themselves with Wagner’s antisemitic document *Judaism in Music* as well as Oakes’ definition of cheesy: “overwrought, overdetermined, and overemotional.”¹ Many ascriptions to Broadway’s cheesiness pertain to excessive portrayal of emotion, and it is not lost that this aspect of the artform can be traced back to its origins.

Excessive emotion is most frequently displayed through verbal communications, whether through speech or song. Evolutionary psychologist Elizabeth Tolbert claims, “performative ritual displays such as music, co-evolved with language, serving to guarantee the truth of arbitrary signs through their illocutionary force.”⁸ Based on Tolbert’s statement, performative emotion has been part of the human species since the dawn of time. It is only in more recent times that oppressors pathologized performative emotion in efforts to silence minority populations, and this phenomenon is most certainly used on American Jews, Black and Indigenous Americans, and non-male populations as well. People perceive excessive emotion as cheesy because they have strictly been conditioned to think so to maintain the masculine, white oppressive hierarchy. Broadway, what began as an immigrant population’s attempt at making peace with a new world, has been simultaneously exploited and demonized by the masculine capitalist elite. This is what perpetuates the dissonant, guilty-pleasure phenomenon that causes Broadway lovers to feel “lame” or “nerdy” for connecting with Broadway’s portrayal of emotion.

Simon Frith provides insight when coping with this phenomenon: “not that music somehow expresses the shape of the feelings, but, rather than in describing musical experiences we are obliged to apply adjectives, and that we therefore attach feeling to words conventionally and arbitrarily to what is, in fact, purely an aural experience.”⁹ Frith is saying if music is purely an aural experience, then an attribution of cheesiness is merely social commentary. Music is a necessary means of which we can communicate nonverbally with each other and by ascribing heady, nonsensical adjectives to sonorities break down the connection that the artists are trying to make. By Frith’s standards if someone was responding to a performance as “cheesy,” or over the top, that individual was not able to make a meaningful connection with the performance, which is perfectly reasonable. By normalizing performative excessive emotion, individuals absolve themselves from the ambivalent shame of hating something or loving something, and instead

recognize that performance is part of the human experience. Guilty pleasures then become simple pleasures; thus, disassemble the judgmental intangible scaffolding that encompasses musical taste.

Music has evolved to surpass the limitations of verbal expression, indoctrinating people into an era where attributing characteristics to sonorities may indeed be limiting. In understanding the social constructs that envelop musical theater, it may be possible to remove the stigma of “cheesy” and simply allow individuals the joy of an all-encompassing story accompanied by rich sonorities that feel healing to the physical body. Perhaps the question is not “why is Broadway cheesy?” but rather, “why are people socially denied their distinctly human liberty to experience and express emotion to the fullest extent?”

2. Acknowledgements

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