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Embodied Nostalgia: Early Twentieth Century Social Dance and U.S. Musical Theatre

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EMBODIED NOSTALGIA:
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY SOCIAL DANCE AND U.S. MUSICAL THEATRE

by

PHOEBE RUMSEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre and Performance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

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Early Twentieth Century Social Dance and U.S. Musical Theatre

By
Phoebe Rumsey

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Theatre and Performance
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

EMBODIED NOSTALGIA:
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY SOCIAL DANCE AND U.S. MUSICAL THEATRE

by

PHOEBE RUMSEY

Advisor: David Savran

In this dissertation, I claim the collective emotional connections and historical explorations characteristic of musical theatre constitute a nostalgic impulse dramaturgically inherent in the form. In my intervention in the link between nostalgia and musical theatre, I look to an area underrepresented in musical theatre scholarship: social dance. Through case studies that focus specifically on how social dance in musical theatre brings forth the dancer on stage as a site of embodied history, cultural memory, and nostalgia, I ask what social dance is doing in musical theatre and how the dancing body functions as a catalyst for nostalgic thinking for the audience. I argue that U.S. social dance styles of the first half of the twentieth century, when performed in musicals produced after that time, create a spectrum of nostalgic impulses and embodied meanings. By comparing the historical context of the musical and the time of its original production, I provide a framework for how “embodied nostalgia”—the physicalization of community memories, longings, and historical meaning—within social dance in musical theatre elucidates racial, cultural, and political consciousness.

I group social dances that occurred between 1910-1945 into three chapters: early ragtime dances, Charleston styles, and swing dances. I examine the changes in the social dance in the move to the stage and analyze what gets lost (or gained) by the theatricalization. As all the social dances in this project are from the African American milieu, I keep the African American legacy of social dance and jazz music at the center of the conversation.
In chapter one, I investigate ragtime dances that provide the roots of influence for the social dances. I examine how the Slow Drag in *The Color Purple* characterizes how African Americans attempted to keep some physicality of their home and culture. I then problematize the intersection between the different worlds of race and ethnicities in *Ragtime* and trace how a rupture of the collective parts of the Cakewalk allows for a consideration of the social dance’s history. In *Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed* I analyze how the embodied nostalgia in the dance styles is used to stake a claim for continued diversity and representation in musical theatre. In chapter two, I explore the transition into the social dances of the 1920s and how the dramatic structure of the musical offers differing perspectives on the era. I trace how the choreography in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* embodies the new rhythms of the 1920s and then investigate how nostalgia for the indulgences of the 1920s in *The Wild Party* is dismantled and exposes, through movement and music, the cultural theft at work then and now. I turn to *The Drowsy Chaperone* to investigate the dramaturgical and choreographic strategies that use parody and a cultivation of nostalgia to trouble one’s relationship to musical theatre. Finally, in chapter three, I trace how swing dances in *Wonderful Town, Steel Pier,* and *Allegiance* are used to signal historical idioms, economic survival, cultural identity, and vitalize communities that had been suppressed, deprived, or constricted.

I recover, interpret, and champion the study of dancing bodies and social dance choreography in musical theatre as a way to comprehend the essential impact the body has on nostalgic thinking and what that recognition means in the grand scheme of understanding popular performance as a gauge of cultural and social politics. By approaching musical theatre through this lens of social dance and its embodied nostalgia I develop a method to describing, discussing, and critically evaluating dance in musicals.
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INTRODUCTION

It’s 1945. The boys are back home. But the fight for a new America is just beginning. Teaming up with a beautiful young war widow as their singer, and playing for every voiceless underdog in a world that has left them behind, they will risk everything to redefine the meaning of victory and sing truth to power . . . Bandstand is a truly American celebration of the men and women whose personal bravery defined a nation.

—Bandstand, 2017

The satin chrome plates of the iconic Shure 55 microphone glint in the stage lights and the clear voice of Laura Osnes rings out to the rafters. Dancers kick, swing, and rebound up and over the shoulders of their suspender and fedora clad partners. The promise of Bandstand—passionate music, nation building, and courageous actions from spirited characters—illustrates musical theatre’s ongoing and deep-seated relationship with history, memory, and ideologies of American exceptionalism. Promotional video trailers for the 2017 Broadway musical by Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor lure audiences with a smoky dance club filled with hot tunes and dancing bodies set in motion by Tony award-winning choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler—momentary time-travel to post World War II America is assured.

In the listings for new musicals over the past several Broadway seasons, from Anastasia to Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812, Come From Away to A Bronx Tale The Musical, and Beautiful: The Carol King Musical to Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations, enthusiasm for revisiting the past through the musical theatre form abounds.¹ Eleven-time Tony winner Hamilton may have elevated affection for the historical, but musicals,

by their notable desire to define the United States, have frequently looked to the past, both recent and distant, for answers.²

Musicals commonly use a combination of theatrical conventions and techniques to make historical sojourns possible. Structurally, musicals often employ elements of scenic and costume design to create narratives set in the past. Innovative production teams may have a narrator guide the audience back in time (Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat), rewind time as a point of the narrative (Merrily We Roll Along), or even create memories of an earlier history within a show by using the repetition of music and lyrics (“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” in Showboat).³ Beyond structural tactics however, the heart of these backwards glances are the shared memories and emotions that musicals tap into. The descriptive language of the Bandstand pitch unabashedly invokes a sentimental mélange of U.S. mythologies, national narratives and idioms that were part of the social, cultural, and political consciousness of 1945.

In this dissertation, I claim that the collective emotional connections and historical explorations characteristic of musical theatre constitute a nostalgic impulse dramaturgically inherent in the form. In my intervention exploring the link between nostalgia and musical theatre, I look to an area underrepresented in musical theatre scholarship and in urgent need of attention

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³ There are a multitude of musicals to choose from, however, these three are perhaps the clearest examples of the conventions I describe.
—social dance. Through a collection of case studies that focuses specifically on how social dance in musical theatre brings forth the dancer on stage as a site of embodied history, cultural memory, and nostalgia, I ask what social dance is doing in musical theatre and how the dancing body functions as a catalyst for nostalgic thinking and feeling for the audience. I argue that American social dance styles of the first half of the twentieth century, when performed in musicals written after that time, create a spectrum of nostalgic impulses and embodied meanings that fluctuate as a consequence of the variance and relation between the historical setting of the musical and the time of its original production on Broadway. By comparing the two time frames, I provide a framework for how the “embodied nostalgia”—broadly interpreted as the physicalization of community memories, longings, and historical meaning—within social dance in musical theatre elucidates racial, cultural, and political consciousness. Given that the foundation of jazz music and dance sits squarely within African American traditions, I construct a mode of analysis that keeps the African American legacy and lineage of social dance and jazz music in the U.S. at the center of the conversation. This purposeful and essential intention helps contextualize the embodied meanings of social dance within cultural and political realms. The investigation of nostalgia through social dance in musical theatre is necessary because it augments the recent move in scholarship to consider musical theatre as a performance style

4 The following musical theatre scholars do mention dance in musical theatre and some, such as Stacy Wolf and Andrea Most, achieve deeper analysis, though it is secondary to their overall projects; Liza Gennaro and Zach Dorsey both provide valuable chapters on dance in Musical Theatre, though the short essays do not represent an extensive body of research (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) eds. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris and Stacy Wolf; Liza Gennaro and Stacy Wolf contributed a valuable chapter titled “Dance in Musical Theatre” in The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre ed. Nadine George-Graves, 148-169 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015). Nadine George-Graves is a prominent dance scholar who discusses dance in musical theatre amongst her other areas of interest in dance studies, though musical theatre is not her primary intervention. While there is a small and vital body of work on social dance, as will be shown, there is no substantial scholarship that investigates social dance and musical theatre.
uniquely American and popular and, as David Savran has maintained, an essential “barometer of cultural and social politics.”

**Definitions and Scope**

This dissertation is focused on musicals set in the United States between 1910-1945 and produced after that period; this time frame is integral to my interrogation of nostalgia and social dance in musical theatre for several reasons. Firstly, the American musical itself takes its shape in the earlier part of this era and the time frame is a popular era in which to situate musical theatre narratives. Secondly, as social dance becomes the main leisure activity for the younger generation and working class, and thus a central factor to the development of popular music in the U.S. the consideration of the embodiment of cultural values and social attitudes is made all the more available. As an ordering construct, I group the social dances that occurred between 1910-1945 into three main categories to be explored in three chapters: early ragtime dances, Charleston styles, and swing dances.

I examine a collection of musicals with the following qualifications: they must be set in the era and location I have outlined, have a narrative that includes social dance, and be written and produced in a time after the designated era. In order to explore formations of personal and national identity, I have restricted the study to book musicals set in the United States. By following popular music’s trajectory from ragtime, to early jazz, to swing, up to the beginnings of rock ’n’ roll, it is possible to trace how social dances transform from one era to another and

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6 The popularity of setting musicals in this time frame continues today as seen in many musicals or revues that embrace Jazz Age sensibilities as part of their narrative or at the very least as part of the score. For example, Lin Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton, while often billed as a “hip hop musical” still embraces some of the musical sensibilities of the jazz era.
how cultural assumptions and registers of nostalgia shift along with them.\(^7\) Due to the substantial modifications in social dance methods that happen towards the end of the 1940s, particularly the move away from partnering towards more individual styles, the study is limited to musicals set pre-1945. Moreover, musical revues such as Swing! (1999), Smokey Joe’s Café (1994), or After Midnight (2013) incorporate social dance, but in a revue-like manner without a strong narrative and so fall outside the purview of my investigation.\(^8\)

I investigate shows that are written after the era in which they take place in order to explore how nostalgia becomes embedded in the show and, crucially, embodied by the performers. If I were to look at musicals written in and of their current time, such as West Side Story, the temporal distance needed to examine the threads of nostalgia and evaluate their meaning would be lacking. Nor do such musicals allow exploration of how social dance can be, according to Danielle Robinson, “not just a time machine…but a permeable border between the past and the present.”\(^9\) Finally, I focus on the original musical rather than revivals of the work because analyzing the work of multiple choreographers on specific social dances in one musical would overpower the historical, social and political analysis of social dance I wish to take on.\(^10\) By focusing on a diversity of narratives as opposed to reiterations of the same, I articulate varied ways the embodied nostalgia in social dance creates constructs of the United States that provide meaning in a manner not previously conceptualized in musical theatre or dance scholarship. I

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\(^7\) I build on the scholarship of Julie Malnig who has attempted to connect popular dance with American cultural identity by tracing how social dance trends “give physical and symbolic shape to social, cultural, and political issues in selected historical era.” “Popular Dance and American Cultural Identity,” course description, New York University, accessed April 1, 2017, http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/courses/2017/FA/idsem-ug1675_001.html.

\(^8\) I recognize that some revues may have a similar treatment of social dance, however in order to clearly interrogate embodied nostalgia I investigate musicals that follow a strong narrative throughline.

\(^9\) Danielle Robinson, Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras (New York: Oxford University Press), 47.

\(^10\) I make an exception to this rule with The Color Purple in chapter one and briefly touch on the 2003 revival of Wonderful Town in chapter three.
look specifically at moments of choreography that happen diegetically in the narrative because of the visibility and impact of the dance in its community setting.

**Social Dance**

Social dance is most clearly defined by Julie Malnig in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*. She describes social dance as a communal movement form “rooted in the materiality of everyday life.” According to Malnig, social dances do not generally involve a classical training regime or private instruction but are “essentially vernacular in the sense that they spring from the lifeblood of communities and subcultures and are generally learned informally through cultural and social networks.” Social dance forms are constantly evolving and build on previous iterations, giving the dance genre a strong sense of hybridity and forward motion. This elasticity and constant flux is in opposition to folk dance, in which preservation of culture and historical tradition is commonly the primary aim. I choose to look at social dance in musicals over folk dance because of the cross-pollination of cultures that intersect through social dance’s ongoing development and progression. It is often difficult to clearly designate moments of transition from one popular dance to another; however, it is in these interstices where cultural assumptions shift and new dance styles begin to take shape. An interrogation of these transitions in social dance uncovers what Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* calls, “the fantasies of the age,” which she argues coincide with and activate nostalgic tendencies. To understand the significance of choreographers and directors possessing a social dance as part of the narrative and essence of the musicals in question, I

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interrogate how the ownership of the dance gets fractured in the move from dance club to stage. I examine the changes in the social dance when brought to the musical theatre stage and expose the dance’s embodied nostalgia, particularly in regards to the African American ownership of the social dances in question.

**Theories of Nostalgia and Embodiment**

In this dissertation, I demonstrate the unique capacity that nostalgia has to teach us about the “human predicament in the modern world”; about how we use our bodies to emotionally relate to each other, to embody our concept of home or homeland within the greater space of the world, and the significance of our physical presence as part of a community or nation.\(^\text{14}\) The term “embodied nostalgia” can be interpreted as an amalgamation of these factors as manifested in the body, whether through postures, movement, or dance. I draw on the scholarship of Svetlana Boym throughout this project as she critically examines how nostalgia can be used as a way of understanding modernity. Likewise, I find there to be an innate connection between how Boym engages with nostalgia and the ancillary project of musical theatre. Boym states: “nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.”\(^\text{15}\) The attempt to understand one’s place within the

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\(^{14}\) Boym, 351. Historically, the term nostalgia was coined by Swiss doctor Johannes Sofer in 1688. The word is from the Greek *nostos* (return to home) and *algia* (pain, or longing). At the time it was thought that nostalgia was caused by homesickness and could be cured by a return home. Boym, xiii, 3.

\(^{15}\) Boym, xvi.
complexities of the collective has often been a task of musical theatre. In order to investigate what social dance is doing in musical theatre, I overlay two frameworks of nostalgia—restorative and reflective—as set forth by Boym.

Restorative nostalgia “signifies a return to the original stasis,” and in this return, “the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot.” This idealized portrait of the past does not “reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its ‘original image’ and remain eternally young.” This designation, as seen in the publicity for Bandstand, concerns a polished vision of the past and often participates in the many mythologies that circulate in nation building. In contrast, by excavating below the shiny “restorative” veneer of many historically driven musicals to critically examine the choreographic and dramaturgical nuances that use the past to comment on the present, a “reflective” nostalgia can be realized.

Reflective nostalgia suggests a meditation on and retracing of the past that opens up the possibility for considering alternate perspectives that may go on to influence future individual actions. Boym suggests reflective nostalgia “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space,” and that this action advances the possibility for multiple consciousness and levels of meaning. These two designations of nostalgia, often overlapping in musical theatre, become more evident through theatricalized social dance in musical theatre, and thus provide a

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17 Boym, 49.
18 Ibid.
19 I am not claiming Bandstand only creates or operates in restorative nostalgia; however, the marketing package creates this sort of imagery to potentially attract audiences. The nostalgia in Bandstand is explored further in the epilogue.
20 Boym, 49.
framework for examining histories, identity constructions, and the socio-political impact of
dancing bodies then and now. By considering how community identity and belonging emerge in
social dance, I explore, using Boym’s conceptualizations, how embodied nostalgia can be both
an indicator of uncertainty in one’s current situation, and an intuitive mode of understanding the
anxieties of the present moment. Whether in a fictional narrative or in actuality, the manner in
which one engages with social dance in their everyday life can be seen as a visceral reaction to
stresses of the present.\(^\text{21}\) Likewise, engagement in social dances of a previous era can be both an
embrace of nostalgia and indicative of one’s growing apprehension of the present and angst
concerning the future.\(^\text{22}\)

Building on Boym’s conceptualization of nostalgia, I critically examine how an
engagement with social dance in musical theatre provides a nostalgic experience for the audience
on a corporeal level that opens up a space for critical reflection. The contemporary study of
nostalgia, as taken up by numerous scholars, is not only about melancholia and longing, but
operates in a much more involved and complex manner that recognizes nostalgic impulses as
entry points for a compassionate and critical rethinking of our contemporary moment in tandem
with a widening of possibilities for gaining, “a greater intimacy with the world.”\(^\text{23}\)

I recognize the work of Maurice Halbwachs as a grounding point for studies in memory,


\(^{23}\) Boym, 50. Other theorists studying contemporary definitions of nostalgia in congruence with Boym include: Tammy Clewell, Peter Fritzsche, Elizabeth Outka, Clay Routledge, Sean Scanlan, and Susan Stewart. Contemporary investigations such as these move beyond the notion of nostalgia as homesickness, and take Boym’s lead that nostalgia is “coeval with modernity,” and allow for secondary interpretations beyond only the “restorative” kind of nostalgia. Boym, \textit{Future of Nostalgia}, 8.
and identify that his foundational theories inform nostalgia studies.\textsuperscript{24} Halbwachs argues that the majority of memories come from being part of a specific group at a specific time and is more often than not collective in nature. The community experience of social dance as described by Malnig and Robinson can be considered as a site of memory formation, particularly within my era of investigation in the early twentieth-century where social dance was one of the main group leisure activities. Halbwachs gestures towards nostalgia, when he explains there is often an obligation to “touch up, shorten memories, to give them a prestige that reality did not possess,” triggering what Boym would later term restorative nostalgia.\textsuperscript{25} This polishing of memories is particularly heightened due to the sense for some that the best part of one’s self was left in one’s youth. I mention the work of Halbwachs as a cornerstone in the study of collective memory and a source leading towards a re-thinking of nostalgia, which I use to conceptualize how social dance is a way memories are maintained and nostalgia is created.

In my consideration of embodiment, I assert the body is a prime site to examine historical agency and ownership of cultural mores.\textsuperscript{26} This definition is drawn from the work of Diana Taylor, Susan Foster, and Mark Franko, who, along with Anthea Kraut and Carrie Noland, have examined how “embodied performance . . . makes visible an entire spectrum of attitudes and values.”\textsuperscript{27} In \textit{Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance}, Susan Foster considers choreography a theorization of identity and corporeality, both individual and social. Using this

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{25} Halbwachs, 51.
\textsuperscript{27} Diana Taylor, \textit{Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 46.
\end{flushright}
connection between the self and community helps to identify the genesis of movements in social dance and their individual and collective meaning and reception. For Foster, the act of “reproducing in one’s mind the kinesthetic image of the other,” creates an empathy that challenges and provokes consideration of how one travels through the world physically and emotionally.  

Understanding the dimensions of embodiment and nostalgia is made possible by keeping this emotional and affective exchange in mind and investigating how it circulates when the social dance community is seen on stage.

I draw from Diana Taylor’s work that considers the body as an important site for the performance and re-performance of historical memory in a fluid and contingent repertoire. I assert the body is a living place for historical memory, where that memory gets re-performed and is shaped by the body’s surroundings. This understanding is complemented by the work of Elizabeth Grosz who considers the body as continuously and actively produced by its the social environment. As Grosz explains there is a “lack of finality” in the body, that the body is not a fixed state but “a series of processes of becoming.” This perspective helps to contend with the ongoing transformations within social dances and how bodies can be the carriers of social and political meanings through shifting historical eras. Following Grosz, I keep in mind that bodies “are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself.” This awareness is

29 Taylor explains that the repertoire “enacts embodied memory” and “allows for individual agency.” Like Malnig, Taylor recognizes the fluidity of dance and that the repertoire’s meaning can shift over time. Investigating these case studies with a sense of how “the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning,” will be helpful towards understanding the transmission of dances from body to body and community to community. Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 20.
31 Grosz, 12.
32 Ibid., x.
helpful when considering specific movements or choreographic choices and how embodied markers are present but are not static or unchanging in any choreographic analysis.

Mark Franko’s The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s is useful in this regard as he examines how identity is expressed through dance. His claim that “the study of dance is the study of historical agency” intervenes in the space between work and leisure that social dance is inevitably woven into. Building on scholarship that explores how dancers were the “protagonists of class struggle,” I use Franko’s perspective to conceptualize how social dance in most of my case studies can be seen as an embodiment, and thus signal of, class, race, economic stratifications, and social mobility.

Review of Literature

This project focuses on three main fields of study: social dance, musical theatre, and nostalgia. This approach requires I intervene in a cross-disciplinary manner. In the small amount of scholarship that suggests an intersection between the three areas, Barbara Cohen-Stratyner claims in the structure of musical theatre of the 1920s, the “best way to bring attention to a song was to attach a dance to it.” She explains the reason for the prevalent inclusion of social dance in musical theatre at the time was because of its prominence in people’s lives—“In 1920s New York, you were what you danced.” Cohen-Stratyner argues people were obsessed with social dance in the 1920s and it was common, if not expected, for the latest social dance and a fictionalized dance venue to be part of the musical comedy. Cohen-Stratyner examines social

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33 Franko, 28.
34 Ibid., 7. Of note, Malnig has also come to similar conclusions by way of social dance. 
dances that were often part of the narrative structure of a musical and the social dance venue’s importance in the narrative, as it was frequently where major conflicts, turning points, and resolutions occurred. With this emphasis on social dance as a plot device in the formational decades of the musical theatre, the dances themselves have come to define different historical and political moments and impacts of the decades. Cohen-Stratyner’s identification of the connections between social dance and their socio-political moment supports my claims of nostalgic tendencies of social dance in musical theatre. I extend her focus by analyzing social dances outside of their contemporary moment in order to interrogate the nostalgic underpinnings that emerge in the historical distancing my case studies enact.

William Given is one of the only other scholars who connects social dance and theatricalized social dance in musical theatre. In “Lindy Hop, Community and the Isolation of Appropriation,” as part of The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre, Given suggests when social dance is taken from the dance clubs and placed in the theatricalized setting of Broadway, the distance created de-emphasizes the appropriation of the dance from its roots in the African American community. He claims when a social dance is placed on stage, the “imagined community” it represents becomes “diluted by its intersection with those other communities.” For example, Given claims that when social dances moved out of the multiracial community of the Savoy and onto the stage, “the dance becomes more theatrical, and is supplanted with another

outside discourse, the dance begins to transform from community to spectacle.” Given suggests through this “spectacularization,” the African American possession of the dances and sense of community fade away. His area of study is concerned with the appropriation of social dance on stage concurrent with the development of the dances. Cohen-Straytner is likewise concerned with social dance in musicals happening at the same time audiences are engaging in similar dances. I build on Given and Cohen-Straytner’s work by exploring the cultural appropriations, misappropriations, racial repressions, and social meanings that develop when theatricalized social dance is removed from its original time frame. Considering the consequences of the attempts at the protection of cultural idioms alongside the inevitable progression of social dance forms helps answer further questions such as: what are the effects of the codification and theatricalization of social dances on the Broadway stage? For example, how does a musical like Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed (2015) or Allegiance (2016) take up these questions by theatricalizing social dance and how does nostalgia play a part in this theatricalization, or, as Given would call it, “spectacularization”?

As previously mentioned, Julie Malnig’s Ballroom Boogie, Shimmy and Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader is the most recent and succinct source for identifying, describing, defining, and coding the various social dance styles. Malnig takes up the challenge of interpreting how social dances can be seen as expressions of cultural identity. She theorizes how social dance shapes constructs of the U.S. and argues that by following changes in social dance, political, social, and cultural meaning can be found. Social dances have a cultural resonance

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40 Given designates the word “spectacularization” to describe the move of social dance from the club or dance hall to the stage. Given, “Lindy Hop, Community, and the Isolation of Appropriation,” 742.
indicative of wider social and political changes and struggles, and through this line of scholarship it is clear that social dances do not exist alone, but are part of a network of many social dances all evolving at varying rates, importing different cultural and political significance as they gain popularity.\footnote{In making this connection Malnig draws in parts of the research of Joel Dinerstein, \textit{Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the Wars} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).} Investigating the interconnections and transitions between the forms helps to understand shifts in popular desires. I take up Malnig’s claim that social dances are “symbolic or expressive of a host of social and cultural values particular to their time, place, and historical context,” and take on the task of uncovering through my case studies the meaning these values import when brought forth in a time outside their historical context.\footnote{Malnig, \textit{Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake}, 5.}

Given the time span of my area of investigation (1910-1945), recognizing the work of scholars who intervene in the development of social dance and its racialized foundations is vital. Two significant scholars that trace the racial roots of social dance are Danielle Robinson and Brenda Dixon Gottschild. Robinson’s \textit{Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Era} and Gottschild’s \textit{Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era} make clear from the start that social dance is always and already deeply connected to notions of class and race.\footnote{Robinson, \textit{Modern Moves}, 2015; Brenda Dixon Gottschild, \textit{Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).} Chronologically, Robinson addresses early social dance formations, such as ragtime and early jazz dances, and Gottschild investigates swing dance and provides key arguments as to why swing dancing gave way to the momentum of Bebop and eventually rock ’n’ roll and social dances of the late forties and early fifties.
The main interrogation of Robinson’s work is how African American dances were “refined” by white dancers, teachers, choreographers, and communities. Following her interpretation of the “Americanization” of social dances along with developments of national narratives helps explain the development of national imaginations around the narrative of the case study. Robinson upholds the ownership African Americans have over social dance and argues that race is “an organizing principle of social dance.” However, as with Malnig, Robinson makes clear that fluidity and flux are always a part of social dance. Searching for new and exciting cultural identity at the turn of the century, music and dances were melded, appropriated, and blended with European dances. Zora Neale Hurston explains this reformation of African American sensibilities by white performers in the convergence with Europeans in the migration north: “While he lives and moves in the midst of white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.”

Robinson’s thorough analysis of early ragtime dances and later jazz dances helps to answer her question, which I expand on to ask: “how are ideas about culture and politics communicated through bodies in motion?” Social dances were also used by middle class African Americans as a means of social mobility. In this socialization of bodies, Robinson reminds us how important it is to ask “who” is dancing and to interrogate the two-way nature of

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44 Robinson, Modern Moves, 3.
45 Robinson, 64.
46 Ibid., 26.
48 Robinson, 17. Notable works that also discuss the implications of bodies in motion, as well as the impact of social dance on everyday life at the turn of the twentieth century include: Kathy Peiss, Cheap Amusements Working Women and Leisure in the Turn-of-the-Century New York (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Linda J. Tomko, Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999); Joel Dinerstein, Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the Wars (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).
the cross-cultural borrowing. I ask this question of all the case studies, as a way of producing deeper awareness of the manner in which social dance functions in a theatricalized setting. Lastly, Robinson argues that social dancers are “community members and culture bearers,” and notably, she explores how this consideration sets up the circular paradigm of the “nostalgic cycling and recycling” of social dances, as she explains African Americans use dancing to both assert their heritage and seek an identity in the modern era.49 Her foundational take on social dance as coming from the community, as community, will help me to conceptualize the operation of nostalgia in social dance. The transference of social dance to the stage makes this assertion deeply challenging.

Gottschild is an essential scholar in the field of social dance because, like Malnig and others, she finds social dance to be a “mirror and measure of society,” and further probes how African Americans cope with and fight against the appropriation of their dance forms.50 Gottschild is particularly interested in how the aesthetics of African American social dances became signposts for modernity, embraced by white Americans and Europeans alike, while also operating under the continued racist and racialized climate of the Swing Era.51 Like Robinson, Gottschild discusses the appropriation of dance styles and interrogates how African Americans managed this ongoing conflict asking, “how did black people and white people negotiate the ground between the (exoticizing) embrace of black creative endeavor and the perpetuation of

50 Gottschild, Waltzing in the Dark, 5.
51 Gottschild defines the Swing Era as existing between 1920-1940, though recognizes historical jazz writers generally identify it as 1935-45. Waltzing in the Dark, 17.
I build on Gottschild’s question by examining how the negotiation becomes deeply entangled with shifting registers of nostalgia experienced differently by African American and white communities, adding to the conversation by investigating what happens when the social dance is “spectacularized” on stage. Importantly, I bring in the work of Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, in order to explore the impact of African American chorus dancers on the modernization of performance and female identity on stage. Daphne Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* does valuable work in this regard as well. The work of Thomas F. DeFrantz is also pertinent to the exploration of African American dance styles, aesthetics, and dance theory and will be drawn in.

Sherril Dodds in *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* investigates the instability and struggle that are part of cultural formations and popular modes of identity expression. She argues that the negotiations of cultural identity, which permeate social dance, make the dancing body and culture always “a domain of conflict.” The consideration of this tension makes for a useful apparatus to approach social dance. In my investigation of the effect of social dance in a musical, I take care to analyze the ongoing cultural conflicts that physically manifest in social dance in order to understand the nostalgic affects that do or do not emerge by the inclusion of a particular social dance in a musical. Dodds champions the study of

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53 Gottschild’s *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) is also pertinent to this discussion.
56 Thomas F. DeFrantz’s *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002) is consulted along with various articles.
57 Sherril Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan:), 43.
corporeality in terms of social dance and details how this necessary consideration is based on the hard fact that the dancing body is “shaped by its contexts of production, transmission and reception and how it negotiates and rearticulates itself in response.”

Overall Robinson, Gottschild, Brown, Brooks, DeFrantz, and Dodds illuminate how important it was for African Americans to maintain their cultural rhythms and bodily gestures, despite the ongoing “refinement” by whites such as Irene and Vernon Castle. In this way, African Americans use their bodies in what Diana Taylor would call “multiplication” or “simultaneity” as a way of maintaining culture within shifting political realms. Instead of replacing cultural behaviors with another, African Americans would often try to find through their embodied practices, such as social dance, a way to allow cultural continuation. Social dance is inseparable from the music to which it is danced. Ted Gioia (The History of Jazz) and Marshall and Jean Stearns (Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance) have mapped out the historical trajectory of music and dance in the Jazz Age that forms the spine of this study. The Stearnses provide the most thorough and wide-reaching study of the development and migration of social dance in the U.S. Their first-hand interviews have been integral to the work of the above-mentioned scholars, and are essential to this study as well.

58 Dodds, 44. Similar to Grosz, both investigate how the body is inscribed by its environment and circumstance.
59 Taylor, Archive and the Repertoire, 46.
60 The replacing of one cultural behavior with another has been termed “surrogation” by Joseph Roach in Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2. He describes it as a method of cultures attempting to “fit satisfactory alternatives” as a way of continuing cultural or societal processes, when theirs have been taken over. Roach, Cities of the Dead, 2. Taylor, while agreeing Roach’s foundational ideas are valuable, challenges them by explaining that some cultures do follow the new status quo, but “simultaneously” find embodied ways of keeping their culture alive. I explore how African American social dances manifest in this manner explored by Taylor.
In musical theatre studies, Raymond Knapp along with Stacy Wolf, Andrea Most, John Bush Jones, Elizabeth Wollman, and Scott McMillin investigate how the American musical, both in its subject matter and structure, helps audiences understand who they are and what it means to be American. Knapp has laid essential groundwork that helps to recognize and evaluate various mythologies that are part of the musical theatre genre. I relate social dance to these mythologies to shed light on how in using social dance, racial and identity politics rise, purposely or coincidently, to the surface of the musical. I evaluate the role of social dance and the dancing body on stage in light of Knapp’s consideration of how national identity is formed in musical theatre, and how the genre provides a productive space for examining cultural negotiations and re-negotiations. The scholarship of Jones, Wollman, and McMillin is particularly useful because it follows how social and cultural knowledge are gained through the conventions and operations of musical theatre. Though they do not extensively examine dance, they provide a point of departure as to how to critically examine questions of belonging and assimilation of culture that I extend to my analysis of the role of social dance in the structure of a show.\(^\text{62}\)

The work of Stacy Wolf provides a considerable contribution to the ideological projects of the musicals of the twentieth century and how they transform over the decades. In particular, in *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Wolf claims that modulations in the genre and the conventions of musical theatre are woven together with changes in society. She evidences this is by interrogating elements audiences would recognize and connecting them to adjustments or transitions in social structures. Wolf touches on dance and how it creates emotional and physical tension, such as the eroticism in the work of Bob Fosse, or the individualism that is celebrated in go-go dancing. While dance is not a main emphasis for Wolf, her work is helpful in that she sets up a model for how conventions of musical theatre,\(^\text{62}\) For list of musical theatre scholars who investigate dance see footnote 4, Introduction.
which includes dance, “become part of the U.S. cultural imaginary.”\textsuperscript{63} There are behaviors, fictions, or as I claim, dance expressions or movements, that audiences would recognize as being part of their social world, and part of how they identify themselves. Wolf points to conventions of the form, like the female song duet, that can be connected to transitions in social structures through the era, and this approach is useful as it sets a foundation for reconsidering conventions. For example, how can social dance be analyzed beyond being a classic “dance break,” a pastime at a party, or a couple engaged in a dance—what are the deeper implications? What communities are being imagined on stage?

Finally, Warren Hoffman challenges the operation of nostalgia in the genre stating: “Broadway musicals gravitate toward nostalgia and the past . . . so anything contemporary is welcomed.”\textsuperscript{64} This gravitation towards the past that Hoffman bemoans is in fact what is at stake in the conversation of using musical theatre as a way of understanding ourselves. Hoffman uses Alan Wood’s term “ersatz nostalgia” to condemn many musicals that take too much of a sentimentalized look at the past: “These ‘ersatz nostalgia’ productions essentially remade the past, revising it to meet the interests and concerns of contemporary audiences while suggesting that they were actual recreations of the past.”\textsuperscript{65} Hoffman feels that musical theatre can be thought of as a post-modern pastiche that fetishizes the past.\textsuperscript{66} I bring this concept forward as the fetishization of the past is a not too uncommon critique of musical theatre, however the post-

\textsuperscript{64} Warren Hoffman, \textit{The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 208. In this statement Hoffman is discussing how integral it was that the 2008 Broadway musical \textit{Passing Strange} came into existence, as it offered a “contemporary nonwhite look at the world.” Hoffman, 208.
\textsuperscript{66} Hoffman, \textit{The Great White Way}, 171.
modern idea is provocative, as it indicates a raising of questions, as oppose to a providing of answers. I mention Hoffman because he is a scholar who champions the African American foundations of musical theatre but does not look at one of the largest contributions of African Americans—dance, chiefly social dance. I aim to show that through the movement and social dance, and the subsequent transfer of social dance onto the stage, there is much more to be learnt and many more questions to be put forth.

**Methodology**

I take the initial cue for my methodology from the scholarship of William Given, who investigates the transition of social dance out of dance clubs and into the theatricalized setting of the Broadway stage. Given finds that in the move from club to stage there “becomes a desire to lay claim to [social dance] in order to possess it once it has been objectified.”

67 To understand the significance of choreographers and directors possessing a social dance as part of the narrative and essence of the musicals in question, I develop what Given finds of utmost importance—how the ownership of the dance gets fractured in moving from dance club to stage. Adding to his exploration, I analyze how choreography amplifies meaning, and what shifts in meaning occur when social dance is transferred to the stage. Examining the fractures or changes in social dance when brought to the stage exposes the complexities of the embodied nostalgia the dances carry with them, particularly in regards to the African American ownership of the social dances in question.

For each chapter, I first look at the history of the social dances in question and situate them in time and place. I explain how these dances were created, to what music, and in what venues. Second, building on the scholarship of Malnig and Gottschild, I identify the communities

67 Given, 739.
the dances came from and trace the appropriation, assimilation and (sometimes) cultural exchange that have been layered upon the dance as it was popularized. I identify how the dance gets fractured or fragmented in the move from the dancehall to the stage by identifying the bodies doing the dance in both scenarios and identify “who” is doing the dance. This process includes identifying who originally did the dance, who the character is in the narrative of the musical, and who the performer on stage is executing the dance. This identification supports a connection to how and for whom nostalgia is created in the musical. I then look at how each choreographer uses social dance as a framework upon which to build a unique movement signature that explores the visceral experience of a particular moment for a particular community.

In order to understand how embodied nostalgia can form around theatricalized social dance, I will look at indications of how social dance communities get flattened in the move to the stage. Inspired by Benedict Andersons’s organizing principle of “imagined communities,” I draw on his methods in various instances to identify the nature and style of the social dance communities. For example, the Lindy Hop community at the Savoy Ballroom in the 1930s imagined itself an integrated and fraternal community, though what was outside the ballroom was not so. When the Lindy Hop is then shown on stage in a non-black, historical musical, is that fraternity intact or is it a “white ghosting of a Black dance?” In this consideration of “imagined communities” as seen on stage, or within the world of the musical, I illustrate whether merely a portion of the identifying factors of the social dance are brought onto the stage, in the constructed

68 Benedict Anderson states, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” He identifies three ways nations, (extending to communities) are imagined: they are limited because even the largest communities have boundaries (though elastic); they are sovereign or have dreams of being free standing; and as having “deep, horizontal comradeship” providing as sense of fraternity that dedicates or inspires one towards the community or nation. Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6,7 (Anderson’s italics).
69 Given, 732.
choreographic performance, and what are the consequences of this possible rupture. By critically intervening in this manner, I conceptualize the nostalgic paradigms—either restorative or reflective or both—at work when the piece is presented out of time and includes theatricalized social dance. My work is augmented by numerous interviews with choreographers and dancers and their understanding of what social dance is doing in their production and the creative process that led to their inclusion and interpretation of a particular social dance.

I begin each case study with a detailed description of a section of choreography in the musical. This choice serves two functions; first, the depiction attempts to recreate the imagery and affect that the bodies in motion created in the live performance; second, the interpretation models how to describe dance. The lack of comprehensive dance analysis or recognition of choreographic strategies in musical theatre scholarship, critical reviews, or media review is common. This gap in analytical substance of the choreography in musical theatre if often because there is not a system or common vocabulary scholars or critics feel comfortable using to describe and critique dance. I put forth a framework that functions to describe, analyze, and conceptualize bodies in motion in musical theatre. This method uses social dance as the fulcrum around which to open up conversations about race, culture, and politics on stage in musical theatre.

**Chapters**

In Chapter One, I investigate the ragtime dances of the early twentieth century that provided the roots of influence for the subsequent social dances of this study. The Slow Drag, the Cakewalk, and numerous Animal Dances are interrogated to show both African American influences on social dance and the counter-influence of European social dance on African American social dance styles. I critically examine the following three musicals: *The Color Given*, 737.

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70 Given, 737.
Purple (2005), Ragtime (1998) and Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed (2016). The Color Purple, directed by Gary Griffin and choreographed by Donald Byrd, is one of the only musicals to have a “jook house” as part of the narrative and to use the less known social dance, the Slow Drag. The Slow Drag characterizes how African Americans of the time attempted to keep some physicality of their home and culture, while also trying to assimilate into the industrialized world. I interrogate the restorative and reflective nostalgic elements that emerge through the social dance and its transfer to the stage—a substantial move from the private realm to the public. In Ragtime, directed by Frank Galati and choreographed by Graciela Daniele, I problematize the complex intersection between the different worlds of race and ethnicities of the early twentieth century. I investigate how Daniele deconstructs the Cakewalk and trace how in the rupture of the collective parts of the dance, there is a consideration of the magnitude of where the dance came from. In George C. Wolfe’s Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed I analyze how the embodied nostalgia embedded in the dance styles is used to shed light on the social and cultural complexities that operated in musical comedies in the original 1921 Shuffle Along and how choreographer Savion Glover uses dance to stake a claim for continued diversity and representation in musical theatre today. I critically examine how Glover is able to navigate and bring together the temporal divide of the show with an intense physicality that speaks to the past, present, and future.

In Chapter Two, I explore the transition from ragtime dances into the social dances that came to define the Jazz Age, particularly the Charleston. I look at three musicals that take up the sensibilities and social dances of the time, Thoroughly Modern Millie (2002), Michael John LaChiusa’s The Wild Party (2000), and The Drowsy Chaperone (2006). In each case study of
this chapter, embodied meanings in the Charleston (or Black Bottom in the case of The Wild Party) are dramaturgically maneuvered with divergent motives that present the dance from a distinct perspective. In particular, the differing perspectives depend on how the dramatic structure of the musical—ranging from pastiche to parody—presents the world of the 1920s. In Thoroughly Modern Millie (2002), I explore how the social dance on stage embodies the new rhythms and feelings of the 1920s. I connect this narrative to the nostalgic essences of the flapper lifestyle, commonly fashioned in popular media as a time of jazz music, female autonomy, and Prohibition-era shenanigans, and what the transference of the dance to the stage means. I interrogate how the Charleston, which had its peak in 1926, embodies a process of exploring one’s subjectivity in an increasingly modernized world. Additionally, I critically examine the problematic topic of Orientalism in the show in terms of both ethnic stereotypes and movement parodies. In The Wild Party, the uncensored interpretation of Joseph Moncure March’s poem allows for a critical take on the Jazz Age disguised as pastiche. This darker perspective on the era demystifies the embodied nostalgia for the indulgences of the 1920s and exposes, through movement and music, the cultural theft at work then and now. Finally, I look to The Drowsy Chaperone (2006) as an interesting example of how nostalgia is created onstage, and how director and choreographer Casey Nicholaw uses the popular social dance idioms of the 1920s to achieve the nostalgic affect that fuels the show. I explore how The Drowsy Chaperone uses a playful double coded parodic telling of 1920s musicals that re-engages affection for musical theatre by capitalizing on the thrills of the form while also reflecting on the meaning and influence of nostalgia in musical theater and life.

In Chapter Three, I consider swing dances and how they are used and interpreted in different ways in three musicals set between 1930 and 1945: Wonderful Town (1953), Steel Pier
(1997) and Allegiance (2015). I trace how the very popular swing style social dances are used to signal historical idioms, economic survival, cultural identity, and community. I investigate how concepts of community, and thus social dance, shifted with the political and economic changes of the 1930s and early 1940s. In all three musicals swing dance is employed by the choreographer to imagine a community in the face of precarity whether in response to actions in the narrative or to sociopolitical circumstances at the time of production. The study of these shows demonstrates how social dance can embody the subtext of the story, and how the embodied nostalgia therein becomes the subversive element that can bring social and political meaning to light, even if the plot may not. Wonderful Town is a comedy that uses pastiche combined with a light-hearted social satire to bring 1935 Greenwich Village to life. The opening of the show at the height of the Red Scare, however, complicates the high-spirited show, that will be shown to have subtle but critical undercurrents as manifested through movement. In Steel Pier, set in the early 1930s, swing dance helped a country escape, if only momentarily, from economic realities. I investigate how choreographer Susan Stroman puts social dance front and center and turns towards nostalgia as a way of understanding dance marathons, and the social and economic meaning rooted within them. In Allegiance, set in 1941 and present day, directed by Stafford Arima and choreographed by Andrew Palermo, I argue that Japanese bodies doing American social dances challenge common assumptions about America’s past, and how an embodied nostalgia inherent in the dance form recovers the notion that a Japanese body can also be American. I examine concepts of nationalism and geopolitics and how swing dance becomes a tenet of American identity.

In the epilogue, I point towards the transition into the rock ’n’ roll dances and what this transition means for the embodied nostalgia derived from the dances of the Jazz Age and the
World War II era. I return to *Bandstand* at the conclusion of this project because it is the most recent musical that both builds upon and troubles the embodied nostalgia of social dance in the Jazz Age. In all, I illustrate how nostalgia is embodied and what this corporeal connection conveys on a larger social and political scale. I recover, interpret, and champion the study of dancing bodies and social dance choreography in musical theatre as a way to comprehend the essential impact the body has on nostalgic thinking and what that recognition means in the grand scheme of understanding popular performance as a gauge of cultural and social politics.
CHAPTER ONE:

EARLY RAGTIME DANCES

Let me see you do the ‘rag time dance’...
Turn left and do the ‘Cake walk prance’...
Turn the other way and do the ‘Slow drag’...
Now take your lady to the world's fair (…)
   And do the ‘rag time dance.’

—Scott Joplin, “The Ragtime Dance,” 1902

I. Introduction

When Scott Joplin moved to New York City in 1907 he had already published over forty ragtime compositions including his famous “Maple Leaf Rag,” a ringing and seamless model of the form.¹ By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, ragtime music had nearly obscured European waltzes and parlor music across the nation. The pulse of syncopated rhythms, the aural assault of chords activated by a lively left hand on the piano keys, the delightful melodies, and the irresistible quick dips into a minor key made ragtime “far and away the gayest, most exciting, most infectiously lilting music ever heard.”² As the United States transitioned into the new century, ragtime music exemplified the heartbeat of the modern era. In the decade between “The Maple Leaf Rag” and Joplin’s arrival in New York from Texas via Missouri, ragtime music became the sound of a new age. The “ragged” rhythms, developed from “folk

melodies and from the syncopation of plantation banjos,” created a unique American sound.³

Joplin brought a sense of elegance to the rapid rhythms, and unlike many of his contemporaries, he later turned towards more theatrical genres, including opera and ballet—his intent with his first piece composed for the lyric theatre—“The Ragtime Dance.”⁴ As demonstrated by the above lyrics, Joplin had an awareness of the dances that surrounded, depended on, and grew out of the music. By 1907, ragtime music, generally considered to have prospered between 1898 and 1918, infiltrated all walks of life in New York City.⁵

With the simple and easy to learn one-step dance styles that sprung from ragtime music, social dancing as a leisure activity exploded in cities and towns.⁶ Ragtime dances, established in African American communities to the rhythms of the “jubilant new music,” were infinitely simpler than the waltzes or schottisches of the past.⁷ The Slow Drag, the Cakewalk, and the numerous Animal Dances such as the Turkey Trot and the Grizzly Bear, all from the African

³ Blesh, 7.
⁴ Joplin's first attempt at writing for the theatre was The Ragtime Dance, “a ballet for dancers and a singer-narrator that depicts an African American ball such as those held at Sedalia’s Black 400 Club. It was first staged on 24 November 1899 at Wood’s Opera House in Sedalia.” Berlin, “Scott Joplin.”
⁶ The one-step ragtime dances required little to no experience from couples. The basic technique consisted of “a simple walking step for eight counts with a pivot on the first, danced to a fast march in 2/4 or 6/8 time, at about sixty bars per minute.” Claude Conyers, “One-Step,” Grove Music Online, February 6, 2012, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093. While social dancing had been a pastime in the U.S. since colonial times, common dances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as English country dances, cotillions, quadrilles, and waltzes required previous knowledge and technical ability to participate, particularly as most were group dances that followed the dance manuals and etiquette rules of the time. Conversely, couples quickly learned the one-step ragtime dances. For more information on social dance training methods and etiquette of the middle-class in the nineteenth century see Elizabeth Aldrich’s “The Civilizing of America’s Ballrooms: The Revolutionary War to 1890,” in Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader, ed. Julie Malnig, 55-71. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
⁷ Gioia, 22.
American milieu, provided the roots of the subsequent social jazz dances of the 1920s such as the Shimmy, the Charleston, and the Black Bottom.\(^8\)

The ragtime era dance craze quickly expanded into a tangle of authorship claims of steps, cultural ownership of dances, and quests for authenticity, which only intensifies in the social dances of the Jazz Age.\(^9\) Further, the deliberate “refinement” of African American dances by white artists, instigated by the immensely popular dance team Irene and Vernon Castle, heightened tensions regarding accepted styles of cultural expression for particular classes and cultures.\(^10\) Inevitably, the multitude of social dance fads and accompanying social politics spilled over onto the Broadway stage. In this move, social dances further shifted in style, largely due to African American dances being performed by white dancers in white musicals for white audiences.\(^11\)

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\(^8\) The timeframe of ragtime music and dance begins over two decades before the opening of the iconic Savoy Ballroom in Harlem in 1926. Though the Savoy became the “epicenter” for the expansion and transformation of African American dance styles, the development of the earlier and foundational dances are often overlooked in importance. Given, 733.

\(^9\) Gioia places the Jazz Age beginning in the early to mid-1920s, continuing through the 1930s and early 1940s. He attributes Louis Armstrong as a strong influence in this development, though points out, “the revolution initiated by Armstrong took place in fits and starts, and with little fanfare at the time.” Gioia, 56. The term “Jazz Age” was coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his 1931 article “Echoes of the Jazz Age.” Fitzgerald claims the Jazz Age began with the May Day Riots in 1919 and concluded with the Stock Market crash in 1929. Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” accessed March 13, 2018, https://pderodas.webs.ull.es/anglo/ScottFitzgeraldEchoesOfTheJazzAge.pdf.

\(^10\) Irene and Vernon Castle were a married ballroom dance team that refined African American dances in the early twentieth century and performed them for white audiences in the United States and Europe to much acclaim. The Castles were instrumental in teaching many of the dances to white students, particularly of high society. Megan Pugh explains, “Vernon and Irene Castle set out to change the perception that cabarets were havens of sin. They helped sanitize social dancing, publicly rejecting the bunny hug, turkey trot, and other ragtime animal crazes.” Pugh, America Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 104.

\(^11\) For more on attempts at ownership of dances and who can claim ownership of cultural practices see: Anthea Kraut in Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016). Kraut highlights the inequities of the appropriations and the operation of the “institutional discrimination, entrenched patterns of appropriation, and insidious stereotypes,” that beset African Americans in the U.S. Kraut, Choreographing Copyright, 27.
This chapter examines early ragtime dances in three musicals—the Slow Drag in *The Color Purple* (2005), the Cakewalk in *Ragtime* (1998), and Animal Dances and Tap in *Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed* (2016)—and investigates what these social dances do when transferred to the stage nearly a century later. I focus on how the social dances bring forth the dancer on stage as a site of embodied history, cultural memory, and nostalgia and how the dancing body functions as a catalyst for nostalgic thinking for the audience.

In *Choreographing History*, Susan Leigh Foster maintains that the body should not be considered as a “natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience.” In this consideration, the stage dancer, when engaged in social dances created in and of a particular social and political moment, participates in both the communities from which the dance originated and their members’ enduring historical experience. Whether the community on stage is one that populates a rural African American jook joint, or a white upper-class community that participates in a Cakewalk fundraiser, meanings are always already attributed to the body dancing.

All three musicals investigated in this chapter attempt to deepen awareness of particular African American communities at the turn of the twentieth century. These explorations are at their most effective during moments of social dance. In these diegetic moments of social dance,

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political and social issues rooted in the body are physicalized. The embodiment in social dance of the agitations, passions, and desires of a community makes the dancing body a prime site to examine historical agency and ownership of cultural mores. Considering the body, as “unfinished,” the socialization of the body through dance leaves behind physical signifiers of cultural practices and the communities from which they were derived.\(^{14}\) This embodied history, emphasizing the body as a signifier of its past, is found to be most readable in moments of social dance.

Complications arise in the inclusion of social dances in the musicals, however, as the actual social dance communities explored in the narratives are always transformed in the move to the Broadway stage. The disparity between taking “your lady to the world’s fair (...) And do[ing] the ‘rag time dance,’”—a common social event Joplin describes at the turn of the century—and putting the ragtime dances on stage in another far removed era is vast.\(^{15}\) Though the shift to the stage may be a tribute or celebration of the dance, the move can lead to simplification or misrepresentation.\(^{16}\) Creating a physical space between performer and audience in the theatre, and making a private experience more public, can sometimes reduce the social dance of its rich dimensions of cultural meaning and lineage.\(^{17}\) When dancers perform facing the audience in a more presentational style, the social dances can get flattened, and cultural significance risks becoming “obscured or diluted.”\(^{18}\) Significantly, African American social dances are rooted in a more enclosed circular and improvisational style, thus the exhibitory alterations almost

\(^{14}\) Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, x.
\(^{15}\) Scott Joplin, “The Ragtime Dance,” 1902.
\(^{16}\) Joplin “The Ragtime Dance,” 1902.
\(^{17}\) Given, 730.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 735.
inevitably distorts the movement intentions.\footnote{The Stearnses trace the circular dance movement from Africa to the United States by examining a variety of American dances (such as the Buzzard Lope and the Itch) that move in a circular manner common to the Ring Shout in African community movement practice. The Stearnses discuss “patterns of diffusion” of social dances and continually remind their readers circular motion in social dance can be traced back to African roots. Stearns and Stearns, \textit{Jazz Dance}, 32, 25-42.} It is important to recognize, however, the genre of musical theatre has been devoted since its beginnings in musical comedy, vaudeville, and Broadway revues to creating choreography that excites, thrills, and supports the narrative (to a greater or lesser extent). In this structural expectation, the theatricalized on-stage styles characteristically involve more precision in the placement of steps, unity in choreography across couples, and repeatable sequences in order to produce maximum theatrical and dramatic impact. The adjustments and accommodations made to the social dance are in part how the movement gets used as a foundation for the more theatricalized choreography the genre demands and is celebrated for.

The “spectacularization” of the social dances can be telling of the creative team’s motives—in particular the choreographer.\footnote{As explained in the introduction, I borrow the term “spectacularization” from William Given who uses it to describe the move of social dance from the club or dance hall to the stage.} While something gets flattened as social dances move to the stage, the social dances are also operating on a nostalgic level that can be critical and productive. I turn specifically to the choreographers of the three case studies and consider how they use the shape and form of the social dance as a primary framework upon which to build their choreographic signature and the embodied nostalgia that is revealed from this handling. Each musical’s embodiment of nostalgia is shown to persist in a divergent manner from dehistoricizing appropriation in \textit{The Color Purple}, to deconstructing movement codes in \textit{Ragtime}, to historical reclamation in \textit{Shuffle Along} (2016).

\textit{The Color Purple} is set prior to the Great Migration of African Americans when social dances took place in backwoods jook joints and nostalgia is evoked for an experience of privacy
that resonates in the present moment. *Ragtime* takes place in a time when the Cakewalk was a popular society dance. The deconstruction of the Cakewalk in the production meets up with two strains of nostalgia through the body. First, it possibly evokes nostalgia in white communities for their effortless modes of living in the era. Second, it conceivably evokes a starkly contrasted two-sided nostalgia, or double consciousness for African Americans—a nostalgia for outwitting whites through the dance, and an anti-nostalgia for the white brutality to which the roots of the Cakewalk call attention. *Shuffle Along* (2016) straddles the ragtime era and early Jazz Age and its overall essence activates the beginnings of jazz music and dance in musical theatre on Broadway. As a unique counter-example, *Shuffle Along* (2016) undercuts white nostalgic claims to the ownership and creation of musical theatre through its energetic movement style combining both tap dance and a plethora of Animal Dances.

The diverse choreographic structures of each musical require distinct approaches in order to understand the social dance being dehistoricized, deconstructed, or elevated. For this reason the order of investigation of each case study varies based on what is at stake between the dance and the narrative; the history of the Slow Drag takes precedent in *The Color Purple*, a breakdown of the choreography in *Ragtime* is used to enter into the politics of the Cakewalk, and the creative process of developing *Shuffle Along* (2016) begins the final investigation in order to critically and methodologically examine the function of the choreography of tap powerhouse Savion Glover.

This chapter concludes at the beginning of the Jazz Age, when appropriating social dances becomes a distinguishing feature. Though all social dances of this chapter are connected by their hybridity with other dances, what early ragtime dances do fundamentally is emphasize
how African American social dances always already express a history of survival, endurance, and ingenuity.

II. The Color Purple, The Slow Drag, and Pre-Migratory Nostalgia

Now there is something ‘bout good loving
That all you ladies should know
If you want to light your man on fire
You gotta start real slow

― “Push Da Button,” The Color Purple

 Hip to hip, legs intertwined, the dancers slowly grind their pelvises together in a figure-eight pattern. Knees are loose and bent, slightly twisting, coiling clockwise until a shift in the man’s hand far below the women’s waist breaks the slow and sensual spiral, to grip her thigh. The man extends a leg and drags or pulls his partner sideways. In the transition, the couple deepen their connection to the floor, and move together through a low lunge to an adjacent space, merely a foot from where they first stood. A slight loosening of the embrace ensues until the women is pulled upwards, both sets of hands sliding along each other’s bodies to resume the intimate and private connection, slightly to the side of where they were originally standing. The dancers are surrounded by other couples engaged in similar erotic play in the dark shadows of the jook joint. A small band, a guitar player or two and a piano player, keep a syncopated and sensuous rhythm. If the joint is popular, a singer might croon evocative and moving lyrics of the fantasies and perils of love, drawing more couples into the dance—the Slow Drag.  

21 This description is compiled from accounts of the dance in The Mura Dehn Collection and Papers, “Papers on Afro-American Dance,” circa 1869-1987, Performing Arts Research Collections—Dance, NYPL, box 1,3; the viewing of archival videos at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “Ernie Smith Jazz and Dance File,” Collection tape 1, 25a, SC Visual VRA; and descriptions in Robinson’s Modern Moves.
Background of the Slow Drag

The Slow Drag, with its intimate nature, is an elusive dance to categorize, though in order to grasp its importance in *The Color Purple*, a historical overview of the dance is necessary. Likewise, comprehending how the dance was disseminated across the U.S. helps with an understanding of the emotional value and sociality of the dance for African Americans. Danielle Robinson claims the Slow Drag “defies labels such as ragtime, blues, or jazz,”\(^\text{22}\) though finds it to be “a key dance of this new era of African American social dancing, as a touchstone for understanding the black migration experience in early twentieth-century New York.”\(^\text{23}\) Though *The Color Purple* does not take place in New York, the reasons why the dance was brought North helps explain the dance’s importance for African American communities. Though the dance is ambiguous to label and situate, its visceral sense of intrigue and eroticism clearly emerges. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon explains in *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture*, “Hip shaking and pelvic innuendo were now more of a statement to one’s partner than to one’s community.”\(^\text{24}\)

The Slow Drag was a diversion from the public sphere, instead a mingling of bodies in a particular shared private time and place. For this reason, dances that happened in the jook joints, particularly the Slow Drag, “remained primarily underground, away from the American cultural and political mainstream,” and subsequently this seclusion made the dances indigenous to

\(^{22}\) Robinson, 28.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 36.
African American culture. For some members of the community attending the jook houses in the Rural South, the Slow Drag likely worked to invoke a sense of freedom from the law and white oppression. The move out of the Rural South dispersed communities through different migrant tributaries. The community closeness experienced in the jook house would rarely be encountered again. Hazzard-Gordon explains the Slow Drag is a reminder that “never again would the vast majority of African Americans find themselves in such homogeneous communities.”

When African American migration North began, re-engaging with the music and dances of the jook joints helped many reimagine “the rural homes they left behind to carve out better, safer lives.” Music and dances from the intimate settings of jook houses and honkytonks were brought north into the public arenas of urban locales. “From mouth to mouth and from Jook to Jook,” and, I propose, body to body, African American songs and dances travelled north. The embodied memories the Slow Drag activated were used as a coping mechanism and a method of self-care for the new migrants who entered into unfamiliar social and political landscapes. The nostalgia embodied in the Slow Drag is for familial belonging and the routine, where one was free from white employers or authorities, if only for a few hours at the jook joint. As Robinson explains, the Slow Drag was “a powerful source of physical pleasure, recreation, and escape,” which is how it is taken up in *The Color Purple*. The Slow Drag was carried north as a reminder of a homeland and a sense of belonging that did not get reclaimed for many decades, if

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25 Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’,* xi. The Slow Drag is not the only dance to occur in the jook joint. Hazzard-Gordon explains, “Dances in the jooks included the Charleston, the shimmy, the snake hips, the funky butt, the twist, the slow drag, the buzzard lope, the black bottom, the itch, the fish tail, and the grind.” *Jookin,* 83. While many of these dances involved hip movements, the highly sexualized lyrics of “Push Da Button,” in *The Color Purple* sits squarely with the movement style of the Slow Drag.

26 Ibid., 64.

27 Robinson, 35.


29 Robinson, 37.
at all, in the North. Further, as a way of retaining a sense of uniqueness and to hold their community together, African Americans “used dances like the Slow Drag to assert a black distinctiveness within American culture.” This effort at distinctiveness provides a rationale to focus in on the dance in *The Color Purple*.

The sense of belonging in the North for African Americans becomes more complicated, however, as different class strata within black communities attempted to fit into society in different ways. Before long, the Slow Drag was politically seen as a “rejection of black elitism.” The Slow Drag threatened to divide the African American community post-migration, where African American elites, in a move to gain respect and positioning in society, strived to move away from working-class identities and interests. To some, the Slow Drag blatantly evoked African Americans’ rural and slave roots. Robinson explains, “As a folk practice, the slow drag was publicly celebrated . . . for its embodiment of ‘real’ black experience”—but not by all. Importantly, this entanglement of meanings comes from an embodied practice, and when the social dance is reanimated in *The Color Purple* on Broadway in 2005, these ideologies rise to the surface. Though the Slow Drag within the narrative of *The Color Purple* happens in the South, prior to significant northern migration, the dance is emblematic of this pride, as its inward focus bespeaks a sense of safety and belonging. *The Color Purple* is situated in this moment, and explores the dysfunctions, but also harmonies, within communities, focusing in on the love between ones who stayed and those who were forced away.

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30 Robinson, 38.
31 Ibid., 37.
32 Ibid.
The Color Purple

The musical *The Color Purple* is based on Alice Walker’s 1982 novel of the same name. Walker’s novel won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was adapted into a film in 1985, directed by Steven Spielberg. The story begins in 1909 in Rural Georgia and follows the life of fourteen-year-old Celie, including her trials and tribulations at the hands of her abusive father and husband. The plot traces Celie’s plights to reconnect with her sister Nettie and the two children she had as a result of rape by her father, who were taken from her at their birth. With the help of the uninhibited performer and singer Shug Avery, Celie learns of letters from her sister that had been kept from her by her ruthless husband. Celie’s reconnection with Nettie and bond with Shug starts her on the path to personal empowerment that begins with her leaving her husband and creating her own business. The story offers the opportunity to critically rethink Celie’s embodied experience, which opens with a shattered Celie singing “Somebody Gonna Love You,” and concludes with “I’m Here,” sung by Celie, the now successful and self-determined business woman.

This frank and poignant story of the struggles of African American women in the early twentieth century was turned into a musical in 2005. *The Color Purple* is the only Broadway

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musical to have a jook house as part of the narrative and to use the Slow Drag. The social
dance occurs in one of the few moments of dance in the show, when the sultry Shug Avery sings
“Push Da Button” in a jook house. The original production, directed by Gary Griffin and
choreographed by Donald Byrd, ran for three years at the Broadway Theatre. The show was
revived on Broadway in 2015 at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre, directed by John Doyle, who
dispensed with the choreographer he had used in the London production and “staged” the piece
himself. The original production with music and lyrics by Stephen Bray, Brenda Russell, and
Allee Willis, received ten Tony nominations though only one win (Best Actress in a Musical for
LaChanze in the role of Celie) and overall drew lukewarm reviews. The Doyle revival received
tremendous praise, including four Tony nominations and the Tony award for “Best Revival of a
Musical.” Both productions imagine the communities of Rural Georgia in disparate ways that
distinctly clash in their embodied interpretation of the time.

**Choreography and The Color Purple (2005)**

Donald Byrd is a renowned contemporary concert dance choreographer who has worked
with Alvin Ailey and Twyla Tharp and is currently the artistic director of Spectrum Dance

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35 Though there are no musicals with the Slow Drag, John O. Perpener reports Wallace Thurman’s 1929
play *Harlem* incorporates the Slow Drag into the narrative. *Harlem* tells the story of an African American
family from South Carolina who move to Harlem and face financial difficulties as well as prejudices
within the black community. In order to make ends meet the family holds rent parties; in these instances
the Slow Drag was performed. Perpener, *African American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and
Beyond* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 37. The play has been the object of much
controversy as to whether it is “an honest portrayal or exploitation of African American urban life;” Linda

36 John Doyle originally revived the musical at The Menier Chocolate Factory in London in 2013. This
production was then brought to Broadway and produced by Scott Sanders, Roy Furman, and Oprah
*Playbill*, http://www.playbill.com/production/the-color-purple-broadway-theatre-vault-0000012250,

37 The choice to include the Doyle revival is the one exception to my initial designation to avoid revivals
because of its distinctly contrasting treatment of movement in comparison to the original.
Theatre in Seattle. As choreographer for the 2005 *The Color Purple*, Byrd includes his variation on the Slow Drag in the scene in Harpo’s jook joint in the first act. Harpo, Celie’s stepson, builds the jook joint out of his broken-down house in defiance of his strong-willed wife Sophia. Byrd’s intentional use of some of the basic sensibilities of the Slow Drag, such as the grinding of hips and pelvis and holding of buttocks, gestures towards the origins of the form. Byrd likely drew more on his experiences choreographing productions like the 1999 *The Harlem Nutcracker* than on his contemporary dance background to deliver the necessary eroticism to put forth a believable social dance in a jook house. Furthermore, Byrd’s 2002 *The Minstrel Show* was a complex and complicated intervention into blackface minstrelsy that utilized dances of the early twentieth century, including a pointed confrontation with the Cakewalk, in order to challenge and breakdown racial stereotypes. The initial simplicity of Byrd’s choreography in *The Color Purple* also celebrates how “exceedingly accessible” the Slow Drag was and how many people were accepted into the movement dynamic without much bother or fuss. Shug Avery welcomes all to “Push Da Button,” and all do, including the older less athletic performers.

Critical response to Byrd’s choreography was unenthusiastic. Ben Brantley recognized his contribution only as “sprightly fits of choreography.” Critics generally agreed that director Gary Griffin rarely allowed Byrd to “let loose,” and the moment he finally does (in the Africa

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38 Byrd is currently the artistic director of Spectrum Dance Theatre in Seattle, and he continues to investigate the complexities of the history African Americans in performance. He has not returned to Broadway, however, he continues to work in a variety of styles and genres. He is currently working on a danced interpretation of Tchaikovsky’s opera, *Iolanta* for the 2018/2019 season. Spectrum Dance, “Donald Byrd,” accessed November 25, 2017. https://spectrundance.org/about/donald-byrd/.

39 Byrd created *The Minstrel Show* in 2002 for which he won a Bessie Award. He revived the piece in 2015 called *The Minstrel Show Revisited* that toured throughout the U.S. “Donald Byrd.”

40 Robinson, 36.

montage in act two) he radically overcompensates. Overall, Byrd does establish the sense of liberty and lascivious behaviour that the jook joint champions—something Doyle’s 2015 revival does not entirely achieve.

In Byrd and Griffin’s dramaturgical structure, the rural jook house provides, through lighting and simple wooden structures, a sense of escape and privacy. Historically, the jook house needed no assistance from public officials to function. As Hazzard-Gordon explains, “The jook provided both entertainment and an economic alternative to people excluded from the mainstream economy.” The dance in the jook house in the woods in The Color Purple shows an intimacy within the community, in a space free from the eyes of hovering authorities, even if only imagined. In “Push Da Button” there is a harmonious moment where bodies are grinding, backs are arching, and arms are swinging, where desires seem to be met and bodies of all physical sizes and abilities come together. The direct sexual metaphor of the lyrics unashamedly helps to eroticize the song in the production,

SHUG: Keep on turning up that voltage
Till that man begin to glow
Like you’re switchin’ on a lightbulb
Watch the juice begin to flow . . .
. . . Keep the key to rev her motor
Find the spot she love the best

43 John Lee Beatty’s set design for The Color Purple (2005) frames the stage with darkwooden walls, table tops, and a make-shift bar that easily accommodate the scandalous behaviours from gambling to drinking apropos to a jook joint.
44 Hazzard-Gordon, x.
If you don’t know where it is
Give her the stick; she’ll do the rest.45

The song is about sexual intercourse and celebrates the freedom of unbridled desire. The dance allows and encourages bodies of all types to engage in physical contact, to feel that visceral connection with another person. Celebrating physical intuitions and connectedness through the Slow Drag awakens a sense of utopianism held in the body. The appealing number champions black bodies dancing and demonstrates African American free will and sovereignty through its lack of physical inhibitions.46 This moment further physicalizes the historical trajectory, the “tangible and substantial category of cultural experience” of African American dance styles—from indigenous African dances where connections to many subsequent social dances can be made, to plantation dances where slaves sought out any sense of community through music and dance, to backwoods jook joints and a brief sense of seclusion and privacy.47

**Imagined Communities and Pre-Migratory Nostalgia**

The notion, imagined or not, of African Americans escaping from white control both during slavery and after emancipation created a tight community united by the goal to preserve their culture. As Hazzard-Gordon explains, “This sense of community existed in a dynamic

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46 The privacy to experience physical intimacy for African Americans is made all the more poignant keeping in mind the unofficial prohibition of serious love scenes/songs between black characters on stage during the early twentieth century. It was not until *Shuffle Along* in 1921 (nearly a decade later than the narrative of *The Color Purple*) that a love scene and song, “Love Will Find A Way,” between two African Americans was accepted and applauded by audiences. Allen Woll explains “while perfectly acceptable in white musical comedies, love scenes were taboo in black shows, since it was assumed that romancing would offend white audiences…Despite [efforts] to revise stereotypic notions of black behavior, the love making taboo lingered into the 1920s.” Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From ‘Coontown’ to ‘Dreamgirls’*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 23-24. In *The Color Purple*, “Push Da Button” and the scene in the jook house celebrate physical contact free of inhibitions for African Americans in an era where such actions were forbidden in the public sphere making the erotic-styled Slow Drag all the more affecting.

47 Foster, *Choreographing History*, 4.
tension with white control and allowed for the creation of distinctly African-American cultural activities."\(^{48}\) The nostalgia in this construct is for a sense of belonging and solidarity that was challenged in the years following the Civil War. As people scattered around the country, any sense of privacy was gone and “strong bonds of loyalty” broke down.\(^{49}\) There was uncertainty, anxiety, and indeed “some were frightened by their new freedom.”\(^{50}\) The Slow Drag evoked the power and endurance behind communities in the face of such enormous oppression. It is difficult to envision how communities in the past would have functioned and formed. However, using the body as a conduit to the past, or at least as an embodiment of memories, makes for a unique way of knowing and situating oneself in the world.

To be sure, there is a risk of suggesting there is a nostalgia for plantation days by celebrating dances that were essentially created out of the performance practices of, or near to, that era. Byrd, however, emphatically uses the black body in *The Color Purple* to show ownership of and pride in these dances if not necessarily the social conditions of 1907. African American performers in the 2005 production execute the social dance with grounded centers, a looseness of hips and knees, and an unrestricted sense of flow true to the origins of the dance.\(^{51}\) In the jook house scene, in order to clearly represent the African American communities involved, European influences should be very minimal.\(^{52}\) Though European influences had been absorbed into ragtime music, the Slow Drag, by its private nature in the remote jook house setting, would rely on African American movement sensibilities.

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\(^{48}\) Hazzard-Gordon, 63.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Having a grounded center is a term that comes from African and modern dance vocabulary that means staying low to the ground using lots of bend or flex in the knees, called *plié* in the classical vocabulary.

\(^{52}\) Nadine George-Graves, explains that as dances moved from rural to urban settings European influences were stronger. “Just Like Being at the Zoo: Primitivity and Ragtime Dances,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 63.
African American social dance communities do, however, transform in the move to the stage in a variety of ways. Most obviously, the rhythm of the music is sped up so there is a more extravagant and flashy feel to the piece, as opposed to the “slow, delayed sensuality,” which Nadine George-Graves describes is fundamental to the Slow Drag.\textsuperscript{53} Stephen Bray, Brenda Russell, and Allee Willis collectively share credit for creating the music and lyrics of \textit{The Color Purple}. Due to their different musical backgrounds, Bray from rock, Russell from jazz, and Willis from a multimedia and song writing background, there is a mixing of musical styles in the musical.\textsuperscript{54} The blues-styled music, though, sits more squarely in the era than most of the other songs in the musical that have a more contemporary R&B sound, sprinkled with simple pop rhythms and sentimental lyrics. The change in tempo, however, plays a large part in transforming the execution of the dance and shifts how the community is displayed. The increase in speed portrays the rural African American community as more gregarious and outward. At jook joints, participants “were exhausted from their work and tally of the day’s oppressions within their own community.”\textsuperscript{55} These conditions are very much part of the themes that circulate in \textit{The Color Purple}.

\textsuperscript{53} George-Graves, 59.

\textsuperscript{54} Stephen Bray is a drummer who comes from a more rock/pop background who is known for his collaborations with Madonna. Brenda Russell is a singer-songwriter and keyboardist who comes from a jazz and soul background. Allee Willis is a multi-media artist and songwriter as well as a set designer and director. “The Color Purple,” \textit{Playbill}, accessed December 18, 2017. http://www.playbill.com/production/the-color-purple-broadway-theatre-vault-0000012250,

\textsuperscript{55} George-Graves, 58-59.
Purple, even if they are not fully embodied in the dancing in Harpo’s jook joint on stage given the upbeat tempo.56

In addition, the dancing body in “Push Da Button” is more upright with shoulders back and the head up, a characteristic of a more European style that avoids slouched positions. This posture challenges the genuineness of the dance, though is part of the compensation in the theatricalization of the dance.57 There are some attempts in “Push Da Button” to avoid European physicalities; for example, knees are flexed throughout and the sensuous pelvic grinding is not European influenced. The Slow Drag is also reimagined by its very presentational, front-facing entertaining style. This choreographic choice alters the private and intimate nature of the dance. As Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan point out in “Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy,” the Slow Drag is a private dance done in dark, closed

56 The 1985 movie does find a middle ground. First, the camera takes a very narrow shot of the small venue, so the jook joint feels cramped and filled with people already very close by circumstance—an effect not necessarily possible on stage. Second, Shug Avery (Margaret Avery) sings two songs in the jook house (both composed by Quincy Jones, who was also a producer and informal musical adviser to the musical) as opposed to one in the musical. The first song, “The Dirty Dozens” is an up tempo piece, only slightly slower than “Push Da Button” where all patrons are clapping and dancing along; several couples in the background are dancing in the Slow Drag style. The atmosphere, as per the genre of film is more relaxed—film not having the convention/expectation of a pre-intermission showstopper. The second song, “Ms. Celie’s Blues” however is unique to the movie as it has a very slow and sensuous blues feel very apropos to the jook atmosphere. Shug sings the song directly to Celie, in a very playful and sexy manner, while patrons look on casually and continue their activities in the joint. A second slowed down song would have been interesting to add to the musical and help evoke the essence of the jook joint. However, the duet, “What About Love,” that occurs between Shug and Celie several scenes later in the musical, likely precluded any earlier ballad between the two. Both songs available for viewing on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eK3URAH760w, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKe3Ht7idJU, accessed February 26, 2017. Of note, Oprah Winfrey made her acting debut in the role of Sofia, and then went on to be a producer and promoter for both Broadway productions.

57 George-Graves gives additional reasoning for the shift in posture, “the movement of the body towards a more upright stance was also influenced by the fact that more black workers were moving from agrarian lifestyles which shifted the importance of the earth and groundedness.” The jook house in 1907 would have reflected a mix of these occupations and so some leeway in the stance is understandable. George-Graves, “Just Like Being at the Zoo: Primitivity and Ragtime Dances” in Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader, ed. Julie Malnig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 63.
venues. The dances that were taken up in rural jook joints or private clubhouses were not for show or teaching but for social relations and sexual opportunities. This can be seen in the intense sensuality that surrounds the Slow Drag, described by Hubbard and Monaghan as only “marginally acceptable,” when it arrived in New York.

The movement style in *The Color Purple* also shifts in reaction to the tempo as bodies in motion in the number seem tuned in to a more contemporary “Dirty Dancing” style, a fusion of more vigorous Latin dances such as the Mambo and the Lambada, than the relaxed and languid Slow Drag. Certainly, the odd high flying partnered lifts and kicks are out of place in the historical context of the narrative, along with partner-supported drops into the splits by some chorus members. By the end, “Push Da Button” becomes a highly stylized Broadway number, with unison group choreography that builds to all shaking their hands, in the “jazz hands” style, towards Shug Avery before all collapsing to the ground. Byrd lets loose in the last minute of the piece and decidedly over-compensates by adding in *jétés* (leaps) and other ballet-derived moves, but as the act one finale nears, the need to impress audiences is critical. Understandably, this is part of the compensation that happens when social dance is transferred to the stage.

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59 Hubbard and Monaghan, “Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Floor,” 130. In fact, the deliberately unhurried speed of the Slow Drag secluded it from other more upbeat dances of the time. Once the dance transitioned to New York dance clubs, and became known more publically as “dancing-on-a-dime” or “the grind,” it attracted less interest publically and was “not as popular at venues such as the Savoy, and others because couples were to be constantly moving.” Hubbard and Monaghan, 130. The very slowed down speed of the Slow Drag kept it in some ways protected from appropriation.
60 The 1987 movie *Dirty Dancing* popularized the term “Dirty Dancing,” where sexual and erotic dances, such as the Lambada and the Grind were taken up and celebrated with much gusto heralding a stage version, prequel, and live concert tours. “Dirty Dancing,” accessed November 26, 2017. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092890/.
61 “Jazz hands” are done with fingers splayed and wrists shaking. The move is often used in spoofs of musical theatre as the sole way performers show excitement on stage. In general Broadway choreographers avoid using “Jazz hands” today unless specifically as a spoof or parody of the form. The use of them to conclude “Push Da Button,” is not a spoof, though exaggerates the energy in the jook joint.
However, what is pressed out of the dance by the end is its universal welcoming of all bodies and skill levels. Finely trained dancers, with taut and strong bodies, turn and kick with expertise and panache, distorting any ideas the unskilled could join in. Publicizing or “spectacularizing” the dance imagines a different sort of experience; trained bodies replace social bodies. There is nostalgia at work here that envisions the jook joint as a hot club more suited to 1930s Harlem than to the rural south. In this kind of nostalgia—more restorative, and in fact disruptive, than reflective—there is what Rebecca Rugg calls “a fantasy of similarity,” where America is seen to be populated by people who are all alike and of equal abilities.62 Dehistoricizing appropriation in this manner assumes that all jook joints are of this uplifted manner and restructures the importance of the venue to the African American experience.

Choreography and The Color Purple Revival (2015)

In a drastic shift, the dance in the 2015 revival of The Color Purple is near non-existent. There is no choreographer listed as part of the production team. Scottish stage director John Doyle is credited for “Direction and Musical Staging.”63 Ann Yee was the choreographer of Doyle’s initial London production of the revival in 2013, whose contributions Ben Brantley described at the time as “subtle and elegant.”64 Yee’s name was removed from the production

62 Rebecca Ann Rugg, “What It Used to Be: Nostalgia and the State of the Broadway Musical,” Theater 32, no. 2 (2002): 46. As described in the introduction, Svetlana Boym finds reflective nostalgia can be beneficial towards understanding one’s self in the contemporary moment. Reflective nostalgia suggests a meditation on and retracing of the past that opens up the possibility for considering alternate perspectives that may go on to influence future individual actions.


credits and the movement signature became more understated once the piece moved to Broadway. The choice not to include social dances that were part of the jook joints of rural black communities makes for an alternate interpretation of African American life in the early twentieth century than the original production. This move risks disregarding or redrawing rural African American communities as more austere than they were. Doyle, renowned for paring down musicals to focus on character depth and development, chooses to show minimal dance-like moves in “Push Da Button.” There are some shoulder shimmies, a few hip swings, and select “step-touches,” but Doyle, who also designed the sparse set, uses the chairs that make up most of the environment of the play to signal the sexuality. At certain points during the song men and women sit on or straddle the chairs. The performers then rise and lower their bodies on the chairs as a stand-in for physical connection. This move undermines the possible nostalgia within the movement, creating a stiffness that, along with Jennifer Hudson’s somewhat self-conscious performance as Shug Avery, subdues the experience of the jook house. The straddling of the chairs, while apropos in a musical such as Cabaret (“Mein Heir”) or Chicago (“Cell Black Tango”), seems gratuitous and borrows a trope that works in a cabaret-like setting but not within the modest dramaturgical structure Doyle has set up in The Color Purple. Doyle’s choices in

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65 Doyle has received much critical acclaim for his take on Stephen Sondheim productions, such as Sweeney Todd (2005) and Company (2006) that required the actors to sing and play their musical accompaniment, drawing attention more towards the character and away from the production. For more on actor-musicianship see Jeremy Harrison’s Actor-Musicianship (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). I have written elsewhere of the considerations of musicianship as choreography in the work of John Doyle, “The New Choreography of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Allegro,” Studies in Musical Theatre Journal 9, no. 3 (2016): 277-285.

the scene fall slightly flat, and as critic Joe Dzeimianowicz describes, his use of chairs “feels a bit gimmicky” in parts.  

Critics overall, however, had positive reactions to Doyle’s production, all generally agreeing that it was an improvement on the original. What is noticeable across a span of a dozen different reviews is the movement is rarely mentioned, if at all. Some begin their reaction by noticing its absence: Matt Windman says, “At first, Doyle’s production comes off as overtly mannered and limited in movement”; Jesse Green observes, “The songs and dialogue have been trimmed, and much of the dance music removed as fluff.” However, both resolve that the show works in this new manner.

What is more often recognized is how the general conventions of musical theatre have shifted slightly under Doyle’s treatment. For example, Peter Marks of the Washington Post describes the show as “virtually a concert version,” or Charles McNulty at the Los Angeles Times finds that Doyle “treat[s] the show more like a church service than a traditional book musical.” The absence of dance does not seem to bother anyone; most applaud the greater focus on Celie (Cynthia Erivo) and the vocal heft the female leads bring to the show. Green articulates most clearly that Doyle “stages the songs for their thematic content”; the staging of “Push Da Button” “separate[s] the women and the men in ways that clarify the lyrics and then bring[s] them

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together on equal terms. He gets the showstopper almost as a side effect.” This treatment turns away from the embodiment of the music and lyrics and veers the musical more towards a “concert version” that keeps emphasis on the voice, over the body and choreography, to achieve success.

Possibly, the need for a more robust set up of the jook joint fades into the background in order to provide space for a celebrity performer. Hudson does do a highly suggestive, if not exactly comfortable performance, grinding atop a man laid out on a chair at one point, but for much of the song she assembles the patrons of the jook joint in chairs and sings to them in a sermon-like style. The patrons of the jook house seem more like a congregation than the denizens of a rogue gambling house. Lyrics such as,

Keep on turning up that voltage,
Till that man begin to glow
Like you're switchin’ on a lightbulb
Watch the juice begin to flow.

present a stark contrast to the physicality shown on stage. While Hudson coaxes some sexuality out of the men, the women’s bodies seem void of sensuality—they are curious but seem uncomfortable. While the engagement with the chairs hints at some eroticism, Doyle’s choice derails the nature of the jook joints. The ensemble does seem to warm up to the lascivious concepts suggested in the song, though historically, convincing someone of their sexual potential would not be needed in a backwoods jook joint. The importance of the jook house and dance in the rural community gets misrepresented as stiff and perfunctory, disassembling the imagery in Walker’s novel.

70 Green, December 10, 2015.
Unlike Byrd, Doyle does use a variety of body types, all with much less dance technicity or overt athleticism than is often the norm in many Broadway choruses. Does taking this tack make for a more sophisticated, complex, and respectable performance? Hilton Als finds that Doyle “exercise[s] empathy, critical distance, and an openness to lives and cultures other than his own.”72 This identification by Als readily captures the approach of Doyle’s overall dramaturgy, and I would wholly agree, were it not for his unusual use of movement in the second act, where bodies are purposely and skillfully used to invoke images of Africa. Doyle keeps his distance from fully imagining the community in the jook house, as applauded by Als, but then conceives of the “Africa” of Celie’s imagination with relative abundance, as a place filled with family and tradition. This contradiction in how culture is embodied undermines nostalgia for the places and moments of respite for African American communities in the Rural South. It is worth explaining the movement concept in the second act of Doyle’s revival to demonstrate Doyle’s puzzling use of movement.

When Celie reads though hidden letters from her sister Nettie, whom she comes to learn is living in Africa, Doyle subtly and gracefully traces Celie’s imaginings of Africa for the audience. In place of what had been a lengthy African dance sequence in Byrd’s original choreography, but over-saturated with Byrd’s classical ballet techniques and stereotypical “African Dance” steps, Doyle uses a much more simplistic yet effective portrayal.73 For example, Doyle engages the female ensemble to imagine Nettie’s world in Africa, whereas Byrd has a large dance chorus (who did not seem to appear in any other part of the show) take over the scene. For Doyle, the same women who have been part of Celie’s life up until this point as

73 Brian Scott Lipton is his review of the African section in original production, felt Byrd’s choreography was “more appropriate to 1999 that 1929,” TheatreMania, December 1, 2005, http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/12-2005/the-color-purple_7219.html.
secondary characters and community members use simple baskets from the previous scene to evoke images of Africa. They put the baskets on their heads and slowly promenade around the stage. They pull out bright coloured scarves and gently wave them up and down to enhance the imagery. By avoiding any compilation of African dance, but rather using gestures of everyday community tasks, the story is kept in the African paradigm and not shifted to a questioning of European influences or blatant appropriation. Critic David Rooney explains the issue in his review of the revival:

One of the original show’s more problematic sequences was the jump to Africa, to pick up the life of Celie’s adored sister Nettie (Joaquina Kalukango), working as a missionary. Whereas before, that narrative shift brought a jarring detour into full-on Lion King exotica, Doyle transports us with the simple means of basketware carried by the female ensemble members, who unfurl lengths of African-print fabric.

In the 2005 production, the African dance chorus, as explained by Rooney, was a distraction to the overall narrative of the show. The simplicity and practicality of Doyle’s representation of Africa within the sparse set helps conjure up the ideas circulating in Celie’s imagination without the scene feeling exoticized or primitivized. In contrast, Doyle’s treatment of the jook joint scene seems less able to “transport” the audience to a place where inhibitions are dropped and sexual energy abounds in a way that the location requires.

The incompatibility of the two sections felt like a stumble in the dramaturgy of the piece. Though the revival was much more successful overall than the original, offering up the opportunity to further shape the movement in the musical to his original choreographer, Ann Yee (or another choreographer), may have provided a greater space for reflection on the African

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75 Rooney, December 10, 2015.
American experience. Brantley observes it is part of Doyle’s style to “[make] shows smaller to
demonstrate how truly big they are.” However, despite his paring down and reducing
sensationalism, bodily meanings are unavoidably present and bring forth “a substantial category
of cultural experience” to tap into that could have deepened the experience of the jook house
instead of bringing it into a more contemporary minimalist interpretation.

In all, *The Color Purple* is a difficult show for a choreographer to take on given the
minimal and differing movement requirements. The narrative of the show does not offer the
opportunity to develop a choreographic through-line or cohesive movement signature. The
contrast between Doyle’s modest interpretation and Byrd’s more spectacular methods is vast.
Both approach the jook house in different ways, though neither captures the essence and import
of the backwoods establishment. Hazzard-Gordon claims, “The African American jook may very
well be the most significant development in American popular dance and popular music
history.” The challenge of addressing this significance is complex. Byrd adds flourishes that
transform the intimate dance into a more public entertainment offering expected of the genre,
while Doyle attempts to pull back, but loses the essence and weakens opportunities for reflective
nostalgia. Given the fact that the 2015 revival ran during the rise of the Black Lives Matter
movement, there was perhaps a missed opportunity for Doyle to make a more emblematic
statement of the importance of the jook joint to a story of the inner workings, accomplishments,
and solidarity of African American communities. The embodied nostalgia within the bodies of
the performers, as carriers of that tradition, could have been lifted through movement to a point
where there was a more personal contemplation of African American autonomy. Hazzard-

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london.html.
77 Foster, 4.
78 Hazzard-Gordon, 76.
Gordon insists, “For it is in the jook that core black culture—it’s food, language, community fellowship, mate selection, music, and dance found sanctuary.” It would be possible to show a key place (or idea) of sanctuary in a time of much misalignment, with both critical distance and eloquence. Though Byrd’s choreography flattens the importance of this fundamental function, the jook scene is a highlight that uplifts in the original musical, whereas Doyle’s scene cuts off a valuable opportunity for nostalgic enlightenment, empowerment, and a sense of belonging in the contemporary moment. In consideration that the body, “lacks finality” troubling how the body is shaped by its social history, particularly experiences as significant as the jook joint according to Hazzard-Gordon, is an essential endeavor. Accordingly, a greater emphasis on the bodily practices of the era throughout the entire production (not only two songs) might help to make the cultural import of the show more physically tangible and encourage greater contemplation of racial injustices.

III. **Ragtime, The Cakewalk, and Frictional Nostalgia**

*This was a most robust composition,*
*a vigorous music that roused the senses and never stood still a moment. The boy perceived it as light touching various places in space, accumulating in intricate patterns until the entire room was made to glow with its own being. The music filled the stairwell to the third floor where the mute and unforgiving Sarah sat with her hands folded and listened with the door open.*

—*Ragtime,* E.L. Doctorow

In this excerpt from E.L. Doctorow’s novel, the solemn Coalhouse Walker Jr., a serious and professional musician, plays on Mother’s piano. With his left hand bouncing back and forth

79 Hazzard-Gordon, 173.
80 Grosz, xi.
like a sewing machine, clearly articulating the syncopated beat, he introduces the household to ragtime music. Though his attempts at drawing Sarah (with whom he has a child) downstairs continue for many more weeks, the impact of the ragtime music on the family is near-instant. Doctorow’s story of the intersection of cultures in the United States at the turn of the century is the dream and rapture of *Ragtime*. Through engaging and often performative writing, Doctorow spins a story that weaves in celebrities of the time, from famous escape artist Harry Houdini to entertainer Evelyn Nesbit. Delving into the micro-histories of individual families and pulling back to the macro-history of an entire generation, *Ragtime* by construct has a syncopated rhythm in and of itself. Doctorow tells a tale of intimacy and intrigue between the unlikely connections of three families at the turn of the twentieth century.

*Ragtime* is a result of Doctorow intersecting fiction with traditional historical narratives. His lyricism paints a world where Americana is the lifeblood of communities and patriotic mythologies turn the motor of time. *Ragtime* is a fable that tells the story of lives, loves, and the land the American Dream was built upon. Shortly after the publication of the book in 1975, John Brooks describes the melding of the novel with the soul of the music from which it takes its title: “It is full of coincidence and implausibilities; that is because like ragtime, it is not about life but about a dream of life.”

Doctorow reflects on an era that was both rigid, like the clipped tones of the music, and exhilarating in its newness, like the light ragtime melodies, and innovative, like the bold shift in emphasis of the syncopated rhythms. There is both chaos and calmness to a story that tries to know the lives of so many people and join them in one rhythm; a contrast between the everyday and the theatrical. By its sheer expressiveness, *Ragtime* ballyhoos to be brought from page to stage. Establishing the tenets of this theatricalization prior to an examination of the

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Cakewalk serves to set the tone and provide a grounding knowledge for an investigation of the complexities that circulate in the popular and problematic social dance.

**Ragtime the Musical**

Canadian producer Garth Drabinsky and his production company LiveEnt Inc. rose to the challenge to bring the novel to life in 1996.\(^82\) The lavish production initially opened in Toronto and, after several rounds of revisions, moved to Broadway in 1998. With music by Stephen Flaherty, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, and book by Terrence McNally, *Ragtime* is a nearly three-hour musical that in its time was one of the most expensive musicals made.\(^83\) *Ragtime* begins when Mother finds a baby buried in her garden. She takes in the baby and its mother, Sarah. Coalhouse, the father of the baby, eventually regains Sarah’s trust and the two begin their lives together with the help of Mother, despite Father’s disapproval of her involvement. When Will Conklin and his rogue band of volunteer firemen ransack Coalhouse’s car he seeks justice, only to be ignored by authorities. Sarah is killed in her attempt to help Coalhouse, beginning his dangerous and ultimately fatal attempt at revenge. Secondary stories follow personalities of the era, including Houdini, Emma Goldman, J.P. Morgan, and Henry Ford.

*Ragtime* lost the Tony for Best Musical to *The Lion King*, but won Best Score, Best Book, Best Featured Actress (Audra McDonald), and Best Scenic Design. Though some critics, such as Ben Brantley, were disappointed in the less-than-subtle show, *Ragtime* ran over 800

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\(^{82}\) Drabinsky based the musical on the 1975 novel. There is also a 1981 movie based on the novel directed by Milos Forman starring James Cagney and Pat Obrien, with a score composed by Randy Neuman. There is no apparent connect between the movie score and the musical score.

performances.\textsuperscript{84} While \textit{The Lion King} is a coming-of-age tale, with a successful Disney movie behind it, it is difficult to pinpoint what \textit{Ragtime} the musical is. The production is at once a dreamy, rose-colored venture into the past brought to life by exquisite costumes and impressive sets, supported by a harmonious score sung by a close to sixty-member cast; as well as a very tangled web of illusion and disillusion. Harry Houdini, singing in the third person (as all do in the prologue), hints at this complexity: “But for all his achievements he knew he was only an illusionist. But he wanted to believe there was more.”\textsuperscript{85} This distance from the self is established from the beginning and all characters introduce themselves in this impersonalized third person manner. The self-narration of how one imagines him or herself makes this musical a prime site of nostalgia. Brantley titles his review, “\textit{Ragtime: A Diorama With Nostalgia Rampant},” and the framework he identifies is accurate.\textsuperscript{86} The plot celebrates nation building, complete with Father making his fortune selling patriotic bunting and fireworks, however there is much more that can be discerned from the movements of the many bodies on stage. \textit{Ragtime} offers the opportunity to explore beyond the “rampant” restorative nostalgia, and critically rethink the embodied experience of a story that begins with “small clear chords hung like flowers” in Mother’s softly decorated parlour and ends with the deaths of Coalhouse, Sarah, and Father.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ragtime}’s run was not enough to recoup its initial investment. Ken Mandelbaum suggests several reasons, “Reviews were very divided, with at least two negative notices in \textit{The New York Times} and a number of unfavorable verdicts elsewhere. The show seemed to have about as many admirers as detractors. It was also a costly production to run, so even with strong grosses, it was unable to become a financial winner.” Significant revivals of \textit{Ragtime}, however, have had varying success including a scaled down version brought Broadway in 2009, with direction and choreography by Marcia Milgrom Dodge; a 2012 revival in London with direction by Timothy Sheader; numerous regional productions and concert versions have appeared since its original production. Mandelbaum, “Features,” \textit{Broadway.com}, September 22, 2004, https://www.broadway.com/buzz/10715/q-a-92204/.


\textsuperscript{87} Doctorow, \textit{Ragtime}, 159.
Choreography and *Ragtime*

Prior to the start of the original production, directed by Frank Galati and designed by Eugene Lee, a larger-than-life sepia-toned stereopticon sits in the middle of the stage. The viewing apparatus from the late 1890s begins the trek back in time of *Ragtime*. As the introductory windup to the ragtime melody begins, the stereopticon rises into the rafters, optically dissolving within a second stereopticon image on the scrim. The transition reveals a tableau of the townspeople of New Rochelle, New York, dressed in soft white and cream costumes posing for a portrait. The photographic framing sets up a sense of doubleness and reproduction from the start. The play opens with an appropriately grand, astonishingly complex introduction to the era, and the ragtime rhythms of 1902 choreographed by Graciela Daniele.

Daniele, originally from Buenos Aires, is a ten-time Tony-nominated Broadway choreographer. She first made her mark on Broadway as an ensemble dancer, then worked as Michael Bennett’s assistant (*Follies*, 1971) learning the tools and techniques of choreographing for musical theatre. Daniele eventually developed her own movement expertise and became a substantial presence in the musical theatre field both as a choreographer and director-choreographer.\(^8\) An immigrant herself, Daniele has the unique skill of assuming American

movement styles using her outsider perspective as a grounding standpoint.\textsuperscript{89} Daniele and Galati put forth an opening sequence that introduces the main characters and establishes the tension between communities at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States.

In the prologue, titled simply “Ragtime,” the singing alternates between a white chorus, an African American chorus, and an immigrant chorus—all characters in the story are part of the ten minute opening song. The people of New Rochelle begin:

LITTLE BOY: In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Brodview Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York, and it seemed for some years thereafter that all the family’s days would be warm and fair.\textsuperscript{90}

Already a tinge of nostalgia colors the piece. The white ensemble then executes a very formal series of promenading steps. Performers shift their weight to one side while the alternate leg extends forward in a turned-out presentational manner, showing off the foot and ankle. The movement is carefully repeated with the other foot as the body moves forward. Some performers hold parasols, top hats or canes. This strutting and posing is redolent of quadrilles and other European dances, and is the first hint of the movement signature in the show. When the African American ensemble enters, their execution of the same steps is spirited, has much greater panache, and embraces the syncopated rhythm in its wholeness as opposed to merely hinting at the off beat as the first group does. The white ensemble arcs upstage, continuing the promenade.

\textsuperscript{89} In a 1994 interview with Svetlana McLee Grody, Daniele explains, “I didn’t grow up watching Fred Astaire. I was twenty-three, twenty-four years old before I came to this country and really got into American musical theatre. But perhaps because I am a foreigner, I can be a little more objective. From an outside culture, I can see the magnificence that could be.” Daniele hints at her skills (and style) of assembling different fragments of movements in work that involves various dance forms outside of her background, “when you go into a show that demands the flavor of a different culture, it’s up to the choreographer to do the research. Not do the traditional thing, but take that influence and mix it,” this sort of assembly can be seen in \textit{Ragtime}. Grody and Lister, \textit{Conversations with Choreographers}, 157, 163.

\textsuperscript{90} “Ragtime,” Ahrens, 1998.
as the African American group circles downstage. Coalhouse Walker, Jr. steps out of the group and boasts of himself, again continuing the third person narrative style:

    COALHOUSE: In Harlem, men and women of color forgot their troubles and danced and reveled to the music of Coalhouse Walker, Jr. This was a music that was theirs and no one else’s.⁹¹

    A connection between the two groups is immediately set up in the similar rhythms and melodies but the narratives of each community are drastically different. Already, African Americans need to emphatically claim ragtime music as theirs, whereas the boy muses that the world is fair and free—a decidedly privileged and naïve perspective. A third group joins representing the immigrant population completing the collage effect. Tateh and his young daughter step forward to introduce themselves:

    TATEH: His name was Tateh. He never spoke of his wife
    The Little Girl was all he had now.
    Together, they would escape.⁹²

The immigrants, keen to assimilate into their new world, determinedly take up a blended version of the movement styles of the two choruses.⁹³

    In the nearly ten-minute prologue, the parodic origins of the Cakewalk are hinted at in various fragments of movement. These imitative stylings make up part of the texture of the opening, with each group repeating variations on the moves of the other. From the start, the African American and white characters are compared through their movement and postures. This

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⁹² Ibid.
“mimicry with a difference” is suggestive of the challenge of tap or early jazz dances. In “Ragtime,” there is a testing of the physical boundaries between groups, and an embodied tension or strain is felt between the clusters because of their visibly different interpretations of the same movements. This discomfort is further emphasized by lack of eye contact with each other, in spite of discreet attempts to size the other up. As all sing about “moving to a ragtime beat,” the famous actress and performer of the era Evelyn Nesbit enters along with two male dancers. The trio does a very stylized dance much more common to the vaudeville stage, distinguishing themselves from the social dance-based choreography shown by the groups. Nesbit’s dance includes many can-can like kicks, done with the leg unfolding in a _developpé_ style. This delineation is significant: as opposed to a straight kick from the ground, this stylization makes the move look like an exaggerated step, a sort of grotesque mirroring of the moves of the two ensembles that are executed closer to the ground. Further, Nesbit’s foot in the kick is flexed as opposed to pointed, breaking the fluid line of the leg, a slight physical agitation against the charm of the opening. The affected, exaggerated, and fragmented movements displayed by the three choruses and punctuated by Nesbitt’s trio (before joining the white chorus) are distinguishing factors of the movement signature Daniele builds throughout the production. This imagery is taken up in some of the marketing of the show as well. The cast recording shows numerous silhouetted figures who promenade from one side to the other of the cover.

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94 Kraut, 137.
96 _Developpé_ means “to unfold” the leg in classical ballet terminology, the leg is raised by flexing the knee first up to a ninety degree angle or more and extending the lower leg forward from there.
By the end of the prologue, three groups are clearly established: the white Americans, the African Americans, and the Immigrants. The rhythm of the ragtime beat sits differently with each group. In the final chorus of the song, the African American group keeps time by pulsing their heels up and down whereas the other two groups remain still. The white chorus is particularly stiff and their upright stylizations are emphasized by their crisp starched costumes. The overall conceit of the opening sets up the thematic movement code of posturing, prancing, and promenading—in essence, the Cakewalk. The deconstruction of the dance and movement codes by Daniele reveals various kinds of nostalgia through the complexities of the embodied history within the dance. Further, the self-narration hints at a sense of self-parody that speaks back to cultural power structures in effect at the time, particularly in the exaggerated stereotypes set up from the beginning. Before proceeding to analyze the nostalgic effects of the fragmenting of the Cakewalk in *Ragtime*, a necessary understanding of the history and intricacies involved in the social dance is required.

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Historical Background of The Cakewalk

The Cakewalk, by its parodic nature, is inevitably connected to European movement sensibilities. Created on southern plantations by enslaved African Americans at “get-togethers,” the Cakewalk was a temporary diversion from the oppression slaves felt at the hands of their owners. Having observed their masters partake in celebrations or balls with much pretention and pomp, slaves invented the subversive dance involving both mimicry and parody “to ridicule their white masters.”98 Plantation owners and their friends enjoyed watching the slaves imitate them, thinking them decidedly less graceful and refined—the point of the dance being entirely missed by the observers.99

The Cakewalk is one of the only African American social dances to have no African roots; the imitation and mockery of European styled dances was the source of the form.100 After emancipation in 1865, African Americans continued to do aspects of the dance in various informal settings out of habit and the movement style was predictably taken up as part of the imitations of African Americans in white minstrel shows. Replacing the “walkaround,” where all minstrel troupe members toured the stage, the Cakewalk, in its growing popularity, became the

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99 The dance is so named, as owners would often award a cake to the best dancers. Pugh explains the cakes on plantations were “made up of stored-up provisions like cornmeal, baked in ashes.” Pugh, 17.
100 There were a few attempts at the time of the Cakewalk’s popular emergence to connect the dance to Africa as a way to deny its imitative roots. Megan Pugh reports that a Boston Daily Globe article from 1892, claimed the dance was “an old savage custom” from “Darkest Africa.” “What Will It Be? Boston Daily Globe, February 23, 1892 in Pugh, 16. The Stearnses also discuss some connections of the Cakewalk to Africa such as the Ring Shout but conclude the protests of the dance being African was akin to “criticism of dancing the twist and later steps to rock-and-roll.” These types of protests generally came from those opposed to popular culture and against community members dropping their duties to take up the latest craze. Stearns and Stearns, 123.
most anticipated part of minstrel shows and spilled over into popular culture.\textsuperscript{101} How and by whom the Cakewalk is performed gets at what Pugh calls the “slippery core” of the Cakewalk: “It could be performed with grace or comedy, as a sign of social aspiration, a parody of those aspirations, or a wholesale rejection of aspiration in favor of rude, freewheeling, seemingly untamed motion.”\textsuperscript{102}

On the rural level, at the turn of the twentieth century, Cakewalk contests became part of community activities and fundraisers. In cities, large-scale competitions and demonstrations were organized, in many cases with both African American and white participants (though not partnering up across cultures). In New York, Madison Square Garden hosted an annual Cakewalking competition on the grandest scale. Wagers were made on prospective winners, and most knew “black superiority was a foregone conclusion.”\textsuperscript{103} In a contest between the “originators” of the dance versus the “imitators” of the dance, African American competitors prevailed knowing the exact nuances of the parody that enabled them to delight audiences, but also to take away the cash prize.\textsuperscript{104}

Inevitably, the Cakewalk infiltrated entertainment venues, and revues on Broadway took it up. Productions would commonly end with a Cakewalk, or an extravagant twist on the form, performed by African American dancers, such as the “Cakewalk Jubilee” that concluded John

\textsuperscript{101} Though minstrel shows began with white troupes, the style was eventually taken up by black troupes as a way to perform in the genre that drew in the most audience members. William Henry Lane was one of the first African American performers in minstrel shows. Lane worked solo, billed as “Master Juba,” and went on to perform with a variety of minstrel groups. Prominent black minstrel companies formed in the late 1860s and included, Brooker and Clayton’s Georgia Minstrels, or simply the Georgia Minstrels. Companies were added to or expanded and ownership shifted, changing the names to “Haverly’s European Minstrels,” then “Callender’s Consolidated Spectacular Colored Minstrels,” most generally had white owners and managers. Black minstrel shows became popular as they were adapted to have more song and dance in them and less “olios” or skits. Black minstrel shows were also known to have the most extravagant finales (Stearns and Stearns, 55-60). See Part Two of the Stearnses’ Jazz Dance for a thorough investigation of dance in both early and late minstrels shows, pages 35-62.

\textsuperscript{102} Pugh, 15.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
Isham’s *The Octoroons* in 1895.\(^{105}\) Perhaps the most well known of the theatricalized Cakewalks is in the 1898 musical comedy *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk*.\(^{106}\) The show was the first Broadway musical with an all-African American cast.\(^{107}\) The African American writing and composing team of Will Marion Cook and Paul Lawrence wrote *Clorindy* and though it was more of a musical revue than a complete musical, the production did elevate the pair’s reputation, which came to full fruition with *In Dahomey* in 1903.\(^{108}\) *In Dahomey* also ended with an impressive Cakewalk. The last show on Broadway to have a Cakewalk as the finale was *Darktown Follies* in 1913. The Stearnses write:

> At the conclusion of the show the entire company got together again for a cakewalk—parading, bowling, prancing, strutting, and high-kicking with arched backs and pointed toes. . . . As an ensemble finale, the Cakewalk was unbeatable, and it brought *Darktown Follies* to a triumphant dancing conclusion.\(^{109}\)

Markedly, the Stearnses note that it was not until “the miracle of *Shuffle Along*” that dance changed on Broadway, in touring circuits, and ballroom dance settings; the Cakewalk fell out of fashion as more rhythmic and jazz styles took over.\(^{110}\)

> The performance of the Cakewalk in social settings and the Cakewalk on stage exhibit only slight differences, as the dance is already in a presentational style. When the Cakewalk was

\(^{105}\) Stearns and Stearns, 118.  
\(^{106}\) Ibid., 119.  
\(^{107}\) The show was still managed by white producers, a business structure that has remained on Broadway until very recently.  
\(^{108}\) Thomas Riis explains *Clorindy, or The Origins of the Cakewalk* was not considered a complete musical as it only included five songs, and describes it more as a “song and dance medley,” regardless, the show, “made history as the first thoroughly black American shows to find critical acclaim in the heart of Broadway,” at the Casino Roof Garden. “Cook, Will Marion,” Thomas Riis, *Grove Music Online* January 20, 2001,  
\(^{109}\) Stearns and Stearns, 130-131.  
\(^{110}\) Ibid.
done in a social situation where there was little to no distance between audience and performer, secondary meanings (such as its slave origins and class oppressions) were lessened as social pursuits and community happenings were at the forefront of any social dance event of the time. When the Cakewalk was put on a professional stage however, as the grand finale of a Broadway show with audiences standing and applauding, the dance was glamorized and saluted as a national idiom. A very “House of Mirrors” feel to the dance emerges in this spectacularization—audiences are applauding professional dancers imitating the dance of the general populace, imitating the dance that slaves did, who were imitating and ridiculing their white oppressors. This “parodic shell game” becomes an entanglement of embodied histories, white obliviousness, and the drive of popular culture and capitalism, all of which risks obscuring and simplifying the slave communities from which the Cakewalk emerged.\(^{111}\) How communities doing the dance imagine themselves in the game, or what role participants inhabit, becomes part of the complexity of the Cakewalk’s embodied nostalgia.

Considering what gets flattened in the move of the Cakewalk to the stage, the initial obscuring of the meaning of the Cakewalk happened as soon as white performers took it up and made it a parody of black lives in minstrel shows. The foundational mockery of white plantation owners by slaves was erased, and the “titillating” opportunity for white dancers to imitate African Americans was taken up.\(^{112}\) The dance inevitably devolved into a dance craze. The debasement only worsens as it moves to the stage in the Broadway musical. The bodies that originally did the Cakewalk were African American; bodies that were whipped, tortured, starved, and over-worked were the bodies that had the ingenuity to create the dance—that history is embodied in them. The community that African Americans imagined from the beginning of the

\(^{111}\) Pugh, 23.
\(^{112}\) Ibid., 22.
creation of the Cakewalk was founded upon collective survival and self-determination. However, as whites both in the United States and Europe take up the Cakewalk in social settings, and also enthusiastically applaud African American performers in the Cakewalk finales in the early Broadway musicals, this imagining gets deeply fractured.

The Cakewalk will always have underlying meanings and this complexity emerges when any sensibilities of the style are hinted at. Fundamentally, the history of slavery that underlies the entire Cakewalk cannot be erased or overlooked. Pugh succinctly states, “The Cakewalk gets at deeper truths, and deeper patterns, all the way down to the country’s great unfinished business of slavery.”\textsuperscript{113} The Cakewalk is emblematic of a double behavior from its genesis—the genuine person doing the dance and the persona or “mask donned before its white oppressors.”\textsuperscript{114} This enmeshment of identities and cultures involves an interpretation of the “Other” (or the white ruling class more specifically) that comes from a foundational place of agitation and suffering. Doctorow explores this emotional, social, and political paradigm in \textit{Ragtime}, and Daniele physicalizes the theatricalization of these entangled ideologies on stage by creating a movement signature built around the Cakewalk eventually performed by the entire cast.

\textbf{\textit{Ragtime}, The Cakewalk, and Frictional Nostalgia}

The unintended intersection of the lives of Mother and Father, and Coalhouse and Sarah is the fulcrum around which \textit{Ragtime} operates. Mother tries to imagine a community of racial harmony whereas Father remains a symbol of antiquated ways of thinking, inevitably causing tension. The nostalgic contradictions play out in the socio-political imaginings embodied in the

\textsuperscript{113} Pugh, 25.
Cakewalk, and the deconstruction of the dance highlights the incompatibility of the four lives, reinforced by Coalhouse’s death at the hand of white authorities. The continued prejudices against African Americans, the proliferation of stereotypes, and the impulse of white communities assuming what is not theirs is what Coalhouse fights against in the narrative. The fruitlessness of Coalhouse’s efforts to get the police’s help for the crime against his property, and the senselessness of Sarah’s death, leads to a fracturing of the mental composure of the once-respected musician. A radicalized Coalhouse powers the narrative until he is shot on the library steps at the climax of the show. This break in the harmony Mother envisions is taken up in the choreography in several ways, most strongly seen in the beginning and end of the musical.

As previously discussed, from the opening prologue an embodied sense of privilege and nationalistic pride radiates from the group and codes the white cast’s movement as such. Though the anticipation for a Cakewalk hangs in the air given the music and the era, the withholding of the social dance in its entirety interrupts the spell of sentimentality. Daniele does not show a traditional Cakewalk in *Ragtime*, but rather her deconstruction of the dance gestures to the past through postures and tableaux. While tableaux were a popular theatrical form of entertainment in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, here Daniele uses the form to break the flow of movement. In the rupture of the collective parts of the dance, there is a consideration of the magnitude of where the dance came from, a Brechtian-like movement effort to keep the audience from being emotionally swept away. When the black chorus enters, the doubleness and the politics of the dance are immediately juxtaposed with the white chorus. The embodied memories of perseverance and emotional strength in African American bodies, in this particular circumstance, are suggested in their confidence and near overwhelming of the white chorus. Daniele first shows the European source of the Cakewalk in the white chorus and thereby draws
on the sensibilities of the original parody, though by not allowing the white chorus to gain
physical advantage, the black chorus, by their positioning and exuberance, readily overshadows
them. There is discordance to the opening, one that seems purposeful to disrupt the rose-colored
and sentimental tinge that is expected to envelop the musical from the beginning. Evelyn
Nesbitt’s flexed-foot kicks, as described earlier, add to this dislocation of movement and
meaning. This bricolage is supported by the music as well, as the different groups have distinct
instruments that are part of their music signature; the white group’s musical line is mostly piano,
the African Americans’ music adds drums and horns; and klezmer and flutes enhance the music
for the immigrant group.115

In the finale of the show, the Cakewalk-like movement fragments happen upstage as
performers promenade from one side of the stage to another in silhouette. Performers hold
accessories that enhance the effect of the shadow, such as an umbrella or a hat. All three groups,
now mixed together, are part of this promenade. All groups do the gestural maneuvers in the
finale that Daniele imposes throughout the musical. Traditionally in the Cakewalk, lines between
communities were clearly delineated and there was not a mixing beyond varied spectatorship of
the dance. There is still an implication of discord between communities as seen in the opening,
but by having this racial and cultural mixing or co-mingling on stage in the finale there is also a
utopic hope for a new collective, and particularly at this closing moment of the musical, there is
an attempt at resolving the doubleness that exists in the dance. There is both a nostalgia and anti-
nostalgia embedded in the Cakewalk. The notion of not wanting to be reminded of the conditions
of the genesis of the dance causes friction against the massive popularity of the dance in its
heyday. Daniele captures this tension by offering movements, but denying the complete and total

115 For more on the juxtaposition of musical instruments and styles see Michael Lueger’s interview with
Adam Roberts, “Music Theatre and Musicals,” HowlRound Podcast episode 12, November 15, 2016,
dance.

Some reviewers felt this break in traditional choreography and sense of flow was detrimental to the production. Ben Brantley has difficulty even identifying Daniele’s role, stating: “Graciela Daniele is responsible for the ‘musical staging’ (a phrase, in this instance, wisely substituted for ‘choreography’).”\(^{116}\) He adds, “The ensemble’s uneasy dance and the increasingly dissonant music become an image of a melting pot whose ingredients remain unassimilated.”\(^{117}\) I would argue this dissonance is precisely the success of Daniele’s choreography in *Ragtime*. The conceit of the narrative challenges the myth that America is a melting pot, or at very least shows how difficult any sort of amalgamation is. In *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, Raymond Knapp maintains that America’s “‘melting-pot’ ideology [is] so obviously at odds with its history of race-based injustice.”\(^{118}\) This profound contradiction is at play in *Ragtime*. The line of figures that parade across the backdrop, however, function to expose the falsities of the mythology by their very disjointed gestures that embody the dual and frictional nostalgias embodied in the history of the Cakewalk. The communities in *Ragtime* are not necessarily diluted or flattened by the move on stage; they are set against each other to bring deeper understanding to the surface.

The show ends with the unexpected, yet convenient marriage between Tateh and Mother, who raise Coalhouse and Sarah’s child along with their own, fulfilling Doctorow’s utopic desire in *Ragtime*. Doctorow’s wish for an uplifting ending is also tied to the historical moment when the novel was written. In a time when the Watergate scandal was being fully exposed and the fall of Saigon was imminent, the desire to unite the country and reconcile differences was high, and Doctorow’s idealism attempts to fill a void. The deconstruction of the Cakewalk in the final


\(^{117}\) Ibid.

parade upstage breaks apart the idea of limited communities or communities with borders, for the black, white, and immigrant communities in *Ragtime* moving together, though differently, become a society of complex cultural negotiations and adjustments.

Though *Ragtime* is thick with American idioms, its ending does not suggest, however, the “smugness” that often comes with mythologies about the United States. There is a momentary hope for a new life for the younger generation. The brief picture of a patchwork-like reconciliation, seen in the mixed union of Mother, Tateh, their children, and Sarah’s child, is bittersweet knowing the many obstacles that lie ahead in the continued aftermath of slavery, given the audience’s knowledge when reading the novel’s publication in 1975 or seeing the musical production in 1996. The story of real and invented characters and conditions closes the show,

BOY: And by that time the era of Ragtime had run out,

as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano,

But we did not know that then. Loose ends are tied together and the sentimental power ballad “Wheels of a Dream” (Coalhouse and Sarah’s love ballad from the first act) has a brief reprise. The promenade of performers continues from up stage right to left. They hold sharp poses in stark black silhouette, then step

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119 In Knapp’s exploration of mythologies of American and national identity, he explains there is “a smugness endemic to mythologies created, as these seem to have been, to reassure a nation of its own essential goodness.” He cites examples such as *Oklahoma!* and *The Music Man* among others that function in this manner. Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of National Identity*, 122.

120 Doctorow’s novel comes at the end of the first massive civil rights push in the 1950s and 1960s, and imagines how communities that come to be so diametrically opposed in his novel can find harmony by the most unexpected circumstances. His utopic wish suggests even the mere act of imagining a sense of harmony can be one step towards achieving actual harmony. Though he “seek[s] the shelter of a bygone period,” to explore racial relations, ideologies are very much being “refreshed” or reanimated for the moment in which it is written with the historical distance to allow a space for contemplation. John Updike, *The March* in *The New Yorker*, September 4, 2005, /www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/09/12/a-cloud-of-dust/amp.

forward and change into other positions in time with the syncopated beat—they appear as a ghostly row of Cakewalkers. And in this closing choreography there is an embodied power of a dance “haunted by white brutality.” The nostalgic framework of Ragtime gently begins with its photographic framing and lavish sets but then forces, by its bodily practices, a reflection and meditation on the fantasies and mythologies of an age and history that like the ragtime music are quickly obscured by the shadow of the Jazz Age.

IV. Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed, Tap Dance, and Counter Nostalgia.

*God created black people and black people created style.*

—George C. Wolfe, *The Colored Museum*

In a dexterous moment of storytelling in the second act of the 2016 Shuffle Along, Eubie Blake (Brandon Victor Dixon) steps forward and explains to the audience that three nights in a row, George Gershwin sat behind him not watching the stage but observing his conducting technique and a particular clarinet player, William Grant Still. The accusatory tale and song in the show, “Till Georgie Took ‘Em Away,” is told through a solo tap dancer “playing” clarinet in a smoky spotlight, with the Harmony Kings singing and “patting” down stage right. The dancer begins with simple rhythms, and as the story of the wrongful stealing of Blake’s music and style progresses, the riffs of the dancing clarinetist grow in complexity, along with the body

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122 Pugh, 24.
123 Patting is the use of handclaps and body percussion to imitate sounds of drums. Patting was originated by African Americans out of necessity when drumming was banned in cities and on plantations. The Stearnses describe patting started, “as any kind of clapping with any dance to encourage another dancer, [and] became a special routine of slapping the hands, knees, thighs, and body in rhythmic display.” The moves are often called “Patting Juba” as William Henry Lane (nicknamed “Juba”) brought it into a solo performance. Patting also “became part of the more pretentious style of the Charleston: crossing and uncrossing the hands on the knees as they fan back and forth.” Stearns and Stearns, 29.
percussion of the Harmony Kings. The magnitude of the theft is felt through the commanding and forceful tap and rhythm styles. Though Blake’s suggestions are done with a sly wink, the notion of appropriation is readily put forth. Certainly lyrics such as, “steal those black notes, steal that rhythm, write a hit song,” emphasize the point. Importantly, the accentuation and building of tensions in regards to the appropriation of music is done through tap and body percussion, emphatically pointing towards the unashamed borrowing of movement as well as music.

Creating Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Follows

The 2016 Broadway musical Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Follows, with direction and book by George C. Wolfe and choreography by Savion Glover, is a necessary and vital work in the musical theatre genre that reclaims ownership of the form for African Americans. Wolfe and Glover achieve this through the retelling of the past that puts African American contributions to the genre firmly at the center of the conversation. In continuance with Wolfe’s practice of recovery as resistance, Shuffle Along has a

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124 The Harmony Kings were a vocal quartet that grew out of a gospel group. Their professional status was solidified by their involvement in the original Shuffle Along, “Review of Shuffle Along and the Saga of the Four Harmony Kings: Group Harmony Pioneers,” http://classicurbanharmony.net/2016/05/10/review-of-shuffle-along-and-the-saga-of-the-four-harmony-kings-group-harmony-pioneers/, accessed December 10, 2017.

125 Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed: 2016, with music and lyrics by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, libretto by George C. Wolfe, based on the original book of the 1921 Shuffle Along book by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles; musical supervision, arrangement, orchestrations by Daryl Waters.

126 A slightly revised portion of the following section on Shuffle Along, Or The Making of the Musical Sensation and All That Followed is forthcoming in Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity ed. Sarah Whitfield (London, UK: Red Globe Press, 2019).
strong pedagogical and recuperative focus. The foundational construction of the 2016 production began with the dance, movement, and music of the era, as opposed to drawing on a previously written novel as do The Color Purple and Ragtime. Lisa La Touche, a dancer in the 2016 production, explains that the very first creative labs began with Glover experimenting with the dancers and orchestrator Daryl Waters (who both fortified and safe-guarded the rhythms of the 1920s) while Wolfe worked at setting the book of the 2016 show. The show, in La Touche’s experience in the early workshops, grew from a place of intense collaboration between Wolfe, Glover, and Waters. By (re)telling the story of the making of a show, and reimagining the artists and their labor, the bodies on stage in the 2016 Shuffle Along culturally and politically present the archive of this legacy, and uphold the African American foundations of U.S. musical theatre.

Markedly, the choreography in Shuffle Along (2016) operates in a near reverse manner from both The Color Purple and Ragtime. Wolfe’s declared intention was to elevate African American artists and the music and dances from their communities. The performance of African American dances and music of the early twentieth century on stage in 2016 is part of an

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The Color Purple is based on both the novel and film. See footnote 32, this chapter.

Author interview with Lisa La Touche, Shuffle Along cast member, September 17, 2017.

Wolfe explains in an interview with Charles McNulty how shocked he was at the lack of recognition of Shuffle Along in a particular history book, “Shuffle Along was the biggest hit, but all they had was a paragraph at the end. How could it be a footnote to 1921 when it was the biggest show in 1921? How does something that matters so much end up not mattering at all?” He is motivated to remind audiences how hard African American artists had to work to get recognized, stating: “These people didn’t have options. They had to make their own. And they did and they changed Broadway and they empowered generation upon generation upon generation of artists, and that’s an extraordinary legacy.” Charles McNulty, “How Shuffle Along director George C. Wolfe brought back the 1921 show that changed Broadway forever,” Los Angeles Times, April 25, 2016, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/theater/la-et-cm-george-wolfe-20160425-column.html.
act of resistance to the dominant thinking of musical theater being an invention by white artists.\footnote{131 Some scholars of musical theatre such as Geoffrey Block and Lehman Engels among others privilege a more “well-made” musical such as \textit{Showboat} (1929) by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, or go further ahead to \textit{Oklahoma!} as the basis for the genre. Overall, there is a tendency to assign the foundations of musical theatre to white artists such as Ira and George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Cole Porter, among others. This has changed in the past fifteen years as musical theatre scholarship has become more distinctive.} Wolfe and Glover reimagine a community of artists as sovereign and attempting to be freestanding. Glover’s choreography reanimates African American dance styles, specifically tap, as an embodied and communal site of black communication, power, and resilience. This case study demonstrates how \textit{Shuffle Along} (2016) can be seen as a “counter-example” where the dance elevates the communities it came from rather than obscuring or flattening them and their distinguishing characteristics. The embodied nostalgia that comes with the uplifting of African American dance styles breaks down any fantasies of the current or past ages that imagine white artists as creators of the dance forms.

Glover’s choreography for the production is a key element to this process. His dance palette, heavy with an assortment of tap dance and early twentieth century social and popular dance techniques, such as Snake Hips, the Grizzly Bear, and a proto-Charleston, has an exuberance to it with the intention of recapturing the dynamism and effervescence of the mounting of the original 1921 \textit{Shuffle Along}. Glover not only populates the piece with African American movement signatures of the 1920s, such as shoulder shimmies and early iterations of the Charleston, but he also infuses the show with his characteristic contemporary tap dance expressions as a way to connect the past to the present in a model akin to reflective nostalgia. Wolfe and Glover’s dramaturgical reanimation of the original show’s journey to Broadway foregrounds its significance in the contemporary moment. Kristin Moriah describes George C. Wolfe’s creation as “an act of metadrama that became a catalyst for another conversation about
racial diversity on Broadway.” Indeed, critics were impressed by the task Wolfe took on and the impact of the show. Jesse Green points towards Wolfe’s reparative efforts: “Wolfe bombards a core of ideas about race and culture with a billion showbiz protons to produce both a gorgeous spectacle and a big, smoking crater where your former ideas of Broadway once stood.”

Glover’s choreographic tactic of creating movement that embodies the nostalgia of the dances from the 1920s, also expresses assertiveness with his more contemporary moves, sheds light on the social and cultural complexity that operated in musical theatre in 1921, and stakes a claim for the African American foundations of musical theatre now. Further, the African American body on stage, as set forth by Wolfe and put in motion by Glover, emblematizes so much of the labor that went into the foundations of Broadway, labor which is largely unrecognized today. Glover’s intensity and complexity of movement propels this show with a palpable “no holds barred” ethos that claims a futurity for tap dance and the African American body in performance. As Thomas F. De Frantz explains, “movement provokes metacommentary and suggests narratives outside the physical frame of performance.” Glover’s insistence on paying homage to the lineage of tap in *Shuffle Along* and his assertion to “create sounds that allow one to think,” reanimates the African American presence on Broadway and is a critical call to challenge previous histories and systems of social beliefs that surround the emergence of modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century in the U.S.

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**Dramaturgical Strategies**

As part of Wolfe’s dramaturgical framework, *Shuffle Along* addresses and then dismantles the commonly accepted historical record many have come to believe: that the foundations of musical theatre were put in place solely by white artists such as Ira and George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Cole Porter, among others. Wolfe’s previous works, such as *The Colored Museum* (1986) and the musical *Jelly’s Last Jam* (1992), come from a foundational place with the aim to “unsettle the status quo and upend racial expectations.”

Wolfe’s work in *Shuffle Along*, though packaged in a more heartening manner, is no less punctuated with affirmations of African American contributions to society and theatre, and furthers his goal towards “carving a new space for African American drama.”

In this historicized reclamation, Wolfe ties the show together using chronological ordinances helped along by various projections of dates and places, juxtaposed with production numbers and plot points from the original 1921 show in order to reinforce the social and cultural contributions of African Americans to musical theatre then and now. This self-referentiality (or repossession of theatre by theatre) is key in helping to reinforce to audiences just how vital theatre and its history are to the development of society and the role of social dance communities within it. Wolfe details how African American composers, lyricists, comedians, singers, and

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137 Elam Jr., 384.

138 Paula Vogel’s 2016 play *Indecent*, which resurrects the story of the cast and performances of Sholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance* (1907), does similar restorative work in regards to telling the story of censorship surrounding the play upon its arrival in the United States. Wolfe, like Vogel, sheds light on the injustices that operated in U.S. theatre, engaging the audience on both an intellectual and visceral level incorporating music and movement in the retelling and reminding of historical incidents.
dancers pushed through the segregation and elitism that surrounded Broadway at the time to come together and present a musical on their terms, and of their culture.

Wolfe’s innovative weaving together of theatrical elements mixes documentary theatre with the contemporary sensibilities and technologies of current Broadway musical theatre. He includes as an insert in the Playbill a reproduction of the 1921 program in sepia tones, containing a half dozen pictures of the original artists and ensemble as well as advertisements of the era, instigating the nostalgic framework. The show alternates between scenes following the plot of the original show (the story of the shenanigans behind a quasi-fixed mayoral race), and those depicting the staging of that show on tour and the struggle to secure a Broadway venue. In the historical restructuring, Wolfe’s collaboration with Glover, a Tony award-winning choreographer for his work in *Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk* (1996), is able both to navigate and knit together the temporal divide of the show with an intense physicality that speaks to the past, present, and future.

**Choreography and *Shuffle Along* (2016)**

The dance styles of the early twentieth century, when performed in Wolfe’s *Shuffle Along*, rich in the flairs and fashions of the 1920s, create the possibility of nostalgic impulses in the audience—longings for a personal or public past, envisioning an alternate or preferred past, seeking a sense of home—that help them to connect to the reparative message of the production. Further, in this historical vein, the collective emotional associations and historical explorations of the past Wolfe takes on in *Shuffle Along* set up a nostalgic impulse inherent in the show. This desire however does not constitute a longing for the past or a looking back at the past through rose-colored glasses, but adopts a reflective nostalgia; a meditation on and retracing of the past that opens up the possibility for considering alternate perspectives that—and this seems to be
Wolfe’s hope—may go on to influence future individual actions and reparations. As Wolfe explains in an interview with playwright Tony Kushner, “the show is a great place to tell the story of how far we had come, how far we needed to go, and nearly a century later, how much remains unchanged.”

Glover’s choreography has an embodied nostalgia and boldness to it that directly re-declares the African American ownership of tap in musical theatre. Brian Seibert describes the many layers in Glover’s work: “Glover’s choreography, in its wordless eloquence, convey[s] the resilience of African Americans in a form at once symbolic and physical.” This embodied nostalgia within the dancing bodies connects to the present moment by its strategic layering of tap, African American social dance styles, and Glover’s modern innovations, expertly executed by the energetic and extraordinarily capable cast. This juxtaposition of the new and the old opens up a space that demonstrates the dimension and embodied meaning in tap in Broadway musical theatre. This is different from Daniele’s deconstruction of movement codes in *Ragtime* as there is a melding and modulation that happens between the old and new styles in *Shuffle Along*, as opposed to assembling fragments alongside each other to enhance the contrast and embedded meanings. In an interview with Adam Green, Glover explains his process of amalgamating the old with the new within one body dancing: “It’s adding the steps and style of the past to the rhythms and sounds of today. It’s performing an old-school step with a new-school style—or maybe you take a step from today and execute it in a style from the past.”

Through this blending, Glover’s choreography is both an homage to the past and an attempt towards righting the historical record. This move is particularly poignant and steeped in social and political

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141 Adam Green, 2016.
resonance given the cultural forces at work today in conjunction with social equality movements like Black Lives Matter. As Thomas F. DeFrantz observes in a lecture on the work and mission of choreographer Jawole Willa Jo, “our bodies are profound not just in the metaphors they inspire but in the memories they contain.”[142] *Shuffle Along* shows black bodies relentlessly striving for fairness and justice, pushing on through exhaustion and inequality. Wolfe reminds us that this has always been the struggle of African Americans; for all the style, innovations, and foundations they brought to musical theatre, the stories need to be told and retold in order to inscribe them in the vernacular.

*Shuffle Along* (2016) looks to the past as a way of moving forward in regards to African Americans’ historical roles as cultural innovators. Moriah observes, “In staging their awareness of the dynamics of the popular stage and the limitations of its tropes, black performers in *The Making Of* appeared not just as consumable products but as cultural agents.”[143] Markedly, the dancers and choreography of the 2016 *Shuffle Along* bring these ideas forward for consideration. As Jayna Brown describes in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* the female chorus of the original *Shuffle Along* helped shape modernity. She observes, “the meanings of the black woman’s body in motion were central to the anxieties and hopes imbedded in white ideas of the modern city space as well as the politics of black cultural self-referentiality.”[144] Glover, through his complex choreographic signature, is pointedly staking a claim that black performers of the past, particularly the female chorus dancers, were agents of change both on stage and off. The exuberance, energy and dynamism of the original female chorus in *Shuffle Along*, to draw on the work of Daphne Brooks, “crafted new forms of narrative

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[143] Moriah, 181.
agency and corporeal representation in theatricalized spaces.”

Indeed, the 1921 *Shuffle Along* increased the visibility of female African American dancers and launched the career of various famous performers that emerged from the chorus, including Josephine Baker, Adelaide Hall, and Florence Mills. Brown further explains the “New Woman” of the 1920s “embraced black expressive forms, adopting racialized gestural vocabularies to shape and redefine their own bodies as modern.”

The immense success of the original *Shuffle Along* thrust these movement and aesthetic styles into mainstream culture to enormous effect and subsequent consumption (as will be seen in the following chapter). As Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes, “these aesthetic principles became integral signifiers of modernism and were embraced by white Americans as well as Europeans.”

The assumption of African American styles emphatically linked, as Gottschild observes, “the black swing era aesthetic and global trends in modernism movements of African American on stage.”

The complexity within Glover’s choreography in the 2016 *Shuffle Along* explicitly gestures to what a landmark production the original was, one that David Savran states, “made jazz and tap dancing obligatory on Broadway.”

Glover’s choreography punctuates that point nearly a century later by situating the female ensemble in the 2016 version with a dominance and dynamism reminiscent of the original chorus.

**Background: Savion Glover and Tap Dance**

Glover’s history in tap circles and dance communities is well known. He appeared on Broadway at ten years old in *The Tap Dance Kid* (1985) and went on to *Black and Blue* in 1989,

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145 Daphne Brook, *Bodies in Dissent*, 11.
148 Ibid., 5.
when he was the youngest person at the time to get nominated for a Tony Award. His first collaboration with director and writer George C. Wolfe was in *Jelly’s Last Jam* (1992), where he performed with his teacher and tap icon Gregory Hines. His first choreography credit on Broadway was for *Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk* (1996), where he again collaborated with Wolfe. Described by Joan Acocella of the *New Yorker* as “the greatest tap virtuoso of our time, perhaps of all time,” and given his training by the fathers and grandfathers of tap, Glover, born in 1973, is in effect the bodily archive or physical repository of tap dance.\(^{150}\) Glover’s main mentors, along with Hines, include tap dance greats Buster Brown, Chuck Green, Jimmy Slyde and Lon Chaney. From them (and others) he developed a well-rounded understanding of the form. La Touche, who worked with Glover on *Shuffle Along* from the very beginning of the initial workshops explains: “anytime I’ve ever been in a studio with him, I just get this tiniest window of what this could have been like with any of those guys.”\(^{151}\) The embodied history that travelled through the bodies of the greats—from Brown’s subtle shuffles (the brushing back and forth of the sole of the foot to achieve two quick noises) where feet barely come off the floor, to the slides across the floor of Jimmy Slyde, to the fully physicalized style of Hines, where the percussiveness of the taps extended through his whole body—is all present in Glover. Through his work with these early innovators, Glover acquired a fine-tuned knowledge of the history of tap, against which he was able to push and pull en route to devising his own intense, hard-hitting, and grounded style of movement. His bent-over, highly percussive style emerged as very different from the upright-postured, early tap dance sounds, derived from the loose swinging shuffles and soft-shoe methods. Seibert suggests perhaps Glover’s greatest contribution to the

\(^{150}\) Joan Acocella, “Soaring Savion Glover in ‘OM,’” July 8 2014, *The New Yorker.* https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/soaring-savion-glover-in-om. Glover’s extensive time as a young cast member of the 1985 musical Black and Blue allowed him to have contact with the older generation of tap dancers such as Jimmy Slyde and Bunny Briggs, among others.

\(^{151}\) Interview by author, September 19, 2017.
genre is that he “made tap a young person’s game.”\footnote{Seibert, 463.} Glover made it acceptable to internalize the form, to move away from the presentational style previously associated with tap and movie musicals that privileged the visual or scenographic into a mode of interpretation that shared many sensibilities with more modern aesthetics, such as hip-hop and street dance. Young dancers were inspired by the more authoritative urban style of percussive and hard-hitting dance, performed to modern music.

Wolfe describes the dualities and depth within Glover: “Savion is a living repository of the history of rhythm . . . He got it from the guys who got it from the guys who got it from the guys. But he’s also a bridge to the future.”\footnote{Adam Green, “Tap-Dancing Legend Savion Glover Reanimates the Game-Changing Broadway Musical \textit{Shuffle Along}. Vogue 207 no. 5 (2016), 210. \url{https://www.google.ca/amp/www.vogue.com/article/tap-dance-legend-savion-glover-broadway-musical-shuffle-along/amp}, accessed July 3, 2017.} Having Glover at the creative helm of the movement signature and choreographic structure of the 2016 musical offers an often-overlooked epistemology of the foundations of musical theatre in the United States. Wolfe explains his goal with the show was to “reach into the past and bring back to life the ebullient spirit of a groundbreaking hit musical.”\footnote{Jesse Green, 2016.} Glover’s choreography embodies this resurrection (and innovation) by his taking full advantage of the dynamics and depth of tap dancing as a repository of the original movement styles of the production, and melding them with contemporary urban sensibilities largely derived from African American influences. Glover’s choreography functions in this assembly to both shed light on the social and cultural complexity that operated in the performance of musical theatre then (1921) and to stake a claim for the choreographic contributions, historical and ongoing, of African American artistry in musical theatre.

\footnotetext{152}{Seibert, 463.}
\footnotetext{154}{Jesse Green, 2016.}
*Shuffle Along (2016), Tap Dance, and Counter Nostalgia.*

The confluence of the artistry of Glover, the dramaturgical vision of Wolfe, and the on-stage contributions of some of the most talented and accomplished performers on Broadway (Audra McDonald, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Billy Porter, Brandon Victor Dixon, Joshua Henry and Adrienne Warren—all either Tony Award winners or nominees) makes *Shuffle Along* a tour de force that emphasizes the fundamental foundation African Americans laid, and the vital contributions they continue to make to musical theatre. The revised musical, “one of the season’s essential tickets,” as described by Ben Brantley, signals a move to both remind and redefine the foundation of musical theatre and champion the voices and bodies that made significant inroads at a time when musical theatre was in its nascent form.\(^{155}\)

What cannot be overlooked in this discussion is that, unlike the original *Shuffle Along* of 1921 that enjoyed a 504-performance run, tours for nearly three years after, and numerous revivals, the 2016 *Shuffle Along* played only 100 performances and 33 previews. Much press circulated around Audra McDonald’s pregnancy as the cause for the show’s early closure. However, McDonald was always planning to leave the show for some time to reprise her 2014 Tony Award-winning role in *Lady Day At Emerson Bar & Grill* in London. The news of her pregnancy nonetheless seemed to have stalled ticket sales, though an excellent replacement, Grammy award winner Rhiannon Giddons was ready to step in. Catherine M. Young gives three more plausible reasons for the show’s closure: “There are three important reasons a show as great as *Shuffle Along* is closing and they don’t involve a pregnant star. The show is expensive to run, may be too ‘inside’ for the casual Broadway consumer, and it could not get out of the long

shadow cast by *Hamilton.*” These pragmatic reasonings ring true and help to explain the broader socio-economic functioning of Broadway. Kristin Moriah further explains the complexity surrounding the closure: “In *The Making Of*’s closing we are witness to some of the paradoxes behind the seeming ascendance of ethnic diversity on the popular stage.” Moriah explains the continued challenges to navigating race and ethnicity in popular entertainment, observing, “embodied performances of blackness and nuanced depictions of African American History are still at odds with audience expectations.” This lack of alignment, however, should not be a reason to stall the creation of works about the African American experience, as is explained by Sandra Seaton, whose great uncle was Flournoy E. Miller. Seaton describes in a 2016 article in *The Dramatist* that when artistic director Jack Viertel was thinking of reviving the original *Shuffle Along* in 2002 as part of the *Encores!* series, he communicated his worries of receiving “political resistance, especially from the very population we’d be trying to honor” in conversation with playwright August Wilson. Wilson replied:

> Its presentation would be a historical reminder of that contribution, and its images and portrayal of blacks, though less than sterling, would not be a perpetuation of the images, but a historical reminder of a time when such portrayals were part of the popular culture. I think that is important.

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158 Moriah, 179.
159 Flournoy E. Miller along with Aubrey Lyles wrote the original book of the 1921 *Shuffle Along* and is a character in the 2016 show played by Brian Stokes Mitchell.
Though the numerous and complex reasons behind the closure “demonstrates the unsteady role that race and ethnicity continue to play in popular entertainment,” avoiding these encounters altogether further underserves those communities.\textsuperscript{162}

The ephemeral nature of live performance is felt in the disappointment professed by heartbroken cast members and fan groups. In effect, this twist of fate has not allowed \textit{Shuffle Along, Or The Making Of The Musical Sensation of 1921 And All That Follows} to be seen by a vast number of people, inevitably lessening its intended impact. The lack of a cast album and readily available libretto add to the difficulty of reviving the show. La Touche talks about the double meaning within the narrative of the original show being forgotten and the 2016 one coming to a close:

We lived our version of it, some really dark corners that turned and some huge celebrations and the fact that our cast, our ensemble really stuck together. We became so close throughout the whole process, everyone looked out for one another and it really mattered. Obviously, any gig that you have is super significant but you could tell there was a certain vibe that everyone had to be able to tell this story. It was more—we get to tell the story versus we get to be on Broadway.\textsuperscript{163}

Some of the methods used to raise the level of significance of the dancing African American body were to engage with the history at every level and counter any nostalgia for the white artists creating the foundations of the form. Wolfe was determined to make people understand the stakes at play at the time of the original. La Touche describes how the show’s dramaturg explained the history leading up to the original show. She refers to how various assistants would put up newspapers on the rehearsal room walls each day reporting news from the same day

\textsuperscript{162} Moriah, 179.
\textsuperscript{163} Interview with author, September 19, 2017.
ninety-six years previous. Wolfe comments,

Prior to this show happening, X number of people knew about Shuffle Along—this show is now happening, people don’t know everything about it, but it’s there. The cast knows; they are finding out about people they didn’t know, the people who went before them, when the stakes were more violent. And, any time there is a cultural breakthrough in which this culture transcends what it’s supposed to be, there’s a violent reaction. So we have a black president, and it’s followed by an incredibly violent reaction. It happens over and over.\(^\text{164}\)

The crisis in Shuffle Along is not in the flattening of social dance communities but the missed opportunity to bring this African American elevation nationwide.

Though Shuffle Along often receives accolades as the first popular African American musical on Broadway, it is important to note for the sake of understanding the artistic environment at the time, that Shuffle Along (1921) was not a standalone event created by African American composers and artists.\(^\text{165}\) In his lifetime, Shuffle Along composer Eubie Blake consistently protested the many “firsts” commonly attached to the 1921 show, insisting they were owed to, or should be shared with, others. He continually reminded journalists throughout his lengthy career of those involved in the ongoing creation of musical theatre in the first third of

\(^{164}\) Kushner, Interview Magazine, May 6, 2016.

\(^{165}\) While the original 1921 Shuffle Along was the most long-running and popular African American musical of the early twentieth century and the first to have a love scene/song between two African Americans, Will Marion Cook’s 1898 Clorindy, or The Origins of the Cakewalk “made history as the first thoroughly black American show to find critical acclaim in the heart of Broadway.” It is important to note that Clorindy contained only five songs so is often considered a sketch or song-and-dance, further, it was performed at the less formal Casino Roof Garden (Riis, Oxford Music Online). Cook’s In Dahomey (1903) however had a more substantial full-length structure and is considered “the first all-black show to play a major Broadway theatre.” Shuffle Along pointedly made a place for African American shows to not be such a rarity on Broadway breaking ground for, “black writers and performers be both welcomed and acclaimed on Broadway.” Allen L. Woll, Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 38, 57.
the twentieth century from Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, Billy Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson to Ernest Hogan, George Walker and Bert Williams.\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Shuffle Along} did not just appear out of the ether—it was a high moment in a time of much effort and dedication to African American music and performance in general. Wolfe’s production brings this vital information front and center and describes how \textit{Shuffle Along} shifted the tenor of musical comedy and the influence of jazz music on Broadway.

David Savran specifies the impact of jazz music to musical theatre resulting from the original show: “\textit{Shuffle Along} modernized musical comedy by introducing a sparkling mélange of ragtime, operetta, and jazz that did more than carry audiences away.”\textsuperscript{167} This crossover of music styles extended to the show’s physical movement, as in effect social dances and movement rhythms evolved alongside jazz music (as seen with ragtime and the Cakewalk, the blues and the Slow Drag, and now with tap and jazz music). European dances of the time such as the waltz or the Schottische were over taken by more popular and physically liberating dances of the times, such as the numerous Animal Dances (the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, etc.), and eventually the high-energy Charleston and Black Bottom. And, as the Stearnses explained, the dynamism and innovation of the dancing in the 1921 \textit{Shuffle Along} changed the structure of shows.\textsuperscript{168} The original \textit{Shuffle Along} was not solely a tap musical; it was a mix of many strands of music, comedy routines and even costumes, a sort of patchwork of sounds and movements that had worked before in other venues.\textsuperscript{169} Glover’s choreography today has similarities: it encompasses the many different movement dimensions from the past as well as contemporary, of-the-moment dances, just as in the original \textit{Shuffle Along}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{166} Woll, xi.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Savran, \textit{Highbrow/Lowdown}, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Stearns and Stearns, 130-131.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Savran, 74.
\end{itemize}
Wolfe is certainly attuned to the mark *Shuffle Along* made on Broadway in 1921 in terms of changes in music styles. He includes a clever moment in the show when Lottie Gee (Audra McDonald) is rehearsing a song to be put in the show—“I’m Just Wild About Harry” (Harry being a third candidate that enters the mayoral race and comes to win the hearts of citizens, while the two crooked candidates fight amongst themselves). The song is presented for Lottie to sing as a waltz, one of the common musical structures used in European-styled musical comedy at the time. The song, which has gone on to become one of the most recognizable songs of *Shuffle Along* and often a standalone hit, is practically unrecognizable as a waltz, comical in its construction as a lilting three-quarter time composition. Lottie protests that no one is doing waltzes anymore and asks if some swing could possibly be injected into it. In this moment in the 2016 show there is both humor and artistry on a larger level regarding the style shift that nods to the proliferation of jazz rhythms into musical comedy. “I’m Just Wild About Harry” expands into a larger production number as Gertrude Saunders and numerous ensemble members join Lottie. The song is resplendent with the dynamism of jazz and rhythmic complexities, rising to be one of the highlights to the show.

Wolfe is attempting to capture and showcase the transition in musical styles in this scene, as in others such as the moment with the clarinetist mentioned earlier. This dramaturgical choice reminds audiences of the aural depth of the shift, demonstrating how musical comedy sounded before and after the influence of jazz music.\textsuperscript{170} Wolfe describes the magnitude of this event: “Once you teach syncopation, everybody can syncopate—George Gershwin, Irving Berlin . . .

\textsuperscript{170} The transition in musical styles is emblematic of greater changes taking place at the time such as the financial boom, developments in technology, greater consumerism, increased freedoms for the younger generation, the intellectual and artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance, continued women’s suffrage, and women in the work place.
Jazz gave Broadway—and America—its own musical language. It liberated American Music."\(^{171}\)

The timing of this move coincided with the increased and rapidly growing mechanization of America since the late-nineteenth century. The rhythm of America was changing and nothing symbolized this more than jazz music.\(^{172}\) Wolfe explains that this shift in rhythms and the move away from European sensibilities was new yet felt natural in the progressive moment of the 1920s: “These rhythms were alien but intrinsic to who we are as a culture, and they were on Broadway . . . and they were changing Broadway.”\(^{173}\) The infiltration of jazz was unavoidable in the many aspects of daily life and when Shuffle Along came along there was an abundance of sounds and physicalities that Wolfe and Glover successfully recreate and recall in Shuffle Along, telegraphed from the start in the lengthy subtitle—*Or The Making Of The Musical Sensation of 1921 And All That Followed.*

**Tap as a Conversation**

One of the most striking moments in the musical comes when there is a stand-off between those performers who went on to work on the musical *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924) and those who went on to the musical *Rang Tang* (1927). This split of the cast signaled the end of the collaboration between the foursome, as they parted ways to pursue separate projects.

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\(^{171}\) Adam Green, *Vogue* 207, no. 5 (2016).

\(^{172}\) The Jazz Age was a time of much change in society. The financial and technological boom of the early 1920s, along with new freedom for young people, the Harlem Renaissance, increasing liberties for women, made for alterations in everyday life and leisure activities. Despite socioeconomic developments happening at the time, for at least the 1920s, tickets remained affordable on Broadway, so attendance remained high and attending the theatre was a regular social activity. John Bush Jones explains, “The 1920s was one of the last decades of the century when ticket prices rose so slowly that the incomes of working-class and middle-class Americans could more than keep up with them.” He adds, the general frivolous and carefree attitude of the 1920s, “fostered hundreds of ‘mindless’ musicals—diversionary shows intended purely as entertainment,” a musical theatre phenomenon not experienced to that extent since. *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press), 61, 52

\(^{173}\) Adam Green, *Vogue* 207, no. 5 (2016).
Wolfe has Glover embody the break-up (played up in the 2016 show for theatrical effect) between Blake and Sissle and Miller and Lyles, using the ensemble to perform a sort of competition, or challenge dance, between the casts of the two shows. By creating a physical argument or competition between performers, Glover does two things. First, he both celebrates and underlines the importance of the conversational style that already existed in tap dance. Much like improvisation in jazz music, there exists in tap dance a fundamental passing back and forth of rhythms, or call and response, as a mode of showmanship and physical communication. In so doing, Glover makes sure that this basic characteristic of tap dance is represented. Second, in this conversation there is a trading and negotiating back and forth of styles, beginning with more traditional styles that increase to more contemporary tap modulations showing the progressive nature of tap dancing, while also locating it in the origins of the form as a competitive dance practice.

While tap dance is not specifically considered a social dance in a partnered sense, its origins and roots in conversation through challenge dances and the building of steps, grounds it as a vital part of the “lifeblood of communities” that was “generally learned informally through cultural and social networks.” La Touche explains the social dance aspects of tap dance are rooted in the communication and challenge feature of the form. This social structure brings people together who would gather to show moves and “show up” other dancers. She explains, “What they would do is congregate. Just like hip hop dancers. They would congregate and always have these challenges . . . like Charleston competitions in the 20s and 30s.” This communicative style is foundational to the form and deeply embedded in Glover’s style.

174 These tenants that define social dance are put forth by Julie Malnig and explored in the introduction. Malnig explains social dances: “spring[s] from the lifeblood of communities and subcultures and are generally learned informally through cultural and social networks.” Malnig, Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake, 4.
175 Interview with author, September 19, 2017.
The back and forth dance-off, happening mid-way through the second act, becomes a stepping off point towards more contemporary choreography in the show. Later in the second act, Glover has the ensemble, dressed in long pants and flat shoes, performing behind and around a scrim. This space, removed from the main focus of action, functions as a framing device to the growing complications between the artists. The ensemble, no longer in the 1920s makeshift costumes, or everyday wear of chorus dancers of the 1921 narrative, execute more percussive and rhythmic moves that have a force and dynamism; this brings the African American tenure of the form distinctly into the present moment. Stomps are louder, arms ricochet forward and back in reaction to moves that bound or slide further from the body using greater complications of rhythms and taking greater physical risks. The dance becomes more authoritative, as it is executed in a position lower to the ground, with knees deeply bent and shoulders hunched. These physicalities support the growing tension in the narrative that sees the break down in the collaboration between the creative team and an increase in the competition between casts.

As mentioned, Glover’s work in *Shuffle Along* is a compilation of styles and methods, each with their own historical resonance. In order to uphold this history in musical theatre, one must continuously acknowledge the complicated roots of tap dance. Constance Valis Hill in *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* explains that any tidy or brief explanation of the history of tap ignores tap’s more complex intercultural fusions, which occurred through the interactions of Irish indentured servants and enslaved West Africans in the Caribbean during the 1600s, African American folk and Irish American laborers in the southern United States during the 1700s, and African American freemen and Irish American performers in
northern urban cities in the 1800s. Keeping this Afro-Irish fusion in mind helps to understand the back and forth of movement between ethnicities and how the notion of exchange, or a conversation or competition, is always at the forefront of the form. Hill reminds that the challenge nature of tap is “a battle for virtuosity and authority, [and] puts into focus issues of race and ethnicity; it inevitably takes on the history of race, racism, and race relations in America.” Shuffle Along (2016) does not chart the complicated historical dimensions of tap, and that is not the task of the show, however, any movement analysis must recognize the complexity embedded in the art form, particularly when looking at the tap challenge section. This production does obscure contributions the Irish (and other cultures) made to tap dance. There is a sense that in the reparation of African American ownership of musical theatre that tap dance is carried along with it, overlooking the multiple ethnicities involved in its roots. Wolfe’s task for Shuffle Along is more focused on resurrecting African American contribution to the musical theatre, and the complications in this journey, than dissecting the origins of tap dance.

**Two Styles of Tap**

As the fashion for tap-dancing grew throughout the twentieth century, many dancers, both African American and white, learned tap at a ballet bar from a white teacher; particularly as white dancers and teachers took up the style. This was not the grounded percussive style of tap

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176 Hill, 2.
177 Ibid., 3.
178 This absorption also happens with jazz music. Ted Gioia explains that from jazz’s early beginnings there was an “Americanization of African music” (and an “Africanization of African music”), referring to it as a “synergistic process . . . the blending together of cultural elements that previously existed separately. He also reminds that in New Orleans where a lot of early jazz music was happening there was a lot of mixing of cultures, and a broader range of influences are often not mentioned in the popular history of jazz music. Gioia states, “settlers from Germany, Italy, England, Ireland, and Scotland also made substantial contributions to the local culture.” Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 5-6.
dance passed down through generations of African Americans, as Glover had learned. As much as black jazz music was readily taken up by white musicians, so too was the path for tap. As such the different styles of tap dance are commonly divided into two broad categories—“Broadway Style” and “Hoofing”—and what performers learned first varies depending on a variety of factors including economic backgrounds, geographic locale, and popular fads. The “Broadway Style” is more lifted with greater emphasis placed on arm gestures redolent of Fred Astaire, and largely derived from the “spectacularization” of the move to the stage. The “Hoofing” style is much lower and the center of gravity is decidedly toward the floor with the arms as a manifestation of the movement not placed in accordance with a specific syllabus or standardized method. Glover has essentially embodied this more exploratory, rhythmically focused, hard-hitting style over his entire career. His abilities in all designations of tap however, are astonishing. Glover’s melding of these two above-mentioned styles is the unique approach he brings to Shuffle Along. Fundamentally, the two styles can often be separated into the tap dance performed by females dancers wearing shoes with high heels, or men in more supple jazz oxfords, to both men and women wearing flatter, harder, square-heeled shoes, often built up in the sole to be quite heavy on their own, the weight decidedly helping to punctuate heel drops and stamps. The ensemble, particularly noticeable in the women, switch from the former shoe to the latter later in the show.

As the break up of the four creators is looming, Shuffle Along stages a significant conversation. One reports that “Flo Ziegfeld” hired the chorus girls to teach his dancers to stomp, shimmy and shake. What perhaps seems flattering at first became the beginning of cultural appropriation of tap dance by white dancers. White dancers eventually passed down their styles.

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179 The Stearnses describes how Florenz Ziegfeld purchased routines. Dancer Ethel Williams describes, “I went down to the New York Theatre and showed the cast how to dance it . . . they were having trouble. None of us was hired for the show.” Stearns and Stearns, Jazz Dance, 130.
or interpretation of African American styles through the ranks of teachers to Broadway
performers who learn a transformed version many decades later.\textsuperscript{180}

Though Glover recognizes this differentiation, he explains this inevitable evolution of tap
in performance:

Tap on Broadway varies through time. There’s the Tommy Tune or Susan Stroman
approach versus the Henry LeTang, Cholly Atkins, Honi Coles style—both lend
themselves to the excitement and invite the audience in. Then something else becomes
popular. \textit{Noise/Funk} came with a different approach. I’m looking forward to being back
on Broadway and reminding people of the greats of the past.\textsuperscript{181}

In Glover’s choreography for \textit{Shuffle Along} there is both a sense of homage to the moves and
styles of the trailblazers, and his own unique contributions. Surprisingly, one of the main
headliners of the show, McDonald, was not completely aware of the intricacies in bringing the
musical back to the stage. She explains, “I didn’t know anything about \textit{Shuffle Along} and its
influence . . . not many people do. That’s the reason I signed on before there was even a
complete script—I want to be a part of telling that story. It’s a way of honoring our ancestors.”\textsuperscript{182}

By recognizing the two styles of tap, one more grounded and authoritative and one more lifted
and showy, a space opens for nostalgia that gestures toward the journey of tap, from African
American culture as an initial social dance, to being an expectation on Broadway in the first half

\textsuperscript{180} La Touche explains of the diversity of tap styles in the cast: “There were some that had been in theater
for a while, two that were Rockettes who had tap dancing training but they had to learn tap dance from
Savion. Everybody was broken down, whatever Savion is doing is like nothing we have ever done before
so everyone had to learn and unlearn some stuff. That brought on everybody's unique style, you would
have some very beautiful long-legged performer in the Rockettes [and] have to surrender that and kind of
get down and dirty.” Interview with author.

\textsuperscript{181} Emily Macel Theys, “Ten Minutes With Savion Glover,” \textit{Dance Magazine} 89 no. 7 (2015), 18.

\textsuperscript{182} Adam Green, \textit{Vogue}, 210.
of the twentieth century.

The Cast of *Shuffle Along* (2016)

Beyond the star-studded list of principal players, the chorus brings the energy and dynamism that captures the resilience and determination of the original cast. The physicality provided by Glover encompasses the desperations and high stakes of the trials and tribulations the cast went through en route to the historic Broadway premiere. In the production numbers from the original 1921 musical, the dancers embody an “old-fashionedness” in their earnestness and youthful execution. This movement dynamic (visible in the overall lightness, abandon, and presentational style) used to evoke the qualities of the original show, stands in contrast to the more powerful dancing in the second act when the cast of *Shuffle Along* is split up, and enters into the previously described dance-off, or “tap-challenge,” outside the story of the original musical, but within Wolfe’s narrative. The physicalized turn towards the past has a reflective element to it in the nostalgic manner suggested by Boym. There is a contemplative look at conditions of the past and meditations on their magnitude in relation to the present.

While the chorus of the 2016 *Shuffle Along* is all African American, like the original 1921 cast, their collective presence hints at the continued difficulties on Broadway today for non-white dancers. Though a musical like *Hamilton* is celebrated for its mixed race cast, there is still much to do beyond casting to repair the historical record, including using more African American composers, choreographers and directors. Glover, who at one point planned to go into the cast himself, though his inclusion did not materialize as the show received its closing date, works the ensemble hard throughout. Brantley describes the efforts of the ensemble:

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183 Hill, 2-20.
This production also boasts the comeliest and most dynamic chorus on Broadway, which—under Mr. Glover’s guidance—transforms syncopated tap into a widely expressive force of giddy liberation and focused determination, of exaltation and anger, in numbers that include the knockout opener, “Broadway Blues,” and a fierce, competitive dance-off in the second act.184

Wolfe’s reincarnation of Shuffle Along is a necessary and reparative rekindling of the historical momentum in musical theatre instigated by African Americans. The sensational and determined 2016 Shuffle Along blows the dust off the archival files for scholars and practitioners alike and opens up the space not only to applaud the tremendous effort of those involved in Shuffle Along (both in the 1921 original and 2016 revisioning) but also to reinstate the historical importance and foundational contributions that African Americans made and continue to make toward the development of U.S. musical theatre. Much like the original Shuffle Along on tour in the 1920s helped in part to desegregate theatre around the United States, Wolfe and Glover’s 2016 Shuffle Along in revivals or tours will hopefully help to restore the status of the original and solidify a more honest and inclusive history. La Touche explains Wolfe’s mission to keep the past alive, “George always said, ‘Please remember why we are doing this, we are doing it for them.’”185

V. Conclusion

In all three musicals investigated in this chapter, there are efforts within the narrative to deepen awareness of particular African American communities at the turn of the twentieth century. These explorations are at their most effective during moments of social dance, or at the

185 Interview with author, September 19, 2017.
very least at community gatherings in the narrative where dance and music happen. In these
diegetic moments of social dance, political and social issues rooted in the body are physicalized
and assume a more tangible form, and put forth a subtext for consideration. This chapter
identified what gets left behind, altered or added in the social dance’s transfer to the stage, and
the social and political repercussions of this “spectacularization.” These case studies have
demonstrated how the presentational style creates nostalgia for the pre-theatricalized dance and
its history. In particular, this chapter has evidenced that African American bodies dancing on
stage hold within them the history of the social dance in question creating an embodied nostalgia
that becomes part of the reception of the musical. In all three musicals, when the nostalgia is
investigated through the bodily practices and choreography in the production, the corporeal
connection conveys deeper social and political meanings.

The following chapter investigates the entanglement of authorship and ownership of
dances, and quests for authenticity that besiege the dances of the Jazz Age, and how those social
and political dimensions are embodied within the dance. Moreover, when nostalgia is
investigated through the bodily practices and choreography in the next chapter a further critical
analysis can be taken up as to what this corporeal connection conveys on a larger social and
political scale, particularly as European and white American influences descend upon African
American dances.
CHAPTER TWO:
THE CHARLESTON
(and Movement Styles of the 1920s)

Carolina, Carolina, at last they’ve got you on the map,
With a new tune, funny blue tune, with a peculiar snap!
You may not be able to buck or wing.
Foxtrot, two-step, or even sing;
If you’ve not got religion in your feet,
You can do this prance and do it neat.

—“The Charleston”
Cecil Mack and James B. Johnson, 1923

I. Introduction

When Runnin’ Wild opened on Broadway in 1923 the Charleston became an “official” popular dance phenomenon on stage and off. Cecil Mack and James B. Johnson’s hit song in Runnin’ Wild “The Charleston” unabashedly identified the heel kicking, knee-twisting dance in the musical. Elisabeth Welch sang the song backed up by a chorus line of dancers kicking and hopping in time. As described in the lyrics above, the Charleston had a particular musical rhythm that could be danced by nearly everyone. With a lessening of social dance rules in the

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1 The Charleston had been previously “introduced” in shows such as Liza in 1923 and fragments of the dance were peppered throughout the 1921 Shuffle Along, however, it did not become a wide spread, prevalent, and popular dance until Runnin’ Wild in 1923. James Haskins, Black Dance in America: A History Through Its People (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 43.
1920s participants needed not worry as much about the variety and rhythm of tap steps or the complexities of how to partner properly. Even those “without religion in their feet,” as Mack and Johnson prompt, could participate without the need to learn extensive flourishes as seen in the early ragtime dances. Mack and Johnson encouraged everyone to get up, dress up, grab a partner, and give the dance a whirl. A veritable dance craze ensued and the Charleston, with its turned-in knees and heel flicks influenced by dances such as the “Jay Bird” and the Shimmy, became emblematic of the Jazz Age. What was it about this eclectic dance that drew people in with such enthusiasm and continues even today to set off a spectrum of nostalgic longings?

The Charleston was energetic and exciting like the jazz music it accompanied. The movement qualities were appealing in their simplicity and loosening of previous dance codes. The suppleness of movement of men and women in fashionably loose clothing came off as both playful and chic. The wildness of the quirky heel kicks and carefree knee bounces set the body a thrill from head to toe. The saucy shoulder-shrugs, provocative shimmies, and bright-eyed glances about the dance floor gave the dance a flirty and lively quality. The multi-directional kicks that lifted fringed hems of women’s skirts high above the knee were sure to turn heads. Dancing bodies were liberated like never before. Arms would swing wildly right and left, and

4 While the Charleston does get “refined” or made inherently simpler by dancing masters, the general populace, socializing outside the regulations of formal ballrooms, took up the dance in their individualized manner; shaking, wiggling, and twisting their heels in time to the catchy tunes.
5 Jayna Brown explains that refinement rules and expectations of dance mastery also depended on the social class taking up the dance and the venue. For example, in the formal ballroom, Irene and Vernon Castle “would model elegant deportment, a new etiquette for an upper-class clientele.” Additionally, the Castles established strict rules for the ballroom: “Do not wriggle the shoulders. Do not shake the hips. Do not twist the body.” These rules helped to “ameliorate the moral panic” surrounding social dance. At more casual venues such as gymnasiams, dance halls, and speak-easies rules were much more lax or disregarded all together. Brown, Babylon Girls, 171, 173.
6 The “Jay Bird” is a slower dance where knees are held together while heels flick backwards or sideways giving a bird pecking or bird-like quality to the movement. James Haskins explains that the slower speed of the Jay Bird would make it loosely recognizable to the Charleston, however the earlier dance is only one of the influences of the unique style of the Charleston. Haskins, Black Dance in America. For further information on how the dance can be traced back to Africa see the Stearnses’ Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance, 13 and Haskins, Black Dance in America, 42.
short bobbed hair would escape from its pins and headbands—uninhibitedness was the order of the day. The Charleston showcased a level of permissiveness and a carefree and playful attitude that was as intoxicating as the alcohol that flowed in the many speakeasies where the Charleston often took place. The youthfulness, vim, and undeniable allure of the Charleston made it the iconic dance of the 1920s. James Haskins in *Black Dance in America* explains, “It was an exhibition dance, that used the whole body in shimmying motions, included a fast kicking step, both forward and backward, and featured slapping the hands on the body, especially on the knees.”

This wild era championed physical abandon and excitement, applauded cunning choices and bold initiative, and gave birth to numerous mythologies and expressions of nostalgia for the 1920s that continue to circulate today. The conservative voices at the time that claimed the Charleston was dangerous and put people on a “path to vice,” only enhanced the appeal of the dance and fueled the stories that grew up around the dance and its dancers. When a current film or stage production advertises itself as set in the Roaring Twenties, images of bathtub gin parties, wild flapper girls, and outrageous celebrations à la Jay Gatsby quickly come to mind. A continued nostalgia for the Roaring Twenties can be seen in recent and past decades in the many films set in this era and in the long-running success of Broadway musicals set in the 1920s like

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7 The Charleston was by no means confined to the speakeasy. Ralph G. Giordano explains the ubiquitous nature of the Charleston, “Americans danced the Charleston in dance halls, on college campuses, outside, on roofs, on boardwalks, on the beach, on the street, within their homes.” Giordano, *Satan in the Dance Hall: Rev. John Roach Straton, Social Dancing and Morality in 1920s New York City* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2008), 83.

8 Haskins, *Black Dance in America*, 43.

Chicago and the various iterations of Gershwin musicals over the years, such as Crazy for You (1992) or Nice Work If You Can Get It (2012).\(^\text{10}\)

This chapter examines the Charleston, and other dances rooted in the form such as the Black Bottom, in three musicals—Thoroughly Modern Millie (2002), Michael John LaChiusa’s The Wild Party (2000), and The Drowsy Chaperone (2006)—and investigates what these social dances *do* when transferred to the stage nearly a century later.\(^\text{11}\) I focus on how the body, particularly the female dancing body, is thrust front and center as an emblem of the Roaring Twenties. The female body in the 1920s—confident, daring, outward, free, and supple—is less rigid and more exposed than in any previous era. The choreographers of the above musicals draw on the freedom and permissiveness embodied in social dances and dancing bodies of the 1920s to form the thematic and dramaturgical structure of the musical.

Expectedly, in the transfer of the Charleston (and Black Bottom) to the stage, the improvised and chaotic essence of the dance tends to get lost.\(^\text{12}\) What is gained in this move, however, varies depending on the molding and manipulation of the dance by the choreographer. For instance, though the organization of the dance into repeatable sequences alters the improvised nature of the dance in a venue such as the speakeasy, it also amplifies bodily

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12 As will be explained in further detail, the Black Bottom is a more sensual social dance than the Charleston and was named for the neighborhood in which it was created in Nashville, Tennessee.
meanings at a grander scale. In addition, the separation between the social dance ethos and the 
theatricalized, highly choreographed adaptation of the dance creates an embodied nostalgia that 
emerges when the experiences and mythologies of the past are put on stage. The exaggeration of 
the already theatricalized elements in the dance within the frame of highly choreographed 
sequences differs from the flattening of social dance communities seen in chapter one. This 
variance is in part because there seems to be more fluidity between the dance hall and the stage 
in the emergence of the Charleston.\(^{13}\) As a result, the continued transformations of the dance in 
the public sphere and its improvised and varying nature opens up a broad range of choreographic 
material from which contemporary choreographers can draw.

In each case study of this chapter, embodied meanings in the Charleston (or Black 
Bottom in *The Wild Party*) are developed by the choreographers from distinct standpoints. The 
differing perspectives depend on how the dramatic structure of the musical—ranging from 
pastiche to parody—presents the world of the 1920s. In turn, the mode of the comedic structure 
sets up how the social dance is used to create nostalgia. In *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, pastiche 
(and an arguable misfire at parody) creates an embodied nostalgia used to embolden feminine 
modernity and champion frivolity and newness. In *The Wild Party* the uncensored interpretation 
of Joseph Moncure March’s poem allows for a critical take on the Jazz Age disguised as 
pastiche. This “dangerous” angle demystifies the embodied nostalgia for the indulgences of the 
1920s and exposes, through movement and music, the cultural theft at work then and now.\(^{14}\) *The 
Drowsy Chaperone* uses a playful double coded parodic telling of 1920s musicals that re-

\(^{13}\) John Bush Jones observes, “If the Americans of the ‘20s were the thrill-seeking folks the social 
historians say they were, here was a chance for them to take a piece of theatre home with them.” Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2003), 64-65.

engages affection for musical theatre by capitalizing on the thrills of the form while also reflecting on the meaning and influence of nostalgia in musical theater and life.\(^{15}\)

In particular, the use of parody in musical theatre, whether it be poking fun at, familiarizing, or admiring a social concept (such as the “new woman” in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*), a character trait or flaw (as in *The Wild Party*), or conventions of the form itself (as in *The Drowsy Chaperone*), sets in motion the machinery of nostalgia. This engagement with parody, “one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity” according to Linda Hutcheon, is based on several factors.\(^{16}\) Parody opens up a space in the musical where one is given license to delight in the excess of excess, to enjoy the silliness, and to be nostalgic. The nostalgia may have a referential quality, involve a moment of self-reflexivity, or create a desire for a simpler time whether imagined or not. Furthermore, there is a wish in parody for an understanding of the present moment or considerations of future paths using our collective past as material, albeit in a comedic manner—a nostalgic maneuver that can allow for critical distance.\(^{17}\)

In this regard, movement and choreography can be considered to share in the workings of the parodies.\(^{18}\) As social dances of the 1920s were both expanded in and learned from musical theatre productions, the connection between dance and parody is seen already in the performative

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\(^{15}\) I draw on the work of Linda Hutcheon who uses the term “parodic double coding” to explain how the text parodied is often a parody itself; essentially the form and the subject are both sources of parody, and the “double-voiced,” or multiple perspectives helps to “pay homage” to the form. Though *The Drowsy Chaperone* is not a parody in technical terms, it does take on some of the comical behaviors of parody such as exaggeration and self-realization to be examined further in this chapter. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000), 14, xiv, 46.


\(^{17}\) This intent would depend on the degree of critical stance and the dramaturgical imperatives of the show in question.

\(^{18}\) Movement and dance as part of parody can be seen from early developments of the form often in tandem with the music. Elizabeth L. Wollman explains the operation of parody in burlesque and vaudeville, “Musical numbers often featured traditional or popular melodies that audiences would have recognized, set with new lyrics or newly layered with sly double entendre. Dance numbers, too, poked fun at various folk and classical styles.” Wollman, *A Critical Companion to The American Stage Musical* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, Plc, 2017), 23.
The embodiment of nostalgia is made possible by the physical exaggerations, imitations, repetitions, and accentuated dance moves that are part of the parody in operation with the historical resonance of the social dance itself.

Of note in this chapter, I focus in on gender and the privileging of the female body on stage. This choice is for two reasons. First, as is common in musical theatre, the lead character in each show is a woman, however, in two out of the three cases the female protagonist is also a dancer by profession. Second, the female body (more so than the male body) is liberated from the previous constraints of society. Women gaining the right to vote in 1920 brought about “a new way of thinking about what it meant to be a woman and a citizen of the United States.”

Linda Tomko explains women achieved greater freedom and rights in the U.S. (and internationally) through “bodily perseverance,” whether in suffrage marches or labor protests. The endurance and presence of women is implicit in the 1920s and in this new era, women “forged ways of comprehending their changing experiences through a variety of danced embodiments.” Although the youthful generation of both men and women in the 1920s experienced new and exciting physical freedoms, particularly in social dances, tracing the development of the female body in motion, the iconic “flapper” of the 1920s, helps to support how identity, particularly the “new woman,” is formed through physical behaviors. The “new

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19 This embodied parody is seen most readily in the work of Josephine Baker, but also in the rage for Charleston contests in the 1920s and the desire to be noticed using dance, as is shown to be one of the main motives of the Black Bottom.
21 Linda J. Tomko, Dancing Class, 7.
22 Tomko, 7.
23 The term “new woman” was popularized by Henry James in 1877 and encompasses how women pushed against Victorian ideals and expectations. Hugh Stevens explains: “The New Woman, in her demands for education, and the right to pursue a career rather than marriage, her rejection of the patriarchal family and life of domesticity, and her demand for political power, actively questioned the biological determinism and gender assumptions of the Victorian era.” Stevens, Henry James and Sexuality (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27.
woman,” however, should not be understood only as the iconic “flapper” that can get romanticized and Americanized. In fact, there are various contradictions within the type and transformations that occurred from the beginning of women’s suffrage in the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains how at the turn of the century the “new woman” was “unmarried, career oriented, politically active,” but by the 1920s, “both women and men transposed the New Woman into a sexually freighted metaphor for social disorder and protest.”24 The shifts in women’s motivations, along with changes in the expectations and interpretations of women’s roles unfold in tandem with a variety of factors in the 1920s including an increase in women in the work force, mechanization, and growing consumerism. In these three case studies, the consideration of the female body in motion is made all the more available by the story revolving around her.25

Finally, it is important for the overall trajectory of this project to recognize from the start that most of the dancers doing the social dances in the three musicals of this chapter are white. This is a distinct shift from the previous chapter that showed black dancers doing black dances. The near obsession with which the Charleston is taken up by white dancers pulls the dance away from its roots in the African American milieu. In this move there is a decreased emphasis on inward looking community ownership or expression for African Americans, and an increased emphasis on the latest physical ingenuities, social dance narratives, and the desire to seek one’s identity through the “new,” i.e., the latest African American-created social dance. The African American dances attracted so much interest by whites that they were vociferously and brazenly

25 The show-within-a-show structure of The Drowsy Chaperone complicates this proposition as Man In Chair narrates a show that revolves around his experience with the fictional musical, however, in the story he tells of his favorite musical the narrative follows Janet and her “drowsy” chaperone, who enables the variety of mix-ups in the show for Janet and her fiancé.
taken up and transferred to the stage and screen. I interrogate the intricacies of this move by outlining the history of the Charleston and mapping how movement practices are transferred to and transformed on stage in the 1920s. This consideration helps us to understand the obliviousness and escapism that permeated the Charleston and the Jazz Age. Following this history, I explore the wonder of the Jazz Age then and nostalgia for it now to launch this chapter into the exploration of three musicals that are wrapped up in the thrills, enchantments, and turmoil of the time seen most vividly in the body.

**Background of the Charleston**

Despite the official song and debut of the Charleston in *Runnin’ Wild*, Elida Webb, the choreographer of *Runnin’ Wild*, is not exclusively credited for inventing the Charleston. There is a more varied history of how the dance developed and travelled. True, the many patrons who saw *Runnin’ Wild* on Broadway aided in the dissemination and popularization of the dance across the nation, however, fragmented forms of the Charleston had been seen and experienced prior to the 1923 musical. Elements of the dance are generally agreed to have emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in the South and carried North with the Great Migration. The most well-known of the “proto” forms of the Charleston was in the original 1921 *Shuffle Along* where different movement fragments familiar to the Charleston, such as the Shimmy and Snake Hips,

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26 I explore the history of the Charleston prior to investigating the case studies, which is different than the previous chapter as each case study involved a different dance needing specific historical treatment. As the case studies in this chapter all generally involve the Charleston, or sensibilities of the Charleston, tracing an overall history prior to their investigation is most effective. The Black Bottom in *The Wild Party* is the exception and will be historically analyzed along with that show.

were blended with tap dance. The Stearnses trace the Charleston to 1903 in Savannah, Georgia, noting how the call and response-like structure of nascent forms of the Charleston can be drawn back to the African “Juba” influence. Composer and lyricist Noble Sissle explains his experiences with the Charleston, “It’s a real old Southern dance. . . . I remember learning it in Savannah around 1905.” James B. Johnson, the composer of Runnin’ Wild, explains that similar movements to those in the Charleston were common around 1913 and that the dance had many variations including tamer versions that were often part of cotillion dances. Additionally, various dancers of the time recall participating in Charleston contests in the early 1920s.

One of the main curiosities of the Charleston as a partner dance is that the male dancer did not necessarily lead the movements. Couples would dance together but there were many moments to express individuality. The shoulder shaking, the pedestrian-like swinging of arms in opposition, the twisting of the heels, the teeter-totter-like up and down of the torso, and the

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28 Snake Hips is a loose-jointed dance made popular in the early 1920s by Earl Tucker. The dance involves a fluid motion of legs in the hip sockets that gave the illusion of a “boneless” leg and swirly hips, an effect in part taken up by Josephine Baker in her solo performance career. Stearns and Stearns, 12.
29 The “Juba” is described “as going around in a circle with one foot raised—a sort of eccentric shuffle.” As mentioned in chapter one the Juba step is also connected to “Patting Juba” that can be seen in variations of the Charleston that involve the “crossing and uncrossing the hands on the knees as they fan back and forth.” Stearns and Stearns, 28, 29.
30 Stearns and Stearns, 112.
31 Ibid.
32 When discussing the transmission of dances and culture the mid-nineteenth century the notion of “slumming” should be mentioned as it is in part how people learned of the artistic practices of other cultures within the city. Chad Heap explains, “slumming became central to the emergence of the commercialized leisure industry, prompting the creation of a variety of new public amusements that promoted the crossing of racial and sexual boundaries. Heap further observes the complicated relationships slumming involved: “[t]raveling to Harlem and Bronzeville like other slummers to partake of jazz, liquor, and other forbidden pleasures, these musicians, literati, and socialites struck up significant cross-racial relationships with the black women and men they met on their visits. While such relationships often remained fraught with racialist, and sometimes even racist, implications, they far exceeded the exoticism that motivated most whites to visit black neighborhoods.” Heap, Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife (1885-1940) (Chicago: IL, University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7, 211. For more on slumming and Harlem Cabarets see Heap’s chapter five in Slumming, “The Negro Vogue: Excursions into a ‘Mysterious Dark World,’” 189-230.
opportunities for surprise “breakaways” from one’s partner “freed the body publicly.” The woman was not seen as “following” the man, equating the dance with a politicization of the body where female autonomy becomes evident.

At the same time, because there is not as strict a technique to the Charleston as compared to earlier dances such as the foxtrot, vestiges of other dances or movement skills can creep in. Carol Martin explains this historical embodiment: “Dances come and go even as the physical memory of individual dances persists in individual bodies long beyond their moment of popularity.” There is not an instantaneous switch over to a new dance, communities absorb the moves into their world, and in the embrace of the new dance style a cross-fertilization happens between previous dances embedded in the body. Movement styles people grew up with or did in earlier eras remain part of their bodily repertoire and influence how they move or take on a new dance. In this manner one of the most distinctive aspects of the Charleston (outside the formal ballroom) is its lack of uniformity that opens up a space for individual personalities and physicalities to come through. Some might add an enhanced double-bounce to the dance that makes clothing and jewellery come to life, others might keep elbows up high by their shoulders, rarely bending the knees giving the dance a more pogo-stick feel. The multi-layered

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35 For example, those who grew up with the waltz or foxtrot (both dances done in a closed position) may naturally embrace their partner in a similar manner while kicking heels up. The younger generation would be used to a looser hold. In all, there would be an overlap of older and newer styles of social dance.
36 As mentioned, stricter rules for body movements were enforced in more formal social dance settings. The moments of choreography in the upcoming case studies take place in informal, private, or even outdoor settings—all locales where there would be a lessening of rules. Markedly, the blending of social dance with the theatricalized embellishment is expected in the musical theatre genre, making the strict rules less significant.
characteristics and openness to the dance generally made it easy to learn, though embodying the fast rhythms and free styles came more easily to some than others.

**Transmission of Dances**

Though none of the musicals in this chapter delve into how white dancers learned the Charleston, at the height of the Charleston in the first half of the decade there was an active community of African American dance teachers who were in high demand to instruct white dancers, actors, and socialites in the dance form. While race is not a main focus of the narratives of the case studies of this chapter (as it was in the previous chapter), a general understanding of the transmission of the dances helps to highlight the embodied history of the dance and how ownership gets troubled as the dance evolves.

One of the main characteristics of the Jazz Age, as it progresses into the decade, is the increasing invisibility of the black dancer. Ironically, this move happens with the rising social and cultural trends and fashions for all things African American. In a telling moment in *The Wild Party* the D’Armono brothers, Oscar and Phil, sing of this shift:

Black folks

Are sounding more like

White folks

Who are sounding more like

black folks

in every way!\(^{37}\)

White patrons were fascinated with jazz music and dance and rushed to learn methods for themselves. Danielle Robinson explains that there was a “superficial but overt embracing of ‘blackness’ that occurred during the Jazz age.” The “superficial” assumption of the dance, which is parodied in the LaChiusa lyrics above, is in reference to the “celebration” and simulation of African American dances and music by whites. The Wild Party director George C. Wolfe makes a direct and critical comment on this artistic theft and racial impersonation by using blackface in the lead male character’s opening song. White performers, as is explicitly seen in The Wild Party, simultaneously learned and adopted the dances that in turn became more or less a “celebration” of themselves. Though the Harlem Renaissance, beginning in the late 1910s, seemed like a turning point for integration, acceptance, respect, and moving beyond African American stereotypes, there was a desire on the part of some white dancers to learn African American dances and music and attempt to carry them off as part of their own lifestyle and community.

Furthermore, white performers wanting to rise out of the general dance crowd and appear on screen or stage had to learn more impressive intricacies that were being developed by African American dancers in the various dance halls in Harlem. However, in order for white dancers, particularly film stars (or would-be film stars) to excel at the black dances, they needed the best African American teachers to teach them. Robinson describes how dance instruction provided a considerable amount of employment for African American dancers, unfortunately credit for the teaching and choreographing is rarely, if ever, given. When the social dances of the 1920s were on film or on stage the “whiteness of the dancer and the blackness of the dancing [is] often

39 The use of blackface by George C. Wolfe in The Wild Party is explored in greater depth in the forthcoming analysis of the musical in this chapter.
highlighted.”\textsuperscript{40} This contrast in fact increased, rather than lessened, the distance between the two groups. \textsuperscript{41} Jayna Brown explains this imbalance, “Such moments of cultural transfer were not celebrations of African American cultural resistance. Instead they affirmed a politics of white racial privilege, cultural access, and wilful misrecognition.”\textsuperscript{42}

African American dancers were the experts and eventual celebrities people rushed to see at the large ballrooms in Harlem, like the Savoy and the Cotton Club. White dancers attending these venues began to take up, borrow, and appropriate the dances for their own use and benefit. This phenomenon caused a shift in the historical progression of social dances in the United States. In the 1920s, the taking up of African American dance increases in tandem with the invisibility of the black dancing body. Many of the big revue shows, such as George White’s \textit{Scandals} or the various iterations of the \textit{Ziegfeld Follies}, included the Charleston (and the Black Bottom) and celebrated them as their own. In so doing, the work of African American dancers and teachers gets obscured, an action Brown refers to as “female minstrelsy.”\textsuperscript{43} Brown explains, many of the teaching sessions were quite secretive and executed out of the public eye. She observes that this practice was “a kind of minstrelsy that did not require cork.”\textsuperscript{44} The ability to move in the manner of African Americans was a way to express feminine modernity. “For white people,” explains Brown, “versions of black dance practices served a particular function as they reshaped their sense of individual self to the changing larger social and geopolitical bodies.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{40} Robinson, 37.
\textsuperscript{41} Robinson explains this increased margin of difference: “the performances of appropriated, “authentic” black dancing promoted the recognition of racial differences between the dancer and the dance rather than the similarities.” Robinson, 37.
\textsuperscript{42} Jayna Brown \textit{Babylon Girls}, 174.
\textsuperscript{43} Brown, 157.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 158.
Even though the appropriation of dances is not the main emphasis of this chapter, it must be established as an undeniable aspect of the landscape of the 1920s-1930s and is part of the embodied nostalgia. When white dancers execute African American-created social dances on stage, whether in the 1920s or nearly one hundred years later, there is a sense that the trajectory of history and deeper meaning of the dance is being repressed, or at very least downplayed. By the 1940s, African American contributions seemed to fade further into the background as dances continued to be taken up and adapted by white dancers.\textsuperscript{46} Further, the transformation of the dance into a cleaner, more straightened up or “cute” dance does a disservice to the fact that dancers had subjectivity.\textsuperscript{47} A wider view of the Jazz Age helps to understand the construction of the social, cultural, and political climate when these borrowings occurred and the mythologies that arose around the era.

The Jazz Age

\textit{GIRL DEAD FROM CHARLESTON: DOCTOR CALLS DANCE DANGEROUS}
Dr. Boyer declared that the extreme physical exercise of the Charleston is particularly dangerous for young women.

—\textit{New York Times}, February 16, 1926

The Jazz age was a wild time. With “a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure,” people took the lifestyle, the drinking, and the dances to the extreme.\textsuperscript{48} Though F. Scott Fitzgerald declared in his 1931 essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” “It was an age of miracles,

\textsuperscript{46} Perhaps the most obvious example of a shift in an African American dance to a supposed white creation is the Lindy Hop that becomes the “whitened” Jitterbug, often mistakenly understood as a solely white invention. The Lindy Hop is explored further in chapter three.

\textsuperscript{47} An increased “cuteness” to the dance also risks infantilizing and commodifying the dancers. For more on the commodity aesthetics of cuteness see: Sianne Ngai’s \textit{Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2012.

it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire,” not all agreed.  

A variety of medical accounts from the time show community leaders and physicians declaring the overindulgences of the time to be harmful, particularly for dancing women.  

However, the more social dances and their accompanying lifestyle were declared damaging, the greater the dance’s intrigue for young people. After World War I, and with the achievements of the women’s suffrage movement, the added possibility that couples did not have to marry in order to engage in physical contact linked the Charleston with casual intimacy and shifts in social behaviors. These changes in leisure pursuits characterized the era.

Fitzgerald coined the term “Jazz Age” to describe the period, which he defined as beginning with the May Day Riots of 1919 and ending with the Stock Market Crash of 1929. The Jazz Age emerged and rapidly came into full swing along with the prohibition of alcohol in 1920. For the younger generation, a prime motive of deciding one’s movement through the world was based on a deep desire for pleasure. Fitzgerald contends this urge was not entirely spurred by the ban on alcohol and the tantalizing underground nightlife it created. He explains, “The precious intimacies of the younger generation would have come about with or without prohibition,” contending, “the general decision to be amused that began with the cocktail parties of 1921 had more complicated origins.” 

The freneticism within the dance and the intensity with which people took it up is telling of the fear young people had of being tamed or controlled—a

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49 Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age, 1931,” 2.
50 Further accounts from the era describe various illnesses associated with social dancing. Most were largely unsubstantiated, though the reports themselves point to ways conservatives tried to bridle the dance. A plausible injury that could be the result of too much dancing, however, is the “Charleston Knee.” The New York Times reported in 1928, that a Paris physician, “condemns the Charleston and Black Bottom from a new point of view.” The physician explained the knee joint should only hinge back and forth and the circling of the knee (often called the “Cow Tail” for the circular motion of the knee towards the back) common in the Charleston can cause damage to ligaments which he thus diagnosed as “Charleston Knee;” in “Jazz Dance ‘Dangerous Sports,’ Says Doctor, Adding “Charleston Knee to Mankind’s Ills,” New York Times, April 29, 1928.
51 Fitzgerald, 3.
prelude to what was coming ahead. The wildness of the 1920s was also in part catalyzed by an overt clash of generations. Different generations professed opinions on how the world should function and what one’s responsibilities to the self and society were at any given moment. Amy Koritz explains in *Culture Makers: Urban Performance and Literature of the 1920s*, “Beyond the icon of the flapper, with its image of youthful irresponsibility and conspicuous consumption, there is a strong presence in the 1920s of a belief in the power of rational elites to control human destiny, and a terror on the part of those would be so controlled, that they might in fact succeed.”52

How people envisioned themselves and behaved in the 1920s was largely attributed to age, experience, and one’s respect for or rebellion against the conventions with which they were raised. What one did in their leisure time (a relatively new concept in the 1920s) interconnected with how one’s individual identity was formed.53 The younger generation was ready to break free from the more puritan ideals, while the older generation sought to justify the work ethic they had embraced and precautions they had taken to ensure economic survival. If one was not connected to a sense of duty to family and society, he or she was prime for the indulgences of the time. The social developments of the Jazz Age, such as Prohibition, opened up a space for more unruly activities.54

The increase in social pursuits by the younger generation was of great curiosity to community leaders and the older generation. How people responded to pleasure and physical

52 Koritz, 2.

53 Ibid., 5. Though this manner of identification is often the norm today, at the turn of the twentieth century the concept of “leisure time” was a new phenomenon. How one chose to spend their leisure time was how urban communities came to define themselves.

54 Prohibition banned the sale and production of alcohol from 1920-1933. This bold choice was inspired by what many conservatives felt was blatant drunkenness that was beginning to spread across much of the United States, in big cities in particular. This behavior inevitably went on to affect the family unit. The move to restrict alcohol consumption did not necessarily rid society of public drunkenness, it merely drove drinking underground, creating increased problems of corruption and crime.
enjoyment caused much consternation between factions and much of this debate almost always pivoted around the consumption and enjoyment of alcohol. The shift of alcohol to underground or private venues created a world of secretive and clandestine behaviors as well as increased corruption and crime. Quite quickly secret-drinking venues—namely the speakeasy—became one of the signature locales of the Jazz Age. With nearly 100,000 speakeasies in New York City alone, drinking, dancing, and jazz music became the order of the day.\(^{55}\) The spectrum of experiences in this social landscape ranged from upper-class patrons visiting and taking in the dance venues before retreating to the safety of their homes; to gangsters and criminals seeking to profit from the illegal sale of alcohol; to the enjoyments of the musicians, dancers, and performers that worked and often lived at or near the venues.\(^{56}\) A private drinking party in one’s apartment was also common fare, the experience and consequences of which are explored in *The Wild Party.*

The sense of individuality and experimentation that inhabited the Jazz Age is embodied in the Charleston. Barbara Cohen-Stratyner explains, “More than any other dance, it defined the performer as young and willing to take chances on modern life.”\(^ {57}\) The Charleston physicalized the whimsy and wildness of the era. The dance allowed participants to let loose and experience the thrills of modern times. This adventurous, and sometimes desperate, attitude is most palpable in the upcoming case studies in moments of dance when the abandonment of previous social restrictions and inhibitions is embodied by the choreography.


\(^{56}\) See footnote 31 in this chapter for more on “slumming.”

\(^{57}\) Cohen-Stratyner, 222.
The Charleston Then and Now—Consumerism and Nostalgia

Sometimes, though, there is a ghostly rumble among the drums, an asthmatic whisper in the trombones that swings me back into the early twenties when we drank wood alcohol and every day in every way grew better and better...

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

The debates the Charleston ignited in the 1920s make the dance also a potential indicator of the economic and sociopolitical climate of the era. Koritz explains the Charleston in its time “generated a discourse that intertwined apprehension about gender, class, race, and aesthetic value with both invocations of expertise and consumerist imperatives.”

The Charleston was about more than sexuality and freedom, it was also about consumption and the development of mass culture. Markedly this mass culture is based in the purchasing power and consumption on the part of the middle-class and thus still subject to delineations of class and race. Chip Rhodes explains in Structures of the Jazz Age: Mass Culture, Progressive Education and Racial Discourses, “the fundamental contradiction between mass culture’s democratic promises and the inegalitarian class structure from which these promises are inseparable.” Fortunately, the availability of affordable mass entertainment kept a level of social interaction between classes and races. Koritz observes the link between the celebration of individualism in the Charleston and consumerism in the 1920s “contributed to the attenuation of the vibrant public sphere” while also encouraging people to embrace their individual desires “at the expense of the community.”

Life for the younger generation in the 1920s was less about contributing to the greater good or community causes than fulfilling one’s individual desires. Spending habits in this

58 Koritz, 65.
60 Koritz, 65. For more on cultural mixing at entertainment venues see: Chad Heap’s Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife (1885-1940).
61 Ibid., 10.
age of department stores and shopping as a leisure activity became how people defined themselves in society, beginning the contemporary phenomenon of self-identification in relation to modes of consumption. In effect, the novelty of the Charleston inspired a celebration of the self on show and in motion, particularly for women, where one could be fêted by friends and lovers for the fashion embellishments and trinkets they wore on the dance floor.

The notion that people were more fearless, both with their bodies and money, in the 1920s creates a sense of nostalgia in the twentieth century, particularly looking back from a time when the pressure to keep up with the forward moving economy led many to believe they could handle extensive credit card debt, steep interest rates and long term-mortgages.\textsuperscript{62} The heady time of economic obliviousness in the 1920s is folded into the dramaturgical structure of each case study in this chapter, as the main characters in the musicals generally overlook the financial repercussions of their indulgences.\textsuperscript{63}

To investigate the interconnectedness between and among the aforementioned themes, I begin with a look at the choreographic strategies in \textit{Thoroughly Modern Millie}. I interrogate how the Charleston, by way of the playful pastiche of the show, embodies a process of exploring one’s subjectivity in an increasingly modernized world. I then examine the nostalgic inclinations

\textsuperscript{62} A nationalist angle to this paradigm was added post-9/11 where leaders suggested it was one’s patriotic duty to help reinvigorate business and the economy in New York and across the nation.

\textsuperscript{63} This is complicated in \textit{The Drowsy Chaperone} as the characters in the show-within-a-show disregard economical circumstances, whereas the narrator Man in Chair in the 2000s seems to live by minimal or frugal means.
this self-reflexivity and imitation creates in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{64} Next, I turn to Michael John LaChiusa’s \textit{The Wild Party} that confronts an older, more jaded and run-down group of people, helmed by the strung-out and broken Queenie.\textsuperscript{65} The pastiche-like structure of the piece provides the framework to explore the misplaced nostalgia for a time of cultural theft, over-indulgence, and self-inflicted harm. To close, I look to \textit{The Drowsy Chaperone} as a unique example of how nostalgia is created onstage and used to re-engage one’s affection for musical theatre, a form of nostalgia, which is shown to be a survival tactic for the protagonist (and us) in an increasingly complex and unsettling world.

\textsuperscript{64} The musical, \textit{The Grand Hotel} (1989) with music and lyrics by Robert Wright, George Forrest, Maury Yeston, and book by Luther Davis, based on the 1929 novel by Vicki Baum, takes place in 1928 Berlin and celebrates the liveliness of Roaring Twenties as well. Given its European locale, the show is out of the purview of my analysis, however it is important to note that there is nostalgia in \textit{The Grand Hotel} for the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age, as well as the faded glory of the hotel and the episodes that took place within it. Tommy Tune’s choreography embodied the freedom of the age (much as in \textit{Millie}) paired with the mechanization of the build up to World War II, by using chairs and synchronized movements. The song, “H-A-P-P-Y,” specifically celebrates the Charleston, and describes the dissemination of the dance worldwide, its lyrics stating: “What began in Charleston is now done in London, ev’rywhere from Ku’damm to Paris,” then asking: “Why do I feel dandy when I dance the Charleston?”

\textsuperscript{65} In the year 2000 there were two composers who decided to turn March’s poem into a musical, one by Michael John LaChiusa and one by Andrew Lippa. Lippa’s version was the first to open Off-Broadway in February 2000, directed by Gabriel Barre, choreographed by Mark Dendy with Julia Murney, Brian D’Arcy James, Idina Menzel, and Taye Diggs. The second production was composed by Michael John LaChiusa and opened on Broadway in April of 2000, George C. Wolfe directed and wrote the book, Joey McKneely was the choreographer, The show starred Toni Collette, Mandy Patinkin, Yancey Arias, and Eartha Kitt. The Lippa version ran 54 shows, and the LaChiusa 36 previews and 68 shows. The purview of this project is to analyze Broadway shows not Off-Broadway, as such; I will only briefly discuss the Lippa version.
II. *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and Nostalgia for the “New Woman”

*May one offer in exhibit the year 1922!*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1931

One arm wraps tightly around the waist; another drapes seductively over the head; both wrists flap in double time to the building jazz music; legs flick front, side, and across to the right; a heeled and bedazzled foot comes up to the knee, swivelling the body around, leaving the head behind, until eye contact must finally be broken with the audience; short hair whirls around while shoulders pulse and knees pop and twizzle. A thoroughly modern Millie (Sutton Foster), dressed in an amber cloche hat and matching drop-waist, above-the-knee dress, makes her way through the “spiffy” dancers and sings, “Men say it’s criminal what women’ll do, what they’re forgetting is, this is 1922!” The highly choreographed opening of the 2002 Broadway musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie* imagines the height of 1922. The youthful cast executes exaggerated Charleston-like movements sprinkled with a variety of twists and turns, that moments earlier left Millie with her mouth gaping as she tried to pick up the new “modern” style. Millie dashes out a revolving door center stage and returns moments later in a chic 1920s dress and joins in. Millie wants to fit it and be “modern,” and in the whirlwind of the opening number of the show—so do we.

Prior to this theatricalized pinpoint of the apparent peak of freedom and frivolity for the younger generation in 1922, audiences awaiting the opening of the show are presented with a dictionary definition of the word “modern” projected on the scrim covering the stage. The definition reminds the audience that to be modern is to be “a member of the modern school of

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thought in relation to any subject.”67 The scrim cycles through a rainbow of colors and the projection remains for contemplation throughout the playing of the overture. The description of what it means to be modern helps familiarize the audience with the early twentieth century era in which the musical is set, when female modernism was in full swing and cultural trends involved the bold salutation of all things new. Further down in the definition the audience is reminded that modernity is also “characteristic of present and recent times: not obsolete.”68 With a wink, the creative team boosts the emphasis on just how “thoroughly modern” this musical will be.

The scrim rises and an innocent and naïve looking Millie stands upstage center, wearing a long dress, her brown tresses clipped back, shoulders slouched. She walks slowly center stage and explains how she has planned for this trip, studied the maps of New York City, and has “prepared” for the city (“Not For The Life of Me”). She explains that her family back home insisted she would be lonely and homesick. She produces the return ticket they sent along from her pocket. The music is soft and melodic until she tears the ticket in two; jazz music kicks in and she proclaims, “Burn the bridge, Bet the store, Baby’s comin’ home no more, Not for the life of me.”69 This is the last we hear of Millie’s family or the older generation. The once empty stage populates with stylish dancers, dressed in the luxurious finery of the 1920s—satin lapels of well-tailored suits for the men and dropped waist dresses in satiny champagne colors, accented by trim hair styles and chic accessories for the women. The small, fast moving kicks of the Charleston immediately bring the space and the costumes to life. Dancers walk forward on their heels, push flexed hands overhead, swish hips side-to-side, all while pumping knees up and down and waving arms. The synchronization of the large ensemble amplifies the buoyant mood.

67 Opening projection of Thoroughly Modern Millie, as viewed at the New York Public Library Performing Art Library, Theatre on Film and Tape, January 18, 2018.
68 Ibid.
and their tight formation is indicative of the increasingly mechanized world—the “exhibit” of youth and energy Fitzgerald cries out for.

An emphatic focus on, and imitation of, the playfulness and boldness of the 1920s builds from the beginning, and if the point is at all missed the lyrics of the opening number conclude:

So beat the drums ‘cause here comes thoroughly
Hot off the press! One step ahead! Jazz age!

Whoopee baby! We’re so thoroughly modern [Millie] Now!70

The charm of the era, the follies of youth, the general casting off of ones’ past and embracing the new and the modern is the essence of Thoroughly Modern Millie.

**Background of Thoroughly Modern Millie**

Thoroughly Modern Millie opened on Broadway in 2002. Jeanine Tesori composed the music, with lyrics by Dick Scanlan, and a book written by Richard Morris and Scanlan. The musical was directed by Michael Mayer and choreographed by Rob Ashford.71 The show is based on the 1967 movie of the same name that starred Julie Andrews.72 The plot follows the dreams of newcomer Millie to New York, who gets a job in a secretary pool in order to carry out her plan to marry her rich boss. The story itself is a bit convoluted, with a secondary plot line involving the landlady of a women’s rooming house who kidnaps young women and sells them

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71 The musical won six Tony awards including Best Musical and Best Choreography.
into the sex trade outside the country. The success of the show lies in the treatment of the era, the
dances, the music, the large personalities, and the celebration of a time of change, and pleasure,
especially for women. Millie has the idea that the “new woman” of the 1920s does not need to
marry for love and to marry a man for his money is quite forward thinking. Of course, she comes
to love a man who has no prospects, only to find out in the end he is in fact the heir to a massive
fortune. The musical is melodramatic and sensational; it is a period piece of the early 1920s that
embraces many conventions of musical theatre.73 From Millie’s opening “I want” song (“Not For
The Life Of Me”) to the “11 o’clock” number (“Gimme, Gimme”) the musical fills its role as a
highly entertaining piece of escapism and a pastiche of the 1920s. What makes the show of
critical interest is how the movement is used to unfold the story of the life of the “new woman”
in 1922 within the pastiche style of the score.74 By investigating the female body in motion we
can discern how women worked around the rules set in place by the older patriarchal generation
in the 1920s. In Millie there is a celebration of youthfulness, freedom and engagement in the
novelty of life, despite living in a world, for the most part, run by men.

The Choreography of Thoroughly Modern Millie

Choreographer Rob Ashford has a lengthy list of Broadway choreography credits to his
name—including the Disney blockbuster musical Frozen (2018). Like most Broadway

73 Some of the standard conventions of musical theatre include: a big opening number to introduce the
world of the musical; the “I want” song where early on a character sings about what they want or desire;
the act 1 finale that sends the audience to the intermission with a desire to return; the “11 o’clock number
is a big showstopper towards the end of act two where a main character comes to an integral realization.
For more specific conventions and further details see: Stacy Wolf’s Changed for Good: A Feminist
74 Composer Jeanine Tesori and lyricist Dick Scanlan added their own songs to the musical style of the
score from the film.
choreographers he began as a dancer.\textsuperscript{75} Ashford is highly interdisciplinary, often directing non-musicals and working in film. He is known for his storytelling capabilities using dance. He describes his creative process, “I work really hard to make dance an essential part in my musical. Dance isn’t extra; it should be part of the story. Audiences are smart: you need only about 15 seconds of dance to establish a mood or atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{76} He continues on to explain, “the steps are always last. When you do a new show its always about the story, what do you want to get across at a particular moment, how the characters move—that’s where the most production time is spent—then the steps.”\textsuperscript{77}

Ashford captures the innocence and youth of the early Jazz Age in \textit{Millie} by creating a spectrum of body movement beyond the stereotypical kicks and swinging arms of the Charleston. His choreographic palette for both men and women in the opening includes wrist flicks and circles, shoulder twitches and shrugs, hip circles, ankle flexes, as well as a subtle exoticism that permeates the dance, with articulated fingers and arms squaring around the face suggestive of Spanish or Polynesian dance styles. This shift in style is seen in the bridge of the titular song when the ensemble sings, “What we think is chic, unique, and quite adorable, They think is odd and ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’-ble.”\textsuperscript{78} Dancers travel around in an oval formation, alternating male and female dancer. They do a series of touches with the toe, and then stepping on the full foot, a move that accentuates the syncopated beat of the music. While this stepping occurs, hips swivel around towards the front (in a belly dance style), while arms, hands, and wrists circle and twist in a toreador-like manner. The collaged movement sequence is repeated

\textsuperscript{78} “Thoroughly Modern Millie,” Scanlan and Tesori, 2002.
with the next step. This short section picks up the drum line and more mysterious sounding tone of the bridge and uses the switch in movement to briefly parody the wicked habits the older generation believes them to have taken on. Dancers then chassé (step-together-step) while flapping arms to a tight wedge formation and execute a series of sharp and accentuated dance moves that build in intensity. These quick moves are still in the 1920s style, but engaging the ensemble of sixteen dancers in unison and in close proximity amplifies the communal desire for the latest new and exciting trend. The machine-like quality of this section also reminds one of the urbanization, mechanization, and the fast pace of the modern era. Movement defines how Millie situates herself in the city; for example, in order to activate the elevator in her rooming house occupants must tap dance. Additionally, in the typing pool where many women work, the action of work is not typing, but tap dancing, while seated at a typewriter. The female body in motion is how the women in the piece are shown to be part of the working community, not to mention a clever production number.

Soon after “Not for the Life of Me,” we are introduced to Ching Ho and Bun Foo, who work for Mrs. Meers, the leader of a white slavery ring. The two Chinese immigrants are trying to earn enough money to bring their mother from Hong Kong to New York. Disheartened by their work with Mrs. Meers they break into a Mandarin version of “Not For the Life of Me.” Despite the absence of any choreography in their version the jazzy essence of the piece is felt with the same vocal intonations of the “bo-do-dee-dohs.” Later in the musical they also tap dance to move the elevator as Millie does. The repeating by Ching Ho and Bun Foo of the opening number and some of Millie’s moves brings up the problematic topic of Orientalism in the show.  

79 Mrs. Meers in played by a white actress in a Chinese-styled costume, with heavy eye makeup, and an exaggerated English-Mandarin accent. Ching Ho and Bun Foo are played by Asian American actors.
Of the limited scholarship surrounding this issue in *Millie*, Angela C. Pao explores the concept of “ethnic parody.” Pao finds the musical is more about a community of migrants than ethnic stereotypes, forgiving the Orientalism (as do many reviewers). Pao claims the musical “operates in the mode of second-order parody using over-emphatic citations and performances within performances to deconstruct stereotypes and reformulate social relations,” and is generally a drastic improvement on the 1967 film. In this consideration, the overt exaggeration is meant to “denounce racism,” and as Pao claims, “Asian characters are treated no worse and no better than anyone else in the show.” If the Orientalism is suppose to be a spoof or parody of 1920s movie stereotypes as the creative team claims, then “we need signals from the text to guide our interpretation, and the degree of visibility of these signals determines their potential for assisting us.” *Millie* does not offer this guidance, and Pao does reprimand the production team for not having more visible cues of the parody itself. All things considered, and without prior knowledge of the film, the Orientalist stereotypes remain of concern with or without additional background knowledge.

In terms of movement, the Orientalist stereotypes draw some attention to various Eastern or “exotic” dance styles, as mentioned earlier. These flourishes are part of the mélange of 1920s styles Ashford uses in the opening dance number and are not found in any significance elsewhere.

81 Angela C. Pao, “Green Glass and Emeralds,” 36. Pao explains the musical has in fact done much to repair the overt racism in the movie, however those unfamiliar with the movie would not know of the improvements and are left to judge the structural logic of including the characters themselves. She explains, “Scanlan’s goal was to embody the spirit of the present multiracial and multicultural era of American society and American theatre.” Pao, “Green Glass and Emeralds,” 36. Changes from the movie to the stage include: Scanlan and Richard Morris (co-writers of the book) give Ching Ho and Bun Foo names (previously called Oriental 1 and 2) and motives in the show (to bring their mother to America); by the end Ching Ho ends up in a relationship with Miss Dorothy.
82 Pao, 4.
83 Hutcheon, *Theory on Parody*, xvi.
in the musical. The hip rolls and wrist swirling redolent of belly dancing do, however, fit within the historical era. Exoticized “Salome” dances were part of popular vaudeville performance at the turn of the nineteenth century that seeped into stage performance.\(^{84}\) Douglas Gilbert explains the usage: “the Salome fad became an important vehicle in vaudeville for women to showcase their female sexuality and independence.”\(^{85}\) The “exotic” dance elements are very few in Millie and though they “point to the emergence of the New Woman,” Brown reminds they are also “an eroticized enactment of European colonial access.”\(^{86}\) Keeping this in mind, Ashford seems more focused on imitating the thrills of the dances of the 1920s rather than parodying the “exotic” style.\(^{87}\) Critics of Millie acknowledged the Orientalist stereotypes in the show but, as mentioned, were not that disturbed by them, given most knew of the original movie.\(^{88}\)

The critics are not so soft on Ashford’s choreography. Though Ashford received the Tony Award for Best Choreography for Millie, his work on the show received mixed reviews. Though some consider the choreographic moments as extra fluff, Ashford explains he strives to create

\(^{84}\) Salome dances were essentially an exotic dance performed while removing veils and scarves, traditionally done to invoke desire and gain favor, “Dance of the Seven Veils,” http://www.shira.net/sevenveils.htm, accessed July 2018.

\(^{85}\) Douglas Gilbert, America\textsuperscript{n} Vaudeville: Its Life and Times (New York: Dover Publishing, 1940), 190. Ruth St. Denis and Fahruda Manzar were some of the most famous performers of the “Salome” style and the trend grew in such popularity that there were “Salome” dance schools in various large cities.

\(^{86}\) Brown, 175.

\(^{87}\) As for the racial make up of the cast: the majority of the original ensemble was white, though there were several Asian American and African Americans in both the men and women’s chorus. Some of the Asian American cast members also understudied Ching Ho and Bun Foo, including a female member of the chorus Jo Ann M Hunter. Playbill, accessed July 28, 2018, http://www.playbill.com/production/thoroughly-modern-millie-marquis-theatre-vault-0000008183.

movements that “grow organically from the characters and the plot.” Ashford has certainly created a complex movement palette that puts the entire body, particularly female bodies, in constant motion. Notwithstanding, critics debated the degree to which he achieved his goal. In order to understand what Ashford’s choreography is doing in the musical, I consider the operation of embodied meaning created by his use of the Charleston as base material or framework in tandem with various critiques.

Thoroughly Modern Millie and Nostalgia for the “New Woman”

With her chin thrust forward and shoulders squared, Millie belts out: “Good-bye, good goody girl, I’m changing and how.” From the beginning Millie defies expectations of family members back home and joins up with the other young and resourceful women making changes in their lives in the early 1920s. What is the nature of this transformation and how is it manifested in the body? For Millie the “change” involves breaking free from traditional and conservative middle class values and embracing independence and liberal views (and the distinct fashions of the 1920s). Importantly, the change for women at the time was also about exploring what the body can do, and the dance in Millie allows for this exploration, particularly as Sutton Foster, a very adept dancer, easily brings the embodied transformation to her character. Millie arrives in New York at the height of the Jazz Age. The musical explores how she navigates the thrills of the time, but generally avoids questioning what is at work economically or politically.

89 Interview with Jenny Dalzell, Dance Teacher Magazine, April 1, 2012.
91 Foster has appeared in eleven Broadway shows and won two Tony Awards for Thoroughly Modern Millie (2002) and Anything Goes (2011). Trained from an early age in ballet and tap, Sutton began training intensely in high school entering numerous competitions, including Star-Search at 15. Her first professional jobs were as a dancer in touring musicals, then eventually as an ensemble member/understudy in a variety of Broadway shows (Les Miserable, Grease, The Scarlet Pimpernel). Her first major role was in Millie, where she got promoted from the chorus to understudy to lead. Sylviane Gold, “She’s the Top,” Dance Magazine 85, no. 12 (December 2011): 26-30.
Experiences for Millie are new and fresh; there is an absence of cynicism and anxiety (as is seen in *The Wild Party*) that make the show a particularly fertile place for nostalgia for a time when female bodies were boldly changing how they moved through the world with much flair and flourish. In the early 1920s anything seemed possible. The joyous emboldening and embracing of the modern created, especially for women, a utopic few years of imagining and acting out one’s autonomy without much thought for the future.

The nostalgic inclinations created in *Millie* are for the luxury of self-reflexivity, self-exploration, and mobility—concepts not necessarily available to all audience members in the twenty-first century. The character of Miss Dorothy who joins Millie at her rooming house emphasizes this point, with ironic flair, as she comes from a wealthy background, but wants to be part of the excitement and “See a new world unfurl,” as she sings in her opening song, “How the Other Half Lives.” The insertion of a rich character that wants to experience being poor offers an amusing, though possibly offensive, parody of the pursuit of economic status. Indeed, the saccharine sweet sensibilities in *Millie* are perhaps too intense or self-indulgent for some. Certainly, Charles Isherwood tires of Foster’s “overdetermined” smile and “pearly whites,” stating “she bares her splendid assortment so insistently, so ingratiatingly, that by the end of the evening you’ll either be smiling right back or reaching for sunglasses.” Yet, the exaggerations serve to remind one of the magnitude of the shift in the roles and behavior of women in the

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92 Stiff corsets, long skirts, and the conventional behaviors of society in general bound bodies prior to the 1920s. When the Charleston was done in the growing number dance halls in urban areas and beyond, it enhanced the already emerging process of female autonomy in an increasingly modernized world. For more on changes in social and physical behaviors of women in the early twentieth century see: Linda J. Tomko’s *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999) and Kathy Peiss’ *Cheap Amusements Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996).
1920s. The female ensemble sings in the opening song, “Men say it’s criminal what women will do,” pointing out just how opinionated men were to the ongoing changes in women’s behavior.95

The excessiveness of the movement, above other theatrical elements in Millie, captures this sense of extravagance and margin of change, which fits within the pastiche quality of the show. Critics seemed to agree that the larger-than-life personalities of the lead performers carry the show, and I would add that the personalities are drawn from the inflated physical sensibilities and mind-sets of the era created by the focus on the liberated-self, particularly for women. Foster amplifies the joyous shenanigans by a continued use of loose body language, and near rubbery posture and cartoonish movement styles. Thomas Burke explains Sutton Foster “drive[s] [the show] forward by sheer force of personality.”96 Yes, the shiny veneer of the show can be considered too much at times and does operate in a sort of dramaturgical impetus that can only be described as “over-the-top,” however, the early part of the 1920s was outrageous and shameless, as wistfully described by Fitzgerald. Foster’s quasi-parody of the styles helps enhance the nostalgia for the era. While Isherwood labels Ashford’s choreography as “heavy on the insistently flapping hands and feet, low on distinctiveness,” and Burke calls it “derivative,” I posit the dance’s insistence serves to support the scale of change for women’s physical freedom; further, the dance is imitative by design.97 In the beginning of the 1920s copying, parodying, and parroting others en route to forming one’s own identity was the way the Charleston broke barriers towards allowing women a freedom of the body.

97 Isherwood, 2002; Burke, 2002.
The “Nuttycracker Suite” in Millie emphasizes this outrageousness and imitative learning and enjoyment. An analysis of the bizarre scene helps to substantiate the idea that the early 1920s were a time of incredible chaos and exploration of the body. The “Nuttycracker Suite” is an instrumental section in the musical where Millie and her friends visit their first speakeasy. The music throughout the entire scene is a jazzed-up and amusing imitation of Pytor Illyich Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker Suite written in 1892. The showy piece also contributes to the cartoonish and extravagant style the musical is trying to take on. The citation of the Nutcracker also evokes a fantasy world, or “Land of the Sweets,” that Millie and her friends inhabit, which works well in service to the pastiche of 1920s-styled films both the original 1967 movie and musical attempt. The diegetic dance scene involves a comic treatment of ballet, jazz dance, and social dance styles that teases out the exchanges between the dance hall and concert or stage dance, along with a demonstration of how identity can be developed through social dance (and alcohol).

As Millie and her friends enter the speakeasy, a multitude of dancers are already moving in couples using a combination of Charleston and Tango-like choreography, keeping their focus towards the floor. The dancers are hunched over, hopping and kicking one foot to the front and back, with plenty of breakaways and sensual transitions using deep lunges side to side. Their passionate dancing draws attention to the physical awkwardness of Millie and her friends upon their arrival. The lack of lyrics in the scene helps express how social dance venues from the beginning of the Jazz Age forward were about music, body language, and one’s innate physicality.

Unexpectedly, Miss Dorothy grabs a flask from Jimmy and takes a swig. She instantly begins to move in a distorted and stiff manner, the alcohol apparently causing convulsions and
twitches. Each girl takes a drink and the same thing happens. The jerky movement twists into ballet arabesques and other sharp movements from the classical repertoire. When Millie takes a swig her knees immediately become rubbery and she noodles about the stage with flailing kicks and spaghetti arms. The music turns bluesy and Jimmy and an unknown partner begin a sultry and sensuous dance, close to the Slow Drag, connected by a string of pearls. Millie tries to do the same but is strangely stiff and shocked when her companion grabs her buttocks. Partners switch and Millie is now paired with Jimmy. Millie is surprised to find herself dancing with confidence and sensuality. Millie reconsiders her relationship with Jimmy, who she had butted heads with earlier, based on the shift in her physicality (and lowered inhibitions from the drinks).

Millie is pulled back in with her girlfriends for a frenzy of dancing center stage while the men circle and leap around—late night mayhem has taken over. Further alcohol is guzzled and competitions between Millie and other performers showcase Foster’s dancing skills, but also how open Millie (the “new woman”) is to trying the latest moves, music and drinks. Dancers move about in low lunges with weight on the ball of the foot, adding in lots of small kicks and Charleston strides swinging forward and back. The whole concept of organized chaos is turned on its head, as the music shifts to an intense and pulsing version of the final adagio music of the ballet. A flask is passed down the line, to a Tchaikovsky pas de deux finale. The mayhem is put to a stop when Millie passes the flask mistakenly to a police officer and the same drinking line becomes a line up for mug shots leading to a night in jail.
In this section, one’s experience of physical and social awakening is expressed through dance. This strategy physicalizes the shift in Millie and her friends from first-time attendees at a speakeasy to seasoned participants and part of a new community. Adding in a ballet-meets-jazz “mash-up” alludes to how unhinged a speakeasy might have been. The juxtaposition of high and low dance forms brings up the diversity of patrons at speakeasies that could range from high society to lower classes, as well as a mix of gangsters and criminals. While the dance is somewhat presentational to the audience there are multiple points of focus and inward facings to one’s dancing partner that altogether make this moment of mayhem believable—when the police raid the joint and everyone gets arrested, the absurdity of the situation and the outpouring of bodily freedom is very much felt by the abrupt halt in the music and movement. There is no attempt at sophistication in the “Nuttycracker Suite”; the choreography is “exuberant and playful.” While it may be derivative, the choreography is unrestricted and the lack of self-consciousness of the performers by the end captures the spirit of the early 1920s and the gutsy “new woman.”

A more subtle but effective choice, not mentioned by critics, that Ashford uses to bring out the “social” in social dance happens at a cocktail party hosted by the wealthy Muzzy Van Hossmere. While a private conversation is going on between Muzzy and Jimmy (her secret stepson) the guests at the party are engaging in a light one-step behind them. There are a dozen couples all mechanically doing the dance in time, standing a foot away from each other with arms placed in the couples dance position but not touching. This robotic and fragmented dance

98 Marya Annette McQuirter observes, “Social dance figured as one of the central arenas in which the process of identity formation became manifest,” in “Awkward Moves: Dance Lessons form the 1940s,” in Dancing Many Drums: Excavation in African American Dance, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 81. Adding in the “Nuttycracker Suite” section in Millie helps to show how social dance venues helped participants find a sense of belonging within a community.
occurs when the guests (including Millie) are not involved in the conversation but are eavesdropping. The dancers, with their backs to the audience, go through the motions of the dance but the lack of physical contact makes for a very austere mood. The stiff movement is a nod to the refined and stiff nature of the dances when taken up by the wealthy elite and is a stark contrast to the chaos and physical abandon in the speakeasy, the domain of the uninhibited.

Critics Barbara and Scott Siegle take a more consolatory angle to the show stating director Michael Mayer “does an exceptional job of keeping the audience’s mind off the show's limitations and stressing its strengths: color, pacing, laughs.”\textsuperscript{100} Indeed, the strength of \textit{Millie} is its driving rhythm and embodiment of the thrills and merriments of the era. \textit{Variety} calls the show a “gleefully nostalgic concoction,” and in a recent post-9/11 world the need for a turn away from present anxieties in order to contemplate one’s place in the world, if just for a few hours at the theatre, becomes quite desirable.\textsuperscript{101} A backwards glance, particularly one so sentimental and frivolous as \textit{Millie}, can offer a nostalgic reflection on historical moments that punctuated change in a positive manner that give confidence in the present time.

\textit{Thoroughly Modern Millie} closes with a tableau of a kiss between Jimmy and Millie and a proposal. As they head off on their new lives, a strange young woman shows up, suitcase in hand, dressed in a plain and unfashionable outfit, just as Millie did in the opening of the musical. The chorus begins to welcome thoroughly modern “Maude” through the same up-tempo choreography they did Millie—and the cycle begins again. This circular nature salutes continued feminine modernity and the ongoing quest for the next novelty and trend. This fanciful send-off is rich with nostalgia and unabashedly champions a rose-colored backward glance. This glance, however, illustrates bodies constantly in motion (tap dancing in moving desks in the typing pool

\textsuperscript{100} Siegle, 2002.
\textsuperscript{101} Isherwood, 2002.
for example), offering a sense of momentum to a society that was lacking a sense of certainty in the future in 2002. As Fitzgerald claimed in 1931, “We were the most powerful nation. Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun.”

Director Michael Mayer drives this point home in his enthusiastic production, largely brought to life by Ashford’s choreography that has bodies in motion throughout to emphasize one must move to live and to love (and to operate an elevator).

Indeed, the speed and mechanization of the modern era was commonly interpreted through bodies in motion in the growing cities. Mark Franko describes the dance of the early twentieth century: “the ostensibly ludic qualities of dance were there and then transformed into social energy.”

The intensification of all kinetic and mechanized motion brought forth by Ashford’s highly detailed and hectic choreography celebrates the social energy of 1922. The pastiche quality of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* uses the moves, sounds, and images of the 1920s to create the excitement of the early Jazz Age, though markedly without any political punch. Still, instead of a “random cannibalizing of all styles of the past,” as per Fredric Jameson’s description of pastiche, there is a focus on recreating (through highly theatricalized dance) the social and physical energy that surrounded modernization when a sense of newness was achievable.

Creating nostalgia for that sense of individuality and change—the “new woman”—makes *Millie* a gesture towards the absence of both that newness and ease of exploring one’s subjectivity in the contemporary era. The nostalgic vision may be enticing to contemporary audiences as newness in the 1920s had a resounding influence on bodies in motion, and shifted our understanding of how bodies, particularly female bodies, moved through

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102 Fitzgerald, 2.
the world. While it is true that technological advancement is ever more a factor of contemporary life, its presence is felt largely in the ether—the cyber and the virtual world. In contrast, the embodiment of the “new” in *Millie* resonates on a human, physical, and tactile level that is increasingly hard to find.

### III. The Wild Party, The Black Bottom, and Demystifying Nostalgia.

*So you think the party’s gonna last forever*  
*And you’ll always fly this high ‘ But that depends*  
*The higher the high, the harder you’re gonna*  
*Crash back down*  
*When it ends*

“When It Ends” from *The Wild Party*  
—Michael John LaChiusa

An embittered and tight-jawed Dolores (Eartha Kitt) intones this derisive warning as a faint dawn light creeps over the half-naked and drunk bodies strewn about Queenie and Burrs’s dilapidated New York apartment. Lipstick is smeared on women’s faces and smudged on men’s stretched-out undershirts. Some guests are passed out, some crawl half-heartedly towards their belongings, and others cast glazed eyes around the trashed apartment, taking in the aftermath of a rogue gathering, alcohol bash, drug binge, and orgy—a wild party. The merrymaking and indulgence is long over, Queenie (Toni Collette) stands alone center stage; the pre-dawn light glints off her flushed skin and dishevelled hair. She is momentarily lost in revelry. An allusion to the opening vaudeville number of the musical assembles in silhouette behind her, a tableau of dance hall girls takes up the seductive postures seen earlier. Queenie resists being drawn back into her old burlesque routine—but what a routine it had been! The image of Queenie’s sexy and
rough striptease with her fellow vaudeville dancers begins to pulse behind her. Just two hours earlier, horns had wailed in delight to signal Queenie’s upcoming striptease, and now instruments sustain long and low tones. What happened to these characters and bodies on stage? What caused the wild and rowdy high to turn to such a somber and still low?

_The Wild Party—A Poem and a Musical_

At the top the 2000 Broadway musical _The Wild Party_, by composer and lyricist Michael John LaChiusa and director George C. Wolfe, six men stroll on stage and describe the yet-to-be-seen Queenie, “Gray eyes, Lips like coals aglow. Her face was a tinted, mask of snow.” Queenie and her chorus of dancers enter; they take up wide stances, they dip and grind their hips through deep carnal lunges; they stroke their supple bodies; they take charge of the men. Queenie struts and poses. She wears cheap satin tap shorts over her black stockings and garter belt; her gaudy top exposes pale skin and deep cleavage. She walks upstage and sits on the knee of a male patron while the others explain, “Queenie was sexually ambitious.” This statement is chanted in a round as all gather to grab and pet Queenie. The dancers and patrons of the vaudeville venue take up the throbbing beat as their bodies press together. Blaring horns and percussive drums bring the song to a climax and the group explodes forward to form a line at the footlights. The burlesque dancers, lit from below, are sexy, yet garish. The music is bold, brassy, and at times discordant. Queenie removes her top with little flourish. The men sing, “She never inquired of the men she desired;” the ensemble describes her taste in men, “and she liked her lovers violent

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and vicious.” Queenie soaks up the attention, struts downstage center, and swings her hips in a figure-eight motion as her waving arms cast sinister shadows upstage. Queenie is a sexual animal who thrives on attention and pleasure—the men’s leers and thirsty grimaces seem to suit her just fine. It’s a regular day on the job for Queenie, the protagonist in Joseph Moncure March’s controversial 1928 poem *The Wild Party*, upon which the musical is based.

March’s poem is a book length portrayal of the deteriorating decadence of the Jazz Age as illustrated by a party gone wrong. The book was banned in Boston for “sexual reference and booze-drenched scenes,” though published and released outside of the Boston area in 1928. March opens the poem, “Queenie was a blonde and her age stood still, and she danced twice a dance in vaudeville.” The language of the poem, written mostly in rhyming couplets, is described as “dynamic, quick, witty, sinister and concise.” March creates a portrait of the Jazz Age in his description of the music:

A chord rang out: turned blue, and ran
Through a syncopating vamp,
And the song began
The verse was nothing—but the chorus was Art;
And its music was enough to tear you apart.

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110 Downing, 2015.
111 March, 62. The challenge to put sound to a poem that describes the music so expressively may explain part of the desire people have had to turn the poem into a musical or movie with music.
The description of the music captures the tension between the joyful anguish of splendour and the boredom with the routine that inhabits the characters in the story.

The tension in the music March describes bleeds over into Queenie’s clash between her desires and her despondencies. The contrast between the opening and ending of both the poem and musical is vast but not surprising. Queenie begins her initial conversation with Burrs asking “When was the last time we had a real party?” and ends the play standing in the morning light and removing her make-up with Burrs dead on the floor of the apartment.\footnote{“Wild Party,” music and lyrics, Michael John LaChiusa, 2000.} The betrayal of lovers, the decay of once decadent indulgences, and the search for bodily contact with anyone meaningful has come to an end for Queenie; Black has run off to escape the police and Burrs is dead. March ends the poem, “The door sprang open, And the cops rushed in.”\footnote{March, 1928.} The abrupt end emblematically closes the door on the Jazz Age. March’s writing, erotic and dark, leaves the reader with a cold image of the law taking over and shutting down the wild party, and ultimately the era.

On stage, the ending is decidedly more ambiguous. After Burrs is shot, Queenie walks out of the swirl of vaudeville performances forming behind her (recharged by Burrs’s drunken performance of his vaudeville routine in smeared blackface). Queenie gestures a goodbye to Burrs, Kate, and Mr. Black (who has run off). Queenie sings, “This is what it is to be lost, This is what it is to be scared,” and she begins to remove her make-up, something Black had tried to do, which she sharply drew away from.\footnote{“This Is What It Is,” music and lyrics, Michael John LaChiusa, 2000.} She whispers, “This is what it is to live in light.”\footnote{Ibid.} The final stage directions read: “\textit{Queenie is bathed in morning light.}”\footnote{\textit{The Wild Party}, book George C. Wolfe, music and lyrics Michael John LaChiusa, 2000 in \textit{The New American Musical: An Anthology From the End of The Century}, ed. by Wiley Hausam (New York:}
create a softer yet more perplexing end to the piece by having Queenie stand contemplating her life, with sirens in the distance. Having finally hit rock bottom, there is the suggestion, in an upward glance from Queenie, that the only direction for her to go at the end of the party is up. Perhaps in that look, in the slow-fade to black, there is a suggestion that the consideration of rebuilding or starting fresh is crossing her mind. Queenie’s experience echoes the expiration of heady and hedonistic times, overdue at the close of the 1920s, and also a possibly similar consideration or warning in the present moment of the 2000 production, which was still a time of relative economic boom. The ending is certainly ambiguous, and leaves us wondering—what next?

Why explore the train wreck of Queenie’s life in the first place? What sort of bodily experience is happening in the second half of the Roaring Twenties that differs from the first half? How does the youthful and exuberant “Millie” morph into a washed up and gin-soaked “Queenie”? An interrogation of how bodies move through The Wild Party helps get at humanity’s continued search and desire for sexual and intellectual intimacy and how a nostalgia for this sort of hyper-indulgence can be misplaced. John Heilpern describes the frightening truth to the musical, “Wild Party is the underbelly of America’s meltdown into self-gratification and blurred identities, of party time and exploding violence, of forbidden fruit and the price we pay.”

Wolfe lures the audience in by harnessing desire as a nostalgic impulse. Like March’s poem, in his theatricalization Wolfe appeals to an inadmissible longing for forbidden and indulgent activities of the past (one’s own or in general). The re-release of March’s poem with seventy-five drawings by Art Spiegelman several years earlier created a renewed interest in the

dark poetry, and the clandestine behavior of the Jazz Age.\textsuperscript{118} The poem, now in the graphic novel style, was the inspiration for two musical interpretations of the poem.\textsuperscript{119} The fascination for the hedonism of the jazz age on paper is brought to life on stage with a sense of exaggeration and cynicism that slowly wears away at our expected reminiscence of the Jazz Age. With Wolfe at the helm, nostalgia for the era evaporates by the end, leaving us questioning the lure of the era, demystifying previously constructed assumptions and mythologies. By enticing one to have nostalgia for an age of indulgence and the subsequent breaking down of those desires opens up a space for reflection on the consequences of acting on emotions while oblivious to surrounding people and cultures.

Wolfe’s dramaturgical strategy is to dive into the highs and lows of Queenie’s life and use the microcosm of the party and personalities of the partygoers as a kind of super-structure for the early 2000s, particularly regarding the continuing neo-liberalization of the U.S. since the 1970s. Through the physicalized sleaziness and depraved posturing of many of the characters, Wolfe points to a necessity for an inventory of the self and society. In the aftermath of the first Iraq War and the Clinton scandals, and other abuses of power, as described by Heilpern, taking a look at self and society is a much needed and courageous venture. A way into the earlier questions is to explore how choreographer Joey McKneely embodies the themes of March’s

\textsuperscript{118} For an interview with Spiegelman about \textit{The Wild Party} and images of his graphic drawings see: https://web.archive.org/web/20190314171723/https://musicalstagecompany.com/musical-notes/art-spiegelman-talks-the-wild-party/.

\textsuperscript{119} Both Andrew Lippa and Michael John LaChiusa were inspired by the 1994 re-release of the poem with 75 drawings by Art Spiegelman in \textit{The Wild Party}, based on Joseph Moncure March’s \textit{The Wild Party}

New York, NY: Covici, Friede Publishers, 1928 (New York: NY: Pantheon Books, 1994). While the base material and characters for both musicals are the same. The Lippa version focuses more on the “love” triangle between Queenie, Burrs, and Black. LaChiusa focuses on the experience of the partygoers and social culture at the end of the Jazz Age and the relationships between the characters, drawing the main narrative around Queenie as the musical progresses.
poem on stage, particularly through Queenie’s dancing of the Black Bottom and the overall treatment of the dance in the musical.

Before analyzing the movement in the musical, tracing the origins of the Black Bottom helps situate the social dance in the era. This also helps one understand how the movement is an integral part of Wolfe’s added dramaturgical imperative to consider how the self-destructive and indulgent behavior of the partygoers is at the cost of cultural theft of African American performance forms. Wolfe makes his point concerning appropriation early on in the show, setting a bold and disturbing tone from the start. Burrs’s (Mandy Patinkin) clown piece “Marie is Tricky” that follows Queenie’s opening performance is done in blackface and is a combination of insult, satire, and physical comedy. The choice to include the blackface is an extreme and dangerous reminder of the insensitivities and self-interest the characters inhabit and follows Wolfe’s dramaturgy to show the rawness of self-indulgence. The blackface is performed by Mandy Patinkin in a sort of minstrel show-like manner complete with a title board on an easel. This framing evokes Jewish vaudeville performer Al Jolson who made a substantial career performing in blackface. This connection points to the cultural theft and appropriation of African American arts by white artists. The connection to Al Jolson and emphasis on whiteness is

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121 Though Burrs whiteness is the main issue, given the fact that Jolson and Patinkin are Jewish, and Patinkin has performed and recorded a lot of Jewish music, there is a secondary nod to how assimilated Jewish immigrants are into American culture today, which is not the case for African Americans. Andrea Most explains that though various Jewish artists such as Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker “seemed closely aligned with the black artists … the structure and content of the plays they wrote and performed revealed their ambivalence toward racial issues.” Most, Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical, 26. Wolfe may be being more generalised and is pointing at white America and whiteness, rather than Jewish actors specifically, however the “fraught relationship” between Jews and African Americans, “with its episodes of cooperation, compassion, suspicion, and betrayal, forms a significant and turbulent backdrop to the story of American Jews in the theatre,” is not to be overlooked. Most, 26.
picked up by Heilpern who describes, “The idea of him playing Burrs the entertainer in Jolsonesque black face is brilliantly creepy.”¹²² Indeed, the blackface is disturbing, and introducing it with such force so early on in the show is a move by Wolfe that functions to remind where ownership of jazz music and movement lies—a reclaiming he fully realizes with *Shuffle Along* in 2016. Wolfe creates his own “pocket of resistance” as the poem does not have this reference.¹²³ His choice to include blackface provides a stark reminder of the contestation between race, performance and appropriation in the 1920s.

**Background of the Black Bottom**

Prior to throwing a party, Queenie asks Burrs, “When was the last time I danced the Black Bottom?” to which he replies, “You’re not gettin’ any younger, my child.”¹²⁴ Queenie stands in front of Burrs snaking her hips back and forth, and twisting her heels, anxious to jump into the untamed and often licentious dance of the 1920s. Her opportunity to perform comes in a moment of awkwardness in the party when the two producers Gold and Goldberg try to escape from a conversation with the aging performer Dolores, and out of the blue Queenie screams out and *faux*-faints. When all try to revive her and ask what she needs, she feigns weakness, and then gasps, “I need to do the Black Bottom!” (391). She jumps up and begins to dance and shake and shimmy, drawing the fourteen-year-old Nadine in, “Gotch! Come on Nadine it’s time to get nasty!” (391). This set up names the social dance, clearly separating it from the Charleston. How does the transition into the mid-1920s and the evolution of the Black Bottom help explain the complexities of the Jazz Age?

¹²³ Heilpern, 2000. The blackface was an addition made by Wolfe. The poem reads: “She lived at present with a man named Burrs, whose act came on just after hers. A clown, of renown: Three-sheeted all over town.” March, 10.
For some, the thrills and highs of the 1920s were getting harder and harder to attain as the decade progressed. This is in part due to a desensitization to the wildness of the behavior and patrons becoming immune to what had previously thrilled them. The risqué nature of the Black Bottom helped to embody the growing desperation for continued desire and pleasure—a void the Charleston was no longer filling. Investigating the transition from the Charleston into the Black Bottom also troubles the continued transformation of black dances into white performance styles and shifts in social culture as the decade progressed. Fitzgerald describes how the adults take over the party in the second half of the decade:

The sequel was like a children’s party taken over by the elders, leaving the children puzzled and rather neglected and rather taken aback. By 1923 their elders, tired of watching the carnival with ill concealed envy, had discovered that young liquor will take the place of young blood, and with a whoop the orgy began. The younger generation was starred no longer.

The world-weary, self-destructive and indulgent behaviors of the more “adult” generation proliferate in The Wild Party. So what exactly separates one dance from the other? How do foundational roots differ?

Many connect the Black Bottom with other dances that occurred at the jook house. However, while it was performed there, and part of the jook experience, the Black Bottom is not derived from the rural or backwoods setting of the jook house. Zora Neale Hurston explains the Black Bottom “really originated in the Jook section of Nashville, Tennessee, around Fourth

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126 Jayna Brown observes how dance was used as a platform to work out frustrations, “white people used Black dance to restore their bodies with the spontaneity and exhilaration promised by the dream of a new democracy.” Brown, 175.
127 Fitzgerald, 3.
Avenue. This is a tough neighbourhood known as Black Bottom—hence the name.”

The Black Bottom emerged in the African American milieu as part of the general fluidity of social dance forms, but also in part as a transition out of the Charleston being quickly taken up by white performers. In Lynne Emery’s *Black Dancing in the United States 1619-1970*, Lester A. Walton describes the need African Americans had to continually create dances that were from and championed the African American milieu:

> These Negro dances invariably became the rage with white people months and sometimes years, after colored people have waxed enthusiastic over them. When the Charleston becomes a fad with the white public, colored folk were hoofing the Black Bottom.¹²⁹

The Black Bottom became popular as a way of tuning into and embodying something that insinuates greater sensuality than the Charleston. While this indirect intimation was embodied by the liberation of the body in the Charleston, there is something more complex and daring about the Black Bottom, particularly as it was generally more popular with women. Further, the Black Bottom was less connected to high society than the Charleston, and that class distinction made it attractive to mass culture, particularly in the second half of the 1920s, when it overtook the Charleston in popularity.

Like the Charleston, the Black Bottom dispersed to the broader public through a performance on Broadway. “The Original Black Bottom Dance” was part of the 1923 musical *Dinah* with music and lyrics by Tim Brymn and Sidney Bechet. Additionally, Ann Pennington

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¹²⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, “Mimicry” in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro Anthology* (London, UK: Wishart & Company, 1934), 44. The Stearnses explain as well that the name also derived from the song “Jacksonville Rounders,” though the song title was not as popular as the Black Bottom as the word “rounders” was a stand in for “pimp.” Stearns and Stearns, 110.

performed the dance in George White’s *Scandals of 1926*. Much like the Charleston, dancing masters refined the original form of the Black Bottom to make it more “suitable for the ballroom.”

As the dance passed from bodies of African Americans to white Americans notions of authorship and authenticity emerged in the transformation. One of the interesting elements of this tension in the dance extends beyond a sense of artistic credit, but circulates more around the subjecthood of those who are doing the dance and the “power dynamics inherent to choreographic authorship.” Anthea Kraut unravels this complex issue, explaining, “choreographic copyright, in other words, has been a key site for all kinds of dancers’ negotiations of subjecthood, including and especially their status as raced and gendered subjects (always cross-cut by class).” The body is a prime site in which to examine historical agency and ownership of cultural mores. As such, one’s bodily identification can often be seen through the movement they take on.

What is unique about the Black Bottom is that there was not necessarily a connection to a partner from the start. While the Charleston began this separation, with “breakaways” and moments of individuality, the Black Bottom took the next step, and brought the dance out of the

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130 Stearns and Stearns, 110. In *Choreographing Copyright*, Anthea Kraut explores Alberta Hunter’s claim to the Black Bottom as being one of the first attempts at copyrighting a dance. Kraut explains the complications to Hunter’s claim as in fact it was only verbal, made in front of white audiences in 1925. Kraut describes the lack of paperwork, “it is possible that Hunter’s claim was only rhetorical, that telling a newspaper reporter that she had the dance copyrighted was as official as she needed to be.” Kraut, 145. Kraut further explains that when *George White’s Scandals* began in 1926 they claimed to have invented the dance, wiping out the history that the Stearnses and others claimed went back to at least 1919. It is interesting also to note that, “as a social dance with no single author, the Black Bottom is precisely the kind of dance the law has consistently barred from copyright protection.” Kraut, 143. See pages 142-150 in Kraut’s *Choreographing Copyright* for full description of Hunter’s claim and further complications.

131 The Stearnses explain the refinement of the Black Bottom, “The chief gesture that survived on the ballroom floor was a genteel slapping of the backside, along with a few hops forward and back.” Stearns and Stearns, 111.

132 Kraut, x.

133 Ibid., xiv.
partnered style. Barbara Cohen-Stratyner explains the Black Bottom did not develop into a couple dance, but “remained a frontal performance.” This development decreases the level of transformation of the dance to the stage, as it has a built-in presentational quality. Dancers, mostly women, would face a preferred front, generally seeking a specific gaze from someone watching. Though there is an objectification of the female body, the dance salutes the individual performer, granting Queenie, for example, a sense of autonomy as the center of attention.

**Description of the Black Bottom**

The Black Bottom is a combination of “Jay Bird” steps, as in the Charleston, with knees pumping up and down, however when knees retract (and legs straighten) buttocks push out backwards, almost as if one is trying to close a door with their backside. There is often a retreating motion to the step with slides or slips going backwards, where the motivation for the movement comes from behind. Most apparent in the various footage of the dance are the influence of previous dances, mostly the Charleston, but also the Shimmy, the Bunny Hop, the Turkey Trot etc. The original Black Bottom involved the slapping of hands on the body and “chugging” hips forward and back. The torso would lean back lower and lower to the floor, accompanied by hip swivelling and circling, a sort of “stirring” of the pelvis that was suggestive of sexual intercourse. The dance was often so modified that African Americans did not

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134 Breakaway means to pull away from one’s partner numerous times in a dance to complete one’s steps, alterations, or showing individualized physical acrobatics or tricks.

135 Cohen-Stratyner, 223.

136 Chugging is a hop forward with two feet without the soles or heels of the foot leaving the floor, giving a very low to the ground appearance of shifting forward in the space.

recognize the whitened versions seen on stage. The distinguishing feature of the Black Bottom that threads through video clips and descriptions is the slapping of the buttocks with hands in some manner or another.

**Demystifying Indulgence Through Nostalgia**

The nostalgia in *The Wild Party* is initiated by the creation of the burlesque world of vaudeville on stage. Composer and lyricist LaChiusa, along with fellow book writer and director George C. Wolfe, describes the mood of March’s piece in their opening stage directions, “A line of CHORINES enters, QUEENIE among them. SHE is a piece of work. Not young, not old. Sexy, but not because of her costume. Her face is powdered white. QUEENIE and the CHORINES strut their stuff. It’s a nasty routine” (362). The choice to have vaudeville-style numbers or pastiches is not uncommon in musical theatre, but in this backwards glance to the Jazz Age in *The Wild Party* there is a realization that amongst the decadence and indulgence of the period there also grew a deep-seated obsession, paranoia, and mistrust. By beginning the nostalgic journey back to the twenties in *The Wild Party* with a vulgar vaudeville routine, a more complex and disturbing image of the era emerges allowing for reflection that works in opposition to the perky “flapper” that opens *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. This less-than-rose-colored nostalgia is derived from observing the self-destruction, obliviousness, and instability that infiltrates all the characters in *The Wild Party*.

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139 The 1959 musical *Gypsy* with music and lyrics by Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim, and book by Arthur Laurent, comes to mind in this instance, as well as the 2013 play *The Nance* by Douglas Carter Beane. Various musicals may also include a pastiche-like structure or section such as “Love-land” in Stephen Sondheim’s *Follies*. 
Queenie calls out the Black Bottom as *the* dance she “needs” to do, when the effect of previous vices have worn out or no longer provide the meaning they once did. She sings of what she finds the Black Bottom does for her, the ultimate physicality of something new and novel:

Queenie needs some newer skin
Newer sex and newer sin
Don’t need Bursie pawin’ me
Gotta gotta gotta shake it free
Everybody watch Queenie go wild
Gotta get high
Gotta get thrilled
Gotta get fizzesed gotta get filled.¹⁴⁰

Queenie believes that somehow indulgence can lead to fulfillment. This risky mindset is mixed with a misplaced sense of nostalgia for times when one was able turn inhibitions off and explore the sense of freedom, excitement and extravagance that is celebrated in common images of the 1920s. The glories of indulgence, while celebrated in *Millie*, are starkly demystified in *The Wild Party*, while also exposing the violence that keeps racial and sexual hierarchies in place. A closer look at the choreography and its gestural extravagance helps explain how there could be nostalgia for this sense of excess and the damaging implications of this longing.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ “Gestural” in this context refers to the use of movement actions that have a universally understood meaning, particularly in a sensual way. It should be mentioned that a Brechtian-style is established from the beginning of *The Wild Party* using placards on easels with titles for each section. Further, there is a sense at times of performers “adopt[ing] a ‘gestural’ style which literally points to the artificiality of what they are doing,” as in the opening burlesque routine. Additionally, the rhythmic nature of the poem on which the story is based gives the production a fable-like quality, adding a heightened sense of artificiality to the piece. Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre (1948),” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 1st ed. Edited by Bertolt Brecht and John Willet, 233-246. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 233-246.
Choreography in *The Wild Party*

Joey McKneely began as a dancer on Broadway in *Carrie* (1988), *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway* (1989), and *She Loves Me* (1993). He received his first opportunity to choreograph for Broadway and his first Tony Award nomination for choreography for *Smokey Joe’s Café* (1995), followed by *The Life* (1997). He has explained one of his most remarkable experiences was working with Jerome Robbins in *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway*. McKneely first learned the choreography for *West Side Story* from Jerome Robbins himself. He explains the unique experience with Robbins: “It was during these months of rehearsal that I remember watching Mr. Robbins: how his choreography always fit the situation and character. How simplicity of movement can convey more than words.”

McKneely was then tapped by Arthur Laurents to help update the choreography of *West Side Story* for the 2013 Broadway revival. Laurents wanted the show to be “Grittier. More realistic.” With this prompt, McKneely combed through the choreography, tweaking small movements here and gestures there—the challenge being to not change or adapt the choreography, but to decide what embodied features felt dated. This experience helps to explain McKneely’s keen awareness of movement intentions and engagement with the layering of meaning behind the dance.

Because of the pastiche nature of LaChiusa’s score for *The Wild Party*, McKneely created movement that imitates the original dances of the era, but also found embodied meaning identifiable in the twenty-first century. McKneely accomplishes two main feats with his

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143 McKneely, 2013.

144 McKneely on the changes: “Most people would never notice the changes, for we have worked hard to make them organic to each moment. Those who know the show more intimately might see the differences; however, the choreographic elements are always Robbins.” McKneely, 2013.
choreography. First, he sets tone with his sexualized opening burlesque striptease. Second, he exposes any utopic or naive ideas about the joy of the Jazz Age with his crudely spectacularized Black Bottom. The nastiness of the opening burlesque, made particularly cutting by the sultry Collette, and the trashy postures of the chorines comes across very clearly and establishes the dark nature of the show.

The Black Bottom occurs in the story when Queenie goes on full tilt and becomes untamable by those around her. The stage directions describe the moment: “QUEENIE dances, throwing herself at everyone, downing drinks, but nothing seems to lift her as high as she wants to go” (392). How this mix of the desire to be loved and to escape the self is interpreted becomes key. McKneely positions the dance in an overtly sexualized vein by having Queenie stand flat front, lick one hand and place it on her right back side and step forward, then lick the other and repeat on her left side. She bends over with legs splayed and hits her hands on the floor, then thrusts her hips forward with a forceful forward thrust of her pelvis. McKneely cuts straight to the risqué essence of the Black Bottom. There is no build up through the Charleston, or gentle introduction. The two D’Armano brothers repeat the same “lick and slap” choreography and immediately flank Queenie’s side. The trio executes a double contraction of the core, as if shot twice in the stomach. At the same time, they throw their arms overhead and add an accented “huh, huh” shout that emphasizes the aggressiveness of the pelvic thrust. The dance begins very forcefully, lacking any light or carefree tone; the movement is dirty and sensuous and performed
only by those who have been singled out as leading a more sexually ambitious life style.\textsuperscript{145} The Brothers continue the movement behind Queenie as she moves side to side in a grapevine style and starts singing. In an instrumental dance break the trio breaks into a choreography section with arms doing a lasso-like gesture overhead, while one foot pumps up and down acting as a pivot for the hips and buttocks to swing around; sharp hits of the arms side to side punctuate the movement and pick up the musical accents. Queenie is hoisted up by one of the partygoers and tossed onto the bed where she continues to squirm and writhe, all in service to her very self-aware and self-indulgent performance in front of the others.

The other patrons join in the dance generally improvising along and the party and space become overtly sexualized. Burrs jumps onto the bed and begins to do a very lewd version of the Black Bottom where he slowly licks his hand and wipes it on his lower body with a pronounced and decidedly vulgar thrust of his pelvis back and forth. He continues this action with the other hand, standing high on the bed, center stage. Although the orgy occurs later in the show, the interpretation by Queenie and Burrs of the Black Bottom, in the context of The Wild Party, opens the door to the possibility of the ultimate group debauchery and decadence. The Black Bottom, in spite of its intense vulgarity and sexuality (enhanced by McKneely), is in effect the beginning of the end for Queenie. The Black Bottom is the catalyst of the self-destruction that happens in the musical. The dance pulls the pin that unfurls the dark and all-consuming indulgence in vice. Given how wrong the orgy goes—fourteen-year-old Nadine’s cocaine infused rape, Queenie

\textsuperscript{145} In parts of the dialogue and songs the brothers, Oscar and Phil, sing in the musical, there is an overt implication of their homosexuality and a suggestion of an incestuous relationship. March describes the relationship between the brothers, Oscar and Phil, though does not expand on the term “Brothers,” as to whether it is literal or a stage name. There is one moment where Jack kisses Phil: “You kissed him! I saw you-you nasty sneak!” Phil raised his eyebrow: “Well—what if I did?” A groan from Oscar. He sank down,” March, 59. There is a hint in these stanzas that a protest from Oscar would have been unjust in an incestuous situation.
having sex with Black, and Burr’s death—the dance functions to demystify any ideas of a sentimentalism one might have for this level of indulgence.

Transferring the Black Bottom to the stage does lose some of its origins in the street and private venues, as with the Slow Drag. However, the Black Bottom in its physicality has a very bold and audacious style to it. Queenie’s declaration of the dance (which is not in the poem) is a way to understand masculine aggressiveness through dance, set against Queenie’s desire for attention. While the Black Bottom may normally be seen as a way for women to exert or demonstrate an empowerment over their sexuality, by having Burrs pick up on the gestures of the dance, a physicalized knowledge is gained as to how combative and aggressive Queenie and Burrs’s relationship is. The blatant forcefulness of Burrs’s need to be in control makes his killing of Black for having sex with Queenie believable. The Black Bottom offers a way into the sexual that is understood at a visceral level outside of words. Queenie’s (and thus McKneely’s) overt over-emphasis on the “authenticity” of dance, however, is also telling of her insecurities, and perhaps Wolfe’s schematics shine a light on the formal consequences of cultural theft. As the only woman to do the dance, Queenie’s whiteness, accentuated by her white negligee, is obvious. Her vulgar, yet desperate movements are a reminder of the obliviousness with which white dancers took up African American dances. At the peak of the number, Queenie has abandoned any formal choreography and is sandwiched between the Brothers writhing away. In this moment there is an interesting commingling of bodies between the African American brothers and Queenie, making clear the racialized nature of the dance.

In a sharp beat, Queenie grimaces and she stops short stung by the realization Burrs is not dancing with her. She calls out for him and looks around for help, only to be interrupted by the grand arrival of her best friend and nemesis—the beautiful Kate and her handsome new beau,
Mr. Black. Kate steals the spotlight and all attention from Queenie. Kate, as played by African American actress Tonya Pinkins, takes command of the show (“Best Friends”) and reabsorbs the blackness of the music and dance with expert skill and a professional nonchalance. The guests, including the young Nadine, gush over Kate’s beauty and talent, as she is the one with a famous performing career, not Queenie. Kate stakes a claim for African American cultural ownership and power in the piece and recuperates a moment of dignity that had been shattered by Burrs’s opening blackface routine. Kate’s black presence disrupts Queenie’s white fantasy. Queenie is left abandoned, bitter, and physically destitute—a substantial contrast from only moments earlier. A sort of anti-nostalgia seeps into the musical, a not-so-subtle censure by Wolfe of the often-unashamed enjoyment of anything from the Jazz Age by Broadway audiences. The darker, more disturbing depictions of the Jazz Age work against the nostalgia some may have expected to experience at the outset of the show. By slowly dismantling the dynamic and titillating structure of the show, Wolfe opens up a space for a more nuanced and reflective consideration of the Jazz Age and its layered history.

**Critical Reception**

Critics overall were not very receptive of McKneely’s looser choreography, found to be lacking in the tight formations and synchronicity expected in Broadway shows. Ben Brantley describes the dance in the show: “There is minimal dancing at the party, which has been negligibly choreographed by Joey McKneely.”[146] The question of whether McKneely’s choreography is insignificant is an interesting one to unfold. Brantley is correct that there is minimal dancing at the party, though at the same time the party is always in motion and bodies

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are coming together and drifting apart throughout. A more specific, synchronized dance sequence in the manner of Ashford’s Charleston-based choreography in *Millie* would emphatically not have fit in dramatically. McKneely’s physical shaping and modulation of dance styles of the 1920s embodies the indulgence of the party in two ways. Firstly, he establishes how hyper-sexual Queenie is in the opening burlesque, and secondly he captures how reckless and in dire need of attention she is in her “spectacularized” licking and sexualization of the Brothers D’Armano in the Black Bottom song. Further, the vicious way Burrs takes on the movement signature, if not the extended choreography, helps situate him as the violent, jealous, and irrational vaudevillian monster he is. His vulgar Black Bottom demonstration works to support his behavior later when he and Mr. Black fight. The fact that the only people to be officially choreographed by McKneely into the Black Bottom are Queenie, the sexually risqué brothers, and the sexually abusive Burrs helps to assign the dance to those who have a desire to perform their sexuality for and at others. At a broader scale this overt performance of the self; particularly the racial impersonation, is how the Black Bottom is emblematic of the end of the Jazz age.

Charles Isherwood describes in great detail the music, lighting, and set of the show, using very active descriptors, though there is little mention of bodies in motion:

Vestiges of former grandeur cling to tattered, grimy wallpaper and peer gloomily through huge, broken windows. The haunting, delicately calibrated lighting . . . turns the room into a ghoulish canvas for the revelers’ flickering silhouettes, which leap and dance in frenzied patterns against the walls.  

Bodies do cling, eyes peer around lovers, and partygoers leap and dance in frenzied patterns, though Isherwood prefers to assign these moves to the lighting design. It is the bodies in motion

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and the music that create the world of the poem amongst the minimal set, however, critics struggle to describe the sultry and provocative movement. Isherwood does describe the score as “firmly grounded in the music of the period in which the show is set,” with melodies that “tickle the ear with pleasing, time-tested, riffs full of rumbling piano runs and scorching horn bursts,” recognizing that LaChiusa succeeds musically in bringing March’s Jazz Age poem to life.\textsuperscript{148}

While critics overall disregard the choreography as an impactful factor in the show, the contrast between the over-active, hyper-sexual Queenie in most of the play and her stilled body at the end does much to emphasize how eagerly and intensely the behaviors of the 1920s were consumed. \textit{The Wild Party} illustrates a party as an organism in itself that pulses and pushes along, consuming guests into its chaos as it goes. By the end, like the end of 1920s, all is lost. The obliviousness of the outside world and an over-confidence in veritably every aspect of life led to greater risk-taking, and the “flimsy structure” of the Jazz Age crashed to the ground.\textsuperscript{149} Fitzgerald explains the end of the heady days of wild expectations and ideals that no one considered could come to an end: “But it was not to be. Somebody had blundered and the most expensive orgy in history was over.”\textsuperscript{150} LaChiusa, Wolfe, and McKneely work together to problematize the shiny stereotypes and cultural appropriations of the 1920s. They trouble the nostalgia that surrounds the era by offering a glimpse into a party gone too far and question the possibilities of reconciling the effects of indulgent behaviors then and now.

\textsuperscript{148} Isherwood, 2000.  
\textsuperscript{149} Fitzgerald, 8.  
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid, 8.
Towards the end of the musical, Dolores has a stark moment of honesty that foreshadows the shooting of Burrs. Her torch song holds in it a double meaning of the looming consequences of the “Second Gilded Age”\(^{151}\) begun in the 1990s and the here and now:

I can tell you no party lasts forever . . .

So you better hope to Jesus or Mohammad

Or whatever

That you got the right stuff

When in ends.\(^ {152}\)

The purposeful infelicitous generation of a sentimentalized or restorative nostalgia by Wolfe towards the end of the production creates “not a reactionary desire for the past but a coherent critique of the present and a call for a different future.”\(^ {153}\) In continuance with Wolfe’s practice of recovery as resistance, as seen in *Shuffle Along* (2016), he both uses nostalgia and takes a stand against it as he unfolds the tale of the deeply flawed characters of March’s poem. The demystification of nostalgia in *The Wild Party* allows for a contemplation of cultural theft, the cultural body, and an overall sense of presentness in the modern moment.

### IV. *The Drowsy Chaperone*, Parody, and Nostalgia

*I hate theatre. Well, it’s so disappointing isn’t it? . . . You know there was a time when people sat in a darkened theatre and thought to themselves, “what have George and Ira got for me tonight?” or “Can Cole Porter pull it off again? Can you imagine?*

—Man In Chair, *The Drowsy Chaperone*

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Man in Chair asks, “Would you . . . would you indulge me?” and sets up the record player to play the overture of one of his favorite musicals from the 1920s, *The Drowsy Chaperone*. As he places the needle he asks, “Hear that static? I love that sound. To me, it’s the sound of a time machine starting up” (2). He pours himself a cup of tea and explains overtures are no longer in fashion anymore, and he misses their welcoming feel, “That’s what an overture is, a musical appetizer. A Pu-Pu platter of tunes if you will” (2). The overture concludes and so begins the parade of characters that readily take up the conventions of musical theatre on the stage beside him. Through the exaggerated and comical characters, whether they are the “drowsy” Chaperone herself, who drinks non-stop, or the buffoon-like Latin lover Adolpho, the colorful world of the fictional musical is brought to life, primed to sweep the audience away, if only for a few hours, from their everyday lives. As the singers and dancers kick and turn Man in Chair lifts the record needle and the performers freeze in time; a still image of the story (and the genre) solidifies in front of us for contemplation. *The Drowsy Chaperone* is a typical and atypical musical, a complex and layered love letter to all that is musical theatre, from charming characters and peppy tunes to big show-stopping dance numbers and 11 o’clock torch songs.

**Dramaturgical Strategies**

*The Drowsy Chaperone* was created as a comical “spoof of an old time musical” in 1999 at the stag party for Canadian actor Bob Martin prior to his wedding to real life actor Janet Van  

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De Graaf. Martin, who originated the role of Man in Chair, helped write the book with Don McKellar and composer/lyricist team Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison. The show was produced in Toronto in 2001 and debuted on Broadway in 2006. Bob Martin quickly became a beloved hero of the show and was nominated for a Tony Award for his performance of the quirky main character.

Man in Chair is a self-deprecating, overtly sincere, yet cynical host who talks directly to the audience throughout the one hundred minute show. He uses a combination of dry humor and comical wit (as already evidenced) to explain how meaningful musical theatre can be to an individual and how important it is to him. He explains what a musical does, “It takes you to another world. And it gives you a little tune to carry with in your head, you know? A little something to help you escape the dreary horrors of the real world” (75). Man in Chair’s gushing and memorization of famous shows lines, songs, and character foibles demonstrate his affection for and near obsession with musicals. By the same token, Man in Chair peppers his dialogue with various quips about the present world:

Alright now, let’s visualize. Imagine if you will, it’s November 1928. You’ve just arrived at the doors of the Morosco Theatre in New York. It’s very cold—remember when it used to be cold in November? Not anymore. November’s the new August now. It’s global warming—we’re all doomed—anyway . . .

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156 Soon after the stag party, Martin joined his friends to workshop the musical for the Toronto Fringe Festival. The show went on to a main stage premiere at Toronto’s Winter Garden Theatre in 2001 produced by David Mirvish. Broadway producers then supported a run at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles in 2005. In 2006 the show transferred to Broadway and ran for 674 shows and 32 previews. The Drowsy Chaperone was nominated for thirteen Tony Awards and won five, including best musical and best score. Unlike the previous case studies The Drowsy Chaperone is not based on previous source material. “The Drowsy Chaperone: Study Guide,” 2008.
Two dramaturgical strategies are woven into the plethora of jokes and mischievous sarcasm that Man in Chair uses to re-play the fictional show. As will be shown, one is pedagogical and one is more emotionally motivated. Both, however, are made accessible and sustainable through a gentle use of parody in the text and as part of the movement signature.

In the first strategy, there is a concentrated effort for Man in Chair to provide an informed lesson in the structure and style of early musical comedy and musical theatre. Man in Chair is well informed in the conventions of the form and shares his keen knowledge (and opinions) with the audience as he plays his double-album record of the fictional 1928 musical. Man in Chair sits in his favorite chair by his record player side-stage and sets up each scene for the audience of the chaotic and clichéd story of two soon-to-be-married young lovers and the various blocking agents that get in the way of their wedding. Before placing the needle on the record for a song, he explains what to watch for in the scene, highlights of the original production, and tidbits of gossip about particular actors: “Adolpho is played by former silent film star and world-class alcoholic Roman Bartelli” (24). The setup from a savvy commentator and ardent fan is a clever choice that establishes a framework for a dialogue about the challenges and potential of musical theatre, explained through exaggerated examples from the fictional show. With this intention, the various elements of the relatively thin plots of early musicals are easily identified in performance, from the comedy duo of rag-tag gangsters, to the squeaky-voiced chorus girl, to the four weddings at the end. *Drowsy Chaperone* is a show that makes fun of itself and in this self-reflection there is a clever imparting of knowledge on and celebration of musical theatre. This fun making is couched in a light parodic style that lovingly mocks the conventions of the form, as well as theatre at a broader scale. As an illustration, a clever joke about theatre etiquette unfolds early on when Man in Chair’s answering machine interrupts the show:
Oh, Well, that’s it. The moment is ruined. Thank you. Thank you life. It’s like a cell phone goes off in a theatre. God, I hate that. “Hello? What are you doing?” “Oh I’m at the theatre ruining the moment. How about you?” “Oh, I couldn’t get out tonight so I thought I’d ruin the moment by proxy.” (17)

His takedown of an all too often and annoying occurrence in the theatre brings the audience into the fold.

The second strategy explores how individual and collective emotional connections to musical theatre constitute a nostalgic impulse inherent in the form in general.\textsuperscript{157} Man in Chair’s self-confessed love and nostalgia for the genre of musical theatre is brought to life through his sharing and light-hearted parody of his personal experiences with musical theatre. The complex relationship people have with the form is interrogated in this teasing manner to allow us to feel safe to join in reminiscing about our relationship with musicals. His storytelling-style works in a variety of ways. For one, Man in Chair explicitly points out bad, awful, or loathsome conventions of the form, in a sense diluting the nostalgic reflection, yet in so doing also notes, with a wink, that the form is often drenched in nostalgia. He admits from the start “I hate theatre. Well it is so disappointing isn’t it?” (2), signalling he is not looking at the form through rose-colored glasses (in the restorative nostalgia manner) but in a more informed backwards glance (in the reflective nostalgia manner) as a way of explaining why musical theatre is meaningful to him, and by association—us. Equally important, as opposed to the parody using Orientalist stereotypes in \textit{Thoroughly Modern Millie}, we are in on the joke. Though \textit{The Drowsy Chaperone} is not an outright modern parody of musical theatre, self-reflexivity and a “playful, genial

\textsuperscript{157} In the introduction, I explain this characteristic of the form grows out of the shared memories and emotions that musicals tap into.
mockery of codified forms” are used by Man in Chair to move between his personal relationship to musical theatre and to “pay homage” to the conventions of the form.\textsuperscript{158}

To that end, Man in a Chair helps diffuse the distaste some have for musical theatre by recognizing its slapstick and vaudeville influence. For example, he groans at and apologizes for the awful, drawn out “spitting-in-the-face” bit of stage-business that often could not be resisted in some earlier musical comedies, which he regrettably admits happens in \textit{The Drowsy Chaperone}. Though Man in Chair warns the audience how awful this section is, when he tries to stop the ridiculous scene from taking place beside him, the record skips and the two actors repeatedly spit on each other over and over, bringing the very humor of the overdone slapstick into the plot. He does not deny these things happen in musical theatre, but mentions they are part of the form for better or worse. This overdone “spit take” allows us to laugh at the ridiculousness of early conventions and be part of the collective “groan” for those antiquated bits of business that, like it or not, are part of the history of the form, and seem to creep back in from time to time. Mostly, Man in Chair eagerly points to his favorite parts of the musical, visibly displaying an embodied happiness as he jumps in behind characters or tries to join in on the dance numbers. This differs from his opening statement on theatre, which happens in the pitch-black opening of the show, when the audience hears only his voice and his disappointments in theatre.

\textit{The Drowsy Chaperone} is also very much about turning away from the present reality and escaping, if only for a moment, into the world of fantasy. In this escape there is a sort of

\textsuperscript{158} Hutcheon, 46. Hutcheon explains that parody can be many things including a more playful mockery and does not need to be malicious. \textit{The Drowsy Chaperone}, however, does not have the critical dimension and ironic inversion that Hutcheon explains is necessary to be called modern parody. Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Parody}, 2000. Markedly, the creators of the show do not call the show a parody, stating, “It is an homage to old-fashioned shows that is aimed at . . . people who love musicals and people who are suspicious of them,” Kenneth Jones, “‘Drowsy Chaperone is a Sweet Musical Valentine—With Salty Colored Commentary,” \textit{Playbill}, March 16, 2006, http://www.playbill.com/article/drowsy-chaperone-is-a-sweet-musical-valentine-with-salty-color-commentary-com-131406.
contemplative nostalgia for all shows past and how those shows made you feel, and importantly, how that feeling helped you to shape who you are, and to cope with reality. Man in Chair, his lack of a specific name suggesting an Everyman, draws out and deepens this feeling in the audience very slowly through a string of clever jokes, antidotes, and general shenanigans that give us license to take pleasure in the silliness. In this layered interpretation between individual and collective memories and experiences Man in Chair constructs a representation of nostalgia that produces its own nostalgia. Considering nostalgia is often derived from collective memories, Man in Chair sets out to create a collective past for himself and the audience. He is continually adding in fictional facts about actors or situations asking the audience on numerous occasions, “remember?” as if they were there in the past enjoying the moment along with him. The idea that nostalgia, as explained by Susan Bennett, “leans on an imagined and imaginary past which is more and better than the present,” makes it a prime emotion to coax audience members into. The constant calling back to a fictional moment or movement cultivates a shared memory, no matter how false it is.

This complex and clever framework is further explained through the analysis of key moments in the show, particularly in regards to the movement and choreography. As Man in Chair is in the driver’s seat of the musical our longing to see more of the show is produced (and controlled) by his desire to tell us more. Furthermore, his disclaimers about the show and self-deprecation, often expressed by poking fun at the form or a character, make the nostalgia safe, even attractive. Pointedly, the show is careful not to get too sentimental, and keeps the wry humor and self-awareness at the forefront. For example, Man in Chair takes on the bothersome issue of the classic gratuitous scene or song in front of the curtain that seems to have no place in

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159 Halbwachs, 25.
the plot. He explains that in earlier musical theatre before more sophisticated stagecraft, there was the need for filler scenes or songs to allow for costume and set changes before a big flashy production number. He chooses to use the loose or banal narratives in pornography as an example:

In pornography the story is simplistic—“how do I pay for this pizza?” being the classic example. My point is, as in a musical, the story exists only to connect the longer, more engaging . . . production numbers. What? Well, what kind of a society do we live in if we can’t discuss the similarities between pornography and musical theatre? (30)

The not-so-absurd connection between musical theatre and pornography makes for an excellent comedic moment that allows one to be both delighted and bewildered by the link this apparently conservative man made between the “mechanics” of both forms. That pornography would be the example he chooses plays into the outlandish nature of parody, and continues to allow the audience to enjoy this increasingly spirited theatrical journey.

The confession of Man in Chair toward the end of the show that in fact he had never seen the show, but that his mother had given him the record when his father had left, brings a profound meaning to the show that had not necessarily been there before.161 The genre and conventions of musical theatre as he sees them seem to function in some way to restore the loss of his father. In the two-fold dramaturgical structure of the piece, imagination and memory are celebrated as both a personalized coping mechanism and a crucible of creative inspiration. Taking us into his sanctuary and using the songs he has listened to over and over, Man in Chair creates the entire world of the fictional show.

161 Long forgotten (due to the lively story-telling) is Man in Chair’s confession early on when the lights first come up, “Hello. How are we today? I’m feeling a little blue myself. You know, a little anxious for no particular reason, a little sad that I should feel anxious at my age, you know, a little self-conscious anxiety resulting in non-specific sadness; a state I like to call ‘blue’” (1).
A nutty obsession with an old-time musical is soon expanded to show it is not only the plots in the show that are absurd, but also that life itself aligns with a Sisyphean-like cycle, and that reminiscence, memory, and nostalgia can be an important survival tool. Dance and music are key tools that make this exploration of nostalgia possible. The embodied component of the show provides a way in towards an understanding of the emotional and visceral connection many have to the form.

**Choreography and The Drowsy Chaperone**

Casey Nicholaw directed and choreographed *The Drowsy Chaperone*, his second Broadway show after *Spamalot* in 2005. Nicholaw uses nearly every possible dance convention of the 1920s era drawing from vaudeville idioms, early revue dances from the nineteen-teens, and the Charleston. He employs multiple variations on the Charleston as well as other recognizable dance styles such as “Ballin’ the Jack,” where the performer bounces their hips around in a circle while popping their heels up and down, as well as some elements of the Black Bottom, the shimmy, and tap dance.\(^{162}\) Pointedly, because of the celebration and playful parody of the conventions of musical theatre, all dances are exaggerated and overtly “spectacularized” for comedic effect as well as to serve the dramaturgical strategies. Scott Taylor, a close associate of Nicholaw explains, “In *Drowsy*, I know Casey gave attention to nostalgia, not only because of the type of musical he wanted to create, but by the nostalgia and type of dance that he knew people would expect to see for this time period and from these overdrawn but honest characters.”\(^{163}\) Nicholaw’s embellished movement signature is created from the beginning of the

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\(^{162}\) Stearns and Stearns, 107.

\(^{163}\) Interview with author, May 11, 2018. Scott Taylor has been associate choreographer for several Broadway shows (*Aladdin, On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*) as well as dance captain for *Spamalot, Contact, Steel Pier*, and a dancer in *Showboat, Crazy for You*, and *Cats.*
show using iconic moves from the era upon which he expands through to the end; movements increase in intensity and exaggeration along with the plot.

After the prologue discussing the ups and downs of theatrical experiences, Man in Chair announces it is time to start and settles in with his tea saying, “you’re only seconds away from being transported” (2). The set contributes to the feat of transformation as Man in Chair’s worn out apartment morphs into the 1928 New York City setting. Characters at the top of the show enter through the two doors of his aged refrigerator, which once opened appear as French doors from the inside. In the opening number (“Fancy Dress”), all the characters are introduced, except for Janet, and all sing of the “wedding bells [that] will ring,” an expected exposition-type song for the opening of a show. The entire cast enthusiastically bounces up and down with elbows out to the side. This movement helps to get the one-step beat of the Jazz Age-styled music in the body and set toes tapping in the audience. Man in Chair joins in, ridiculously trying to imitate the choreography, something one often does only in the privacy of one’s home, which works as part of the conceit of the show—he is in his home. The point of this opening allows all to feel the energy and gaiety of the 1920s in a visceral manner and enjoy the excess of excess. Each convention of the form, including the dance, draws attention to itself and is part of the imitation of the stylization of hundreds of shows in the 1920s. Because the parodic style is over the top and unreal, it gives permission to love and delight in the moves. There is a parodic bent to some of the more clichéd moves in the sense that they satisfy people’s expectations of dance in musical theatre. At the same time, the exaggerated manner of the choreography subtly criticizes the stereotype that dance in musical theatre is always “jazz hands” and box steps. The moves

165 Box steps, or a jazz square, involve a crossing over of the feet in a square fashion to keep the performer in the same spot though moving with much energy. Jazz hands are explained in note 61, chapter one.
spoof the stereotypes, but also capitalize on our relationship to those stereotypes. Because of this pointed self-awareness of the conventions of the genre, each convention is deliberately exhibited and made available for both critique and delight from Man in Chair and the audience.

Man in Chair eases the anxiety or frustration some may have with the form by acknowledging the awkwardness of bursting into song or dance from the beginning of the show, which gives a license to let the musical in all its lunacy come to life. Described as “a delightful homage to a simpler and less cynical time,” Man in Chair helps make all comfortable with a form that in the 1920s was often about entertainment for entertainment’s sake, and Man in Chair blatantly asks—“what is wrong with that?”

In fact, the enlarged, over-the-top execution of the most obvious gestures of the social dance thrusts the role and meaning of dance in musical theatre forward for contemplation. Man in Chair’s narration, applause, and love for each dance number emphasizes how much the meaning, memory, and subsequent embodied nostalgia mean to him, and by association, us. Admitting all the characters are two-dimensional from the start, and the “well-worn” narrative structure of the fictional show, alleviates us from having to cope with those deficiencies and enjoy the show.

Man in Chair admits the plot is “flimsy”: basically a case of mistaken identity that revolves around the bride and groom not being allowed to see each other before the wedding. He explains the “B” plot is equally weak involving Feldzeig, a Broadway producer, trying to replace the soon-to-be-married Janet in his show and the ditzy chorus girl who tries to get the spot. To make matters worse there are a pair of gangsters stalking the producer to resolve an unpaid debt. Man in Chair describes them:

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They were an early example of the typical Broadway gangster: full of word play and stylized movements, not really very intimidating. Unless you find dancers intimidating, which I do but for reasons which would not be appropriate to this situation. (13)

By voicing his apprehensions about dancers and dancing, Man in Chair makes an opening for any who feel the same way about the form. He recognizes the surprise or shock of people unabashedly breaking into dance moves on stage. More subtly, there is some sexual innuendo in the statement, as he hints at his desires or sexual anxieties that may not be “appropriate” to discuss. He relays to the audience an understanding of the gaze of the spectator on the often supple and sexy bodies of Broadway dancers that may hint at a certain level of voyeurism or fantasy for some—including him.

In the dance numbers of the show, the literal nature of the simple lyrics and dances are redolent of early “dance-songs” of the late teens of the twentieth century and the instructive nature of those early songs is imitated. For example, in the song “Cold Feet,” the groom, Robert, and his best man, George, move so quickly in the dance (which tells of the Groom’s pre-wedding nerves) that smoke comes from their feet. Their moves are so hot they are literally “smoking”—a lively pun on the title of the song. The tap dance at the beginning of the song, done only by Robert, is standard and predictable rhythm-wise with a lot of shuffle-ball-changes and heel drops that are not in sophisticated rhythms, but simply accent the off beats of the music. When George wanders in to talk to Robert he continues tap dancing through the conversation, suggesting it is just as odd to continue to dance and have a conversation as it is to stand and talk and then break into dance. Robert convinces his friend George to join in; a worn but much-loved trope in musicals and movie musicals to get a second (and sometimes third and fourth) person into the dance number and make a production out of it. The two dancers hit all the styles of “Broadway”
tap dance, from a back and forth conversation with rhythms, to the repetition of small travelling steps, to more virtuoso moves. The music speeds up and the duo goes so fast that smoke comes from their feet. This exaggeration enhances how much audiences loved a showstopper then and now. At the peak of speed and action a tap-dancing waiter comes in with a glass of water for each of them. The dancers stop, drink up, and then go back into the grand finale of the piece. As they finish the routine, Man in Chair appears between them applauding. He explains to the audience that he always pictures the actors panting and sweating after a big routine. While he speaks the performers are frozen in front of him with big smiles, panting and sweating. Man in Chair points to the beloved quirks of musical theatre that those in the know might feel a nostalgia for while also making newcomers to the form feel at ease.

Perhaps one of the most memorable pieces in the musical that creates its own nostalgia is when Janet (Sutton Foster) claims she is ready to get married and is fine to end her famous performance career. Janet claims she does not want to show off her skills and talent to demanding audiences anymore. What ensues is a comedy routine and dance where she indeed does show off every possible skill, from spinning plates to half a dozen cartwheels. She pokes fun at the showing off, posturing, and extended songs and dances, and their reprises that populate the form. Even the plastic grin, presentational poses, and flourishes allude to the spectacularization of the form. Feldzieg begs her, “How can you give up the footlights when you

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167 Foster’s portrayal of Millie Dillmount four years previously in Thoroughly Modern Millie would also create a sense of ghosting particularly as both shows are set in the 1920s. Marvin Carlson speaks of this theatrical memory suggesting, “the dynamics of theatrical memory conjures ghosts of some sort in every new production.” Carlson, 10,000 Nights at the Theatre: Highlights from 50 Years of Theatre-Going, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 263. Foster’s characterization of Millie is embodied in her portrayal of Janet van der Graaff. Carlson mentions the degree to which the audience is conscious of this ghosting varies, but given the nostalgic propulsions already operating in The Drowsy Chaperone, there is a certain level of the uncanny in Foster’s inclusion in the show that would likely invoke memories of Millie adding to the nostalgic impulse in the form. Carlson, 10,000 Nights at the Theatre, 263.
know very well you got greasepaint in your veins?” (19), Janet sings simply, “I don’t want to show off no more” and then strikes a variety of poses for the many photographers. The piece escalates, and Janet goes through a parade of ludicrous actions, including belly dancing and escaping from a locked box to making music by blowing on bottles. All her actions are essentially a collection of vaudeville acts. Janet teases the audience by showing her virtuosic tricks of the trade that will never be seen from her again, though we are seeing them for the first time. She states: “You’ll never see this no more,” then kicks a leg to her head, in effect creating a longing to never have the piece end, as each fantastic skill is only seen once. With a massive build up, she puts on yet another costume, takes a deep breath, and true to the build-up of a finale of many large production numbers that end with a change of key signature to enhance the emotion using a musical half-tone step up, she states (but does) “I don’t want to change keys no more.” The number closes with the ten ensemble members executing a dance combination of small kicks forward, bounces side to side, and backwards travelling kicks with lifted elbows followed by a turn towards Janet for a final tableaux. These Charleston-like movements done in unison function to boost the last moment of the dance with an added exuberance that Janet has been professing and expertly demonstrating. The recognizable dance moves from the realm of the Charleston help to frame the conventional number and provide the satisfaction Man in Chair has explained audiences found highly entertaining. In the collective memories of the nostalgia Man in Chair has created, this means both a fictional past and present “us.” By illustrating to contemporary audiences how desires seemed so easily met, there can be a longing for a simpler time when one was readily satisfied with the musicals of the 1920s. There were no large sets, or flashy lights; joy and belonging were felt in the conventions, as saccharine-sweet as they may...

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
have seemed. The meta-theatrical dramaturgical imperative that Man in Chair creates as tour
guide to the form is made all the more poignant by his self-deprecation and honesty as he
explains his love of the musical.

A second section where dance embodies nostalgia for the 1920s through the imitation and
exaggeration of dance tropes is in the gangsters’ comical number “Toledo Surprise.” At this
moment in the story the gangsters are putting the squeeze on the producer to get an overdue
payment. In a bizarre set up, the gangsters, disguised as pastry chefs, couple baking with
roughing up an enemy; “first you chop the nuts, then you pound the dough …”

Feldzieg “distracts” the gangsters from beating him up by asking them to repeat their actions, exclaiming
what grace of movement they have. The gangsters are awkward at first, but within two bars of
music they become master showmen. The leap from the awkward Everyman into an expert
mover or singer is adored in musical theatre. There is something appealing about the possibility
that all can move their body with ease and that in the fantasy we too can be agile, syncopated,
and stunning. Kitty, the ditzy chorus girl, stumbles in on the conversation taking the opportunity
to show Feldzieg her talent. The trio and various ensemble members join in with basic
Charleston moves (heel kicks, shuffle of heels, pressing of palms to the upper corner of the room
while pumping knees up and down) and start building to more sophisticated moves (complex
turns and kicks). Just as the big dance number really gets “cooking” Janet bursts in and
announces the wedding is off. A scene ensues, and the emotional pay-off for a big production
number finale is put on hold. The desire for physical and musical resolution hangs palpably in

172 There is perhaps a reference here to the gangsters who intrude on the performance of the show-within-
a-show in Kiss Me Kate (1948). This connection continues the homage to the form that The Drowsy
Chaperone takes on, as Kiss Me Kate (music and lyrics by Cole Porter) remains a beloved and
sophisticated example of the musical theatre genre. As a case in point, Man in Chair’s opening
monologue has him wondering how much audiences would anticipate what Cole Porter would come up
with next.
the air. In this moment, however, there is recognition of what it is we are longing for: a
nonsensical dance production that we did not even know we wanted—part of how the show
creates its own nostalgia. Anticipation and longing abounds, strategically orchestrated by the
dramaturgy of the show to create love for the genre. Feldzieg is delighted Janet will now be
available for his show and he surprisingly takes the reins of the number, starting it up again with
a renewed wildness and gaiety of Charleston kicks and shimmies, only to be stopped again by a
second interruption. This “stop-and-go” formula builds to a peak, until all are madly singing and
dancing about baking a cake that has no connection at all to the plot. The charm of the music and
the delight of the Charleston-like dance moves from the 1920s becomes justification enough for
the grand production number. In the final chorus all engage in the very simple choreography
(side heel kicks: one right, one left, then two to the right) but the cast in their tight and
synchronous movement, much like in Thoroughly Modern Millie, use the precise and energetic
moves of the dance to bring the number to a higher and higher peak. This production excitement
is typical and often expected in the Broadway musical, however, drawing attention to it with the
stops and starts helps to substantiate just how important and effective movement and
choreography is to the genre. In order to tease out the emphasis on such exhilarating and
extensive choreography audiences have come to expect—the record skips. All the performers
keep repeating the same double kick on the right, three or four times, until Man in Chair, who
has been dancing in the second row, is able to get over to the record player and stop the skip. He
drops the needle, and the cast finishes the number with rousing shoulder high Charleston kicks
and then low to the ground lunges in canon to close the number with a much waited for, and
unmistakeably spectacular, bang.
The repeats caused by the skipping record effectively function to build added anticipation for the finale. This massive spectacularization of the Charleston at this moment of high physical exertion adds that final tier of engagement and unabashed admittance that this dazzling and thrilling part of musical theatre is highly desired and part of the nostalgia people have for the form. If one was not nostalgic for big production numbers at the beginning of this section, one is more likely to be now. Like the creating of false collective memories by asking “Remember?” of fictional happenings, the constant repetition of the movement coerces the audience into a collective desire for the grandest of act one finales. The number is finished and Man in Chair staggers back to his seat. A small reprise accompanies the exiting chorus. Janet turns and asks, “Why are we dancing, our dreams are in tatters?” pointing to the outrageousness of the number at its most effective. The groom replies, “Yes. Yes…But the tone is so infectious!” (49). This gentle mockery at the end of the piece affirms that singing and dancing on and off stage can and should be a guiltless pleasure.

The first act ends and Man in Chair explains, “The curtain falls, and it’s time for the intermission. At least it would be, if we were actually sitting in the Morosco Theatre watching The Drowsy Chaperone, which of course, we are not” (51). He, however, takes an intermission break. The curtain lowers behind him and he takes out a power bar and sits in his chair and eats it as the audience waits. He explains, “I have a bit of a blood sugar issue. I have to eat small meals all day long or I get jittery. I know it’s rude but you wouldn’t like the alternative, believe you me” (51). The detailed analysis of the fictional Drowsy Chaperone and subsequent holistic view of the genre (the narrator himself taking a break) give the musical space to breathe. Unlike some sung-through musicals that exist in a sort of middle ground of dramatic impulse, the production’s show-within-a-show structure (one of which breaks the fourth wall) allows what Scott McMillin
calls the “crackle of difference” to emerge.\textsuperscript{173} McMillin explains “the smoothness of unity” is not the indicator of success of a musical, rather the differences in a musical bring meaning and interest.\textsuperscript{174} The creative team have created a structure that allows a space for nostalgia and meaning to be created and re-created. Casey Nicholaw, as both the director and choreographer, sets up an environment where Man in Chair can easily move between both shows. This choice, Brechtian in style, effectively keeps the audience engaged by focusing in on both the micro and macro and works to avoid any sense of complacency.

When Man in Chair returns from his “intermission,” he puts on the second record. He leaves to use the washroom, explaining that the audience can listen to the overture to the second act. He accidently puts on a record for another fictional musical, \textit{The Enchanted Nightingale}. A complete Orientalist spectacle at an Asian palace takes place with an ensemble singing and dancing in exoticized red and gold costumes. Man in Chair rushes back in to stop the record. The huge effort put into this small bit of comedy helps reference the various growing pains the Broadway musical has had over the years. Through the playful parody he comments on and admits to some of the past problems with the genre. In his apology to the audience for the mishap, he describes \textit{The Enchanted Nightingale}: “A degrading piece of Chinoiserie . . . A slap in the face to four thousand years of Chinese history. But it had some wonderful tunes . . . and did you recognize Roman Bartelli as the Emperor? Yes, he was a man of a thousand accents—all of them insulting” (54). This over the top interlude of a completely new fictionalized show, lavish set, and bedazzled costumes gives us permission to laugh at the stereotypes and in that experience acknowledge the less than politically correct history of the form.

\textsuperscript{173} Scott McMillin, \textit{The Musical as Drama} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2.\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
As the narrative of the fictional musical is devolving into mayhem, Man in Chair questions, “What a mess! Will it all work out in the end? Of course it will! It’s not real! It’s a musical! Everything always works out in a musical. In the real world nothing ever works out and the only people who burst into song are the hopelessly deranged!” (41). This sobering thought stalls the nostalgic flow, though supports a critical reflection on how important memory and imagination is to everyday functioning and finding a place in the world for one’s self.

When the illusion of the show is broken two beats before the final note of the fictional show by a power outage, the intrusion of the superintendent to fix the fuse reminds of the theatricality of the situation. The “magic” is shattered and it is difficult to imagine how to bring back and rebuild all Man in Chair has created. This effect, also in the Brechtian mode, reminds how imaginary and false the show Man in Chair describes is (and the one we are watching), reinforcing that one of the key values of musical theatre is to provide this escape and emotional safe-place, as a way of managing the realities of life. As the characters freeze, while the superintendent snoops around for the fuse box, there is a sense of intrusion from a parent at a teenager’s party, an awkward embarrassment of letting loose or being one’s self. After the superintendent leaves Man in Chair sits back down and hums a tune from the show. Surprisingly, there is not a restoration to the status quo for Man in Chair, the narrative goes the opposite direction. The characters break their tableaux and wander over to him and invite him into the finale of the fictional show. He brings the show album with him and rides off on a giant airplane (an over-the-top deus ex machina that ends the show), a closing ode to escapism, theatricalization, and theatre in general. By merging the two story lines of the show-within-a-show structure the sheer fantasy of an ending works, while also acknowledging the aggrandizing of the happy ending common to musical theatre. What one may have originally thought of as
misplaced nostalgia for a show Man in Chair has never seen becomes a moot point, and the show, moreover, becomes about how one uses nostalgia to find meaning in life.

A complexity is achieved in *The Drowsy Chaperone* that is a tribute to a very strategic dramaturgy that uses parody and a cultivation of nostalgia to trouble one’s relationship to musical theatre and society on a broader level. The production problematizes the genre and tropes of the 1920s using a skillful manipulation of parody that circumnavigates the overt commercialization of genre and makes us question why performance, and musical theatre in particular, is meaningful to us. Helmutt Illbruk explain nostalgia can be “consolatory and self protective,” which is how Man in Chair starts out, however, as the show progresses and through the embodied performance of the fictional show “conducted” by Man in Chair the nostalgia becomes also about interrogating fundamental aspects of the self and one’s place in the world. The questions to the audience, the pauses at moments of heightened physical action to reflect on the genre, and the encouragement of self-reflexivity, all contribute to this. Svetlana Boym explains there are “fewer and fewer venues for exploring nostalgia,” but when a creative use of nostalgia occurs such as that in *The Drowsy Chaperone* it “reveals the fantasies of the age and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born.”

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176 This sense of reflection is further focused in on towards the end of the musical when there is a garbled final phrase uttered by the chaperone to an unsure Janet. Man in Chair has never been able to make out the phrase. The chaperone says “L-ve while you can.” He is not sure if she says “live while you can,” or “leave while you can” (61). The moral of the fictional musical remains undelivered. He relates to the message himself and reflects on his broken marriage and concludes, “But still, in the larger sense, its better to have lived than left, right? (61). Man in Chair puts the questions over to us.
177 Boym, 351.
V. Conclusion

This chapter has shown how three musicals use the bodily essences of the 1920s and social dance frameworks as dramaturgical material in order to construct a sense of contemplation of the apparent liberties and freedom of the era—for better or worse. I explored how the differing dramatic structures of the three musicals—ranging from pastiche to parody—set up how the social dance is used to create nostalgia. I illustrated how the Charleston and the Black Bottom become physical emblems for the era, and how the choreographers build on the social dances as a way of meaning making in the contemporary moment. I have shown how the values and desires of the everyday world of social dance are amplified through the spectacularization of the body, the female body in particular, on stage. In the following chapter, the re-emergence of social dances after the stock market crash and building up to World War II is interrogated to show how bodies in motion help rebuild social and economic momentum. In that physicalized survival mechanism much is learned about social situations and American identity. The shift in the emotional connection to movement from a sense of obliviousness and wildness in the 1920s to how social dance helps foster a new national confidence is key. Through social dance in the 1930s and 40s, I investigate how the body is created as “American” on stage.
CHAPTER THREE:
SWING DANCE

Social dance is the lens for every social issue that’s happening right there . . . Nobody says that out loud, they’re just hearing the music . . . they’re drawn into it, they’re magnetized into the fold. And they find a venue to scream out even if they don’t have an answer.

—Andy Blankenbuehler

I. Introduction

After the stock market crash of 1929, the economic, political, and cultural life of the U.S. profoundly changed. The expansive world of leisure activities that had flourished in the 1910s and developed into the hedonistic pursuits of the 1920s ran out of steam (and money). The time of the indulgences of the 1920s was over, and in large urban cities poverty and economic strife characterized everyday life. Engaging in social dance was how many individuals coped, vented frustrations, and found solace and belonging, no matter how makeshift the venue or how temporary the company. In this final chapter, I consider how social dance is used and interpreted in three musicals set between 1930 and 1945. The case studies each explore how imagined communities are created in the face of precarity, whether in response to actions in the narrative of the musical or to sociopolitical circumstances at the time of production. I argue the shows’ social dance-based choreographies work both to build communities and to express the subtext of the story, and the embodied nostalgia therein becomes the subversive element that brings the performances’ social and political meanings to light. I claim the nostalgia embodied by swing dance “opens the door for the audience to be in the community” and creates a space to consider deeper economic and political implications perhaps not voiced by the show or overlooked in the
larger quest to fulfill the theatrical expectations of a Broadway musical.¹ As in the previous chapters, I interrogate the choreography in the musical to tease out bodily meanings.

I begin with a consideration of Wonderful Town (1953) in order to introduce swing dance and the physical expressions of the era.² The comedic structure of the musical about two sisters moving to the big city helps bridge the case studies of the previous chapter, moving from the 1920s into the 1930s. Much like Thoroughly Modern Millie, Wonderful Town is a comedy that uses pastiche combined with a light-hearted social satire to achieve its backwards glance. The opening of the show at the height of the Red Scare, however, complicates the high-spirited show and sets the stage for subtle but critical undercurrents. Steel Pier (1997) takes on the complex task of understanding, navigating, and surviving the Great Depression using the microcosm of dance marathons and the social and economic meaning rooted within them.³ Allegiance (2015) explores the specific cultural and political urgencies surrounding Japanese internment in the U.S. during and after World War II through the experiences of one family.⁴ Despite markedly different plots and locations (New York; Atlantic City; Heart Mountain, Wyoming) all three shows use nostalgia in an embodied manner to vitalize communities that had been suppressed, deprived, or constricted.

I explore the three case studies in order of the increasing precarity of the community and characters involved in the story as a way to chart how pressing the implications of nostalgia

¹ Author interview with Andy Blankenbuehler, September 17, 2017.
³ Steel Pier, book by David Thompson, lyrics by Fred Ebb, music by John Kander, 1997. Steel Pier has been viewed at the New York Public Library’s Theatre on Film.
⁴ Allegiance, book by Marc Acito, music and lyrics by Jay Kuo and book by Marc Acito, Kuo and Lorenzo Thione, 2015. Allegiance has been viewed at the New York Public Library’s Theatre on Film and seen live.
become when the tension between self-expression and geopolitics increases. In these dynamics, the dancer is brought forth on stage as a site of embodied history and cultural memory. The investigation of how choreographers build on that physicality helps to conceptualize how the body is created as “American” on stage and the meaning of that move. I investigate the tension that arises from the intrusion of national and international affairs on self-expression and demonstrate that the greater the tension between individual freedoms and nationalistic agendas the more key the dancing body on stage and embodied nostalgia become in determining identity and integrity in the United States.

To understand the physicalization of community memories, longings, and historical meaning, I examine in the next section the transformations of the socio-political climate between 1930-1945. I trace the history of swing dance and how it becomes the movement vernacular of this time in relation to shifting senses of communities and formations of national identity. With this foundation in place, I proceed to the case studies.

**Moving Forward in a Turbulent Decade**

The seeming suddenness of the financial crisis at the turn of the decade led to a culture of anxiety, paranoia and frustration.³ Desperate for tax revenue, the U.S. government lifted the prohibition on alcohol in 1933. The world of the clandestine and spectacular speakeasies was

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³ While coming as a shock to so many, the crash was a result of various factors developing over the decade. In the early 1920s, post-World War I optimism led to an increase in production and employment resulting in a prosperous economy. Beginning around 1924 stock market securities began to rise at a very quick rate resulting in a stock market boom over the next few years. The vision was there was no end in sight for the prosperous time and people “proceeded to build a world of speculative make-believe.” Though signs of the economic lessening (decrease in production and construction) began as early as 1925, with the low lending rates people continued to build debt. Despite erratic behavior of the stock market toward the end of the decade, it always seemed to recover (and then some). Small indications, and mini crashes several months before the ultimate crash largely went unnoticed. As stocks began to fall at the end of 1929 panic ensued and the market bottomed out—not to recover for over a decade. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash of 1929* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 1954), 3,7.
emphatically over. The first glimmer of hope for a financially paralyzed population did not come until Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal was implemented in 1933. Despite the variety of public works programs the New Deal enacted, the Depression did not end until the U.S.’s entrance into World War II nearly a decade later.

The eventual economic recovery, as explained by David Walsh and Len Platt, was achieved largely through Roosevelt’s “revitalizing America’s capitalist economic order to promote and increase the forward movement of the processes of American modernization.” This progressive emphasis “uniting business and labor in its organization of the economy and society,” however, left the working class to fend for themselves in navigating how the vision and workings of the New Deal could offer immediate help. In essence, the working class in the 1930s was caught between “their own perceived sense of failure and their desire to work.” This complex transition from the despair of the depression to the supposed possibilities of the New Deal—capped off with the entrance into a world war—was reflected in the social dance styles that developed alongside the burgeoning social, political, and economic agitations of the era.

Notably, the Swing Era cannot be viewed as a monolithic period; there were various sub-periods within the fifteen-year time span. Concepts of community, and thus social dance, shifted with the political and economic changes of the 1930s and early 1940s. In Swing! That Modern Sound, Kenneth J. Bindas explains the transformation in social dance beginning in the 1930s:

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6 David Walsh and Len Platt, Musical Theatre and American Culture (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), 84.
7 Ibid., 97.
9 Howard Spring explains the Swing Era is generally considered between 1930-1945: “Swing began to take shape around 1928 and was well established by 1932. . . It became a national fad in 1935 when Benny Goodman’s band brought a particular brand of swing to white teenagers, one that combined the performance practices of the great African American bands, such as those led by Henderson and Chick Webb, with modern arrangements of current pop songs.” Spring, “Swing,” Grove Music Online, January 31, 2014, https://doi-org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2258226.
“swing and the depression era are inseparable. The crisis itself helped create a rediscovery of America, a rediscovery that involved all aspects of society” including music and dance.¹⁰ In the 1930s, as part of recovery efforts from the economic crisis there was, in time, a political shift from a focus on individualism to an emphasis on the collective. In this U.S.-styled form of socialism (or the closest the U.S. ever got to socialism) Roosevelt “suggested that a new America could be seen on the horizon that promised a fair share for all people.”¹¹ Swing dance, with its emphasis on belonging and increasing equality between dance partners, grew out of the working class, where many of these ideological changes were felt strongest.¹² Bindas explains, “The 1930s legitimized the worker experience and made it part of the American experience. Swing music played a central role in this transformation,” and to the extent that social dance emerged as “the lifeblood of the community,” swing culture readily dovetailed with the communal aspects of the New Deal.¹³

As will be demonstrated in the case studies of this chapter, the transition from the Depression to the New Deal to World War II spawned very different concepts of community. In the early years of the Depression, swing music and dance were embraced as a survival method to escape from the gloom and despair. By mid-decade dance styles increasingly were also about inclusion, commonality, and engaging in social causes. Towards the end of 1930s, as the effects of the Depression spread out globally, and continuing on towards the 1940s with the U.S. involvement in World War II, social dances also developed an increasingly outward and global manifestation. With soldiers bringing home their experience from outside the U.S., and people’s attentions turned to loved ones fighting overseas, swing dancing thus became about the effect of

¹⁰ Bindas, 99.
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Malnig, 12.
the world on the body.

**Background of Swing Culture**

Swing dance came to life in the ballrooms and dance halls of Harlem, the most popular and famous being the Savoy. The diverse cultural make up of Harlem at the turn of the twentieth century brought many different music and dance styles together, an amalgamation which eventually led to the development of swing dance in the 1930s. Importantly, swing dance “developed concurrently with the swing style of jazz music.” Swing music, performed by large orchestras, generally has a fast tempo with a pulse and syncopation that promoted dancing. Howard Spring explains swing music “is characterized by four-to-the-bar rhythms, guitar and pizzicato double bass in the rhythm section, riff-based arrangements, and assertive drumming.” A symbiotic sort of relationship developed between musicians and dancers in the 1930s as both pushed against the established beats and rhythms, helping to develop a new style and manner of sound and movement. The basic physicality of swing dance involves a rocking side to side (or step and touch to right and then the left) followed by a ball-change (or swinging of the body and

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14 Other notable ballrooms in Harlem the 1930s include the New Star Casino and the Alhambra. Stearns and Stearns, 317.


16 Spring further describes how the emphasis on the syncopation and pulse of the music can vary depending on the musician, which helps to explain the many varieties of swing music. Additionally, the size of the band increased in size (approximately ten musicians increasing to seventeen or more) to include full sections of instruments such as brass or saxophones. “Swing,” *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014, https://doi-org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2258226.

17 Julie Malnig reminds that music and dance chronologies, “historically have been inextricable linked,” however, this creative link is often de-emphasized from both disciplines in the academy. Even so, there was very much a connection between the passions and actions of both the dancers and musicians and orchestra leaders, particularly involving tempo. Malnig, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*, 3.
transferring of weight from one foot to the other) backwards, or outwards, while opening up the dance position (letting go of one of your partner’s hands) for a spin or breakaway.\textsuperscript{18}

As more African Americans moved into Harlem in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Irish, German, Italian, and Jewish communities eventually left. This shift in demographics involved a transition from substantially Jewish and Italian communities in East Harlem to a majority of African Americans, along with an influx of Puerto Ricans.\textsuperscript{19} As this transition progressed, “the newly arrived Negroes began to work out a social equilibrium,” through cultural practices.\textsuperscript{20} In particular, the establishment of more specific groups within the community and territorial behavior happened on the dance floor. The development and articulations of the Lindy Hop were in part how social power dynamics were established in the community. The generally friendly competition and posturing on the dance floor resulted in several groups of dancers that ruled the numerous clubs, the best and most famous being “Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers” at the Savoy. There was a sense of inclusivity to the different groups, and Herbert White (the namesake of the group at the Savoy) was definitely the man in charge of the dance culture at the Savoy. White set rules of conduct and dismissed anyone from the group or inner circle who went against him. Between the different community factions, the protocols, and the social-politics, dancers were primed to blow off some steam. The Stearnses observe,

\textsuperscript{18} The one dance that can be most connected with the athleticism of swing dance is the Texas Tommy. Claude Conyers explains the Texas Tommy: “A vigorous social dance for couples, arguably the first swing dance. The argument is that it was the first social dance using the basic 8-count rhythm of swing dance to include a breakaway step from the closed position of other couple dances of the time (1909–10). It was one of many dances that originated in the dance halls of the Barbary Coast red light district of San Francisco. It was not long before the Texas Tommy was danced on Broadway, in Ziegfeld Follies of 1911,” “Texas Tommy,” \textit{Grove Music Online}, February 23, 2011, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/grovmusic/view/10.1093.

\textsuperscript{19} In 1910 ten percent of the population in Harlem were African American, in 1920 it rose to thirty-two percent and by 1930 it would reach seventy percent. “An Affluent White Harlem?” Andy A. Beveridge, August 27, 2008, \textit{The Gotham Gazette}, http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/demographics/4062-an-affluent-white-harlem.

\textsuperscript{20} Stearns and Stearns, 317.
Harlem had become a fiercely competitive jungle, and the Savoy Ballroom syphoned off much of the nervous energy this constant pressure generated among the lucky few who became deeply interested in dancing. In turn this emotional climate was reflected in the tireless vigor and daring intervention of the Lindy, or Jitterbug.\(^{21}\)

And so it was in this environment that dances were created, tested out and added to. There was always an increased opportunity in swing dances for individual expression or improvisation because of the perpetual breakaway action. This improvisatory concept has been shown to be common with dances such as the Charleston, but with swing dance the breakaway becomes highly anticipated by spectators. When a dancer would “breakaway,” they would pull away from their partner and showcase their ingenuity and daring in front of their fellow dancers and audience members before joining back together with their partner, all while keeping in time with the music. In this sort of showing off, there was an unspoken competition around who could invent the wildest and boldest steps and stay within the swing rhythm. The lifts and throws common to swing dances grew out of this experimentation and rivalry. Rules were understood in the ballroom: one did not steal or “bite” someone’s dance step. Despite the competition and constant one-upmanship, “Nobody copied anybody else or did somebody else’s specialty.”\(^{22}\)

This code of conduct, which led to a rich variety of movements in the swing repertoire, was enforced by the likes of White or other leader-types of the different ballrooms and dance groups. Building on the basic movement structure of the dance, performers could add in many secondary options to show flair and ingenuity. This broad spectrum of possibilities was part of the popularity of the dance. The improvisational and creative impulses produce the swing dance

\(^{21}\) Stearns and Stearns, 320.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 323. This law of conduct continues today, particularly in regards to hip-hop and tap, where there is often a cypher, or informal circle, where artists can practice and promote their moves in a judgment free zone. There is an understanding that there is to be no insulting of each other (as there may be in a rap-battle) and that one does not copy another dancer’s moves.
body as one with subjectivity and self-confidence—qualities that helped to pull one out of the gloom of the depression. In the world of the energetic and constantly evolving swing dances, the bodies is empowered, celebrated, and “physicalizes the social cues” of the dance hall.  

The exact genesis of the name “Lindy Hop” is often misunderstood as being named after the aviator Charles Lindbergh who flew (or hopped) solo across the Atlantic in 1937. In fact, many were calling the swing style of dance the “hop” years before that time. Though once the connection was made to Lindbergh and the publicity around that event, the Lindy seemed to gain in momentum across the nation. In general, the swing dance styles, whether appended with other variations or names, continued on through the Swing Era. The Stearnses explain that vernacular dances “whether performed by white or Negro dancers, survived and prospered through innumerable variations, reinterpretations, revisions, and revivals.”

Importantly, the main impact of the formations of the dance was that it moved away from rules and hierarchies. Terry Monaghan asserts: “the driving reciprocal dynamic of both partners characterized the essential vitality of the dance that paid minimal deference to the ballroom conventions of leaders and followers.” The opportunity for self-expression and equality within a duo was appealing to the general populace. The popularity of the swing music and dance spread across the nation and white audiences and dancers readily took it up as their own. The improvisatory nature of the dance opened up space for a whitening of the dance, transforming the dance into what became known as the Jitterbug. White dancers kept a straight back while doing the dance as they had done with the Charleston. They developed a more bouncy style as they were not as daring with acrobatics or moves that took them close to the floor, African Americans dubbed the

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23 I draw on the scholarship of Elizabeth Grosz here when she discusses the unfinished nature of the body, one that is constantly being shaped and formed by the world around it. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, x.

24 Stearns and Stearns, 114.

25 Hubbard and Monaghan, 133.
characterization “jitterbug” to describe white dancer’s jittery execution of the dance and the name stuck. To call the dance the Lindy today keeps a sense of ownership of the dance to African Americans. In the 1930s and ’40s the overwhelming popularity of white orchestras, singers, and dancers (even in their jittery style) made swing dance a national craze, appropriately earning the title the “Swing Era.”

**Swing Dance, World War II, and National Identity**

Though there were many styles of swing-styled jazz music circulating due to the numerous bands touring and crisscrossing the United States, swing music and dance culture rose to the top of the popular lexicon in part because the moves and music were synonymous with popular cinema of the time, such as *Swing Time* (1936), *Hollywood Hotel* (1937), and *Hellzapoppin’* (1941). Sherrie Tucker explains in *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen*, “By the late 1930s, mainstream swing success required entrée to West Coast mechanisms of the culture industry, which had already gone west with the movies.” The novelty and popularity of cinema bolstered the excitement surrounding the dance. Though racial appropriation is not an emphasis in this chapter, it is important to remember that it was ongoing through the Jazz Age. Terry Monaghan observes, “Broadway and Hollywood productions that incorporated the Lindy Hop in the 1930s and 1940s projected the dance form around the world, even though the key dance motif was reinterpreted according to

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26 David W. Stowe explains this connection: “Most of the swing era’s most popular songs came from movies. Because many studios were in partnership with New York music publishers, they profited from royalties from air play and sheet music sales at the same time the latter helped promote the movies from which they were drawn.” Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 132.

the largely racist practices of those industries.” Despite “new white and black generations, with a pronounced interest in integration” and a greater sense of inclusion in the mid-1930s, there was still much to be done before ownership and contributions of African American music and dance styles was rightly recognized.

After the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the U.S declaration of war on Japan on December 8, 1941, the idioms of swing culture were steadily taken up as iconography of America for the shaping and promotion of national pride. For instance, the image of the swing dancer, particularly the handsome soldier with a pretty female partner, was used to garner national support and applaud expressions of patriotic duty. Through music and dance venues, such as the Hollywood Canteen, VSO shows, and acclaimed dancehalls, swing dancing, as will be investigated in Allegiance, became a social emblem of being involved and generally supportive of the war.

In the three musicals of this chapter all the moments of swing dance happen diegetically as part of the plot. Each of the particular narratives (two of which are set pre-World War II) has its own set of social and political issues that, to a varying degree, create tensions between self-expression and national conformity that are worked out on the dance floor. The social dances themselves, performed essentially on “the dance floor of the nation,” come to define different historical and political moments and impacts of the decades. From 1941 forward, when the inflated mythologies of swing dance and the war are considered alongside formations of national identify and nationhood, the dance becomes a complex set of negotiations surrounding meaning.

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29 Hubbard and Monaghan, 135.
30 After the US declared war on Japan, the Germans declared war on the U.S., prompting reciprocation from the U.S. While the U.S. entry into the war in Asia was different, ultimately the U.S went to war with the Allies against Axis powers.
31 Tucker, xix.
and bodily identity. Studying the complexities of that intersection exposes some of the biases the nation holds and demonstrates how, according to Tucker, “World War II is remembered and memorialized in that United States,” particularly in the manner “official memories are recruited to justify actions globally.” 

Attaching swing dancing to images of World War II harnesses the ideas of inclusion, friendly competition, and excitement of the dance floor for the purpose of national pride. The idea of soldiers shipping out in the morning and asking for one last dance before they go, or the soldier returning from the war to dance and celebrate with his sweetheart, has become such a part of the mythology and iconography of the United States that when a show comes along that challenges this scenario such as Allegiance, where Japanese American bodies performing swing dance are somehow not thought of as American by U.S. authorities, there is a rupture in that national narrative. That break problematizes U.S. consciousness that sees itself as a melting pot nation and points to the tension between the personal and the political, and the private and the public.

The eventual “nationalizing of swing culture” in the early 1940s co-opts the music, dance, celebration of self-expression, and community belonging as patriotic actions. However, Wonderful Town, Steel Pier, and Allegiance trouble the connection between swing dance and pure patriotism, demonstrating how the dance can work in more complex or subversive ways. Each of these cases illustrate that people were often identified, whether deliberately or more inconspicuously, based on how their bodies responded to developments around them as seen in moments of social dance.

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32 Tucker, xix.
33 Ibid., 30.
II. Wonderful Town and Nostalgia for Community

Ever since eighteen-seventy Greenwich Village has been the Bohemian cradle of painters, writers, actors, etc., who’ve gone on to fame and fortune. Today in nineteen-thirty-five, who knows what future greats live in these twisting alleys? Come along!

—Guide, Act 1, scene 1 Wonderful Town

In the 1958 CBC Television live telecast of Wonderful Town, two sisters from Ohio, Ruth (Rosalind Russell) and Eileen (Jacquelyn McKeever), arrive midday in Greenwich Village in 1935 to a street scene of carefree bohemian life in action.\(^\text{34}\) The delightful community of eccentric characters going about their daily lives sets a near instant time-machine effect in motion, drawing the audience back to a time of abundant self-expression and the passionate pursuit of artistic whims. Greenwich Village of the mid-1930s: Abstract Expressionist painter Hans Hoffman’s art school was attracting avant-garde artists from around the world, the legacy of the Provincetown Players, who had lived in the village a decade earlier, continued to appeal to emerging writers and young actors set on the exploration of their craft; and the opening of the first racially integrated night club “Café Society” was only a few years away.\(^\text{35}\) Not only are the television audiences of 1958 drawn back to the bohemian spirit of the Village in 1935, but they

\(^{34}\)The original 1953 Broadway production of Wonderful Town was not filmed in its entirety, only a few very short excerpts exist. My descriptions of Wonderful Town in the following passages come from viewing the 1958 CBS Television live telecast of the stage musical (available in consecutive scenes on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCfW8nX1ZU, accessed July 23, 2018) and in its entirety at Museum of Television and Radio, New York. In Forever Mame: The Life of Rosalind Russell, Bernard F. Dick claims, “The closest approximation of Rosalind’s opening night performance is the kinescope of the two-hour live telecast of Wonderful Town.” He explains, “Rosalind admitted that she could never top the performance she gave on opening night, 25 February 1953. Subsequent performances were never less than professional but never equaled the evening of the premiere.” Forever Mame. (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 160. There is a two-minute silent excerpt filmed by a family member of Rosalind Russell in 8mm from the 1953 Broadway production, which gives a general sense of the show and shows the similarities between the telecast and the stage version. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G7zdKqym7U, accessed October 29, 2018.

could also relish in seeing the near same cast and production of the beloved 1953 Broadway musical that occurred five years earlier.\textsuperscript{36}

And so, in the live television presentation, the enthusiastic tour guide gathers the tourists at the upstage sidewalk at the edge of the Village. They exclaim in amazement: “Look! Look! Poets! Actors! Dancers! Writers!”\textsuperscript{37} Three women dressed in long-sleeved black body suits and flowing skirts enter in a triangular formation from stage right. The influence of original choreographer Donald Saddler’s ballet background is readily visible in the pointed toes and turned out legs of the dancers; the inclusion of numerous iconic modern dance moves allows for a playful imitation of the modern style. For instance, as each dancer maneuvers around an artist and his easel, they curve their upper body into a spiral shape while a bent leg with flexed foot reaches towards their cupped hands. The angularity and abstract gestures suggest the modernist avant-garde, likely Martha Graham dancers drilling themselves in the moves of their renowned leader. While the dancers stand out amongst the other performers in the telecast, in their uniqueness, they also fit in perfectly amongst the bohemian group of artists, musicians, writers, and poets going about their lives in the same absorbed manner. The glories of the 1930s are felt in the sense of \textit{bon vivance} that permeates the neighborhood. After a final build of a cacophony of individual artistic practices, wildly gesturing bodies, all crowding towards each other in a “\textit{mad dance of self-expression},” the tourists are led off to the next stop on the tour—“Now we will see MacDougal Alley” (9).

\textsuperscript{36} In the 1958 telecast Rosalind Russell reprised her Broadway role with most of the same cast except Jacquelyn McKeever played Eileen (originally Edie Adams) and Sydney Chaplin played Robert Baker (originally George Gaynes). Ralph Beaumont helped adapt Donald Saddler’s choreography for the telecast, which has been filmed as if on a stage.\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Wonderful Town}, Joseph A. Fields, Jerome Chodorov, Betty Comden and Adolph Green (New York, NY: Random House Publishing, 1953), 8 (subsequent citations in parentheses).
By a turn of good fortune the sisters find themselves renting a tango instructor’s basement level apartment with one long street level window. Tucked in their new *pied à terre,* they realize they are being watched from outside by two strange men. The ogling men are half-heartedly chased away by a police officer. Despite the adventure and excitement amongst the carefree residents of the village, the third rumble of explosives cutting the new downtown subway line prompts the sisters to wonder, “Why-o-Why-o Why-o, did we ever leave Ohio?”

The beautiful ballad by composer Leonard Bernstein, with its simple harmonies in thirds and small musical range (both to accommodate Russell’s limited vocal ability), is structured perfectly for the two female voices. The chaos of the village and tinge of fear caused by the peeping Toms is juxtaposed with the clean and simple ballad. As Ruth and Eileen sing out about their beloved home state, our love and longing for home, or at least a relief from city life, burgeons as well. By a swift and clever sleight of hand the talented production team make Americana palpable and strangely welcome.

Overall, the vivacity of the 1930s set up at the beginning of the production allows for a sweet contentedness to form around Depression-era Manhattan. *Wonderful Town* can be broadly interpreted as a nostalgic romp through Greenwich Village in the 1930s, however, investigating how that nostalgia functions in a show that opened “at the height of the McCarthy

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38 “Ohio,” Betty Comden and Adolph Green, 1953.
39 Bernard F. Dick explains, “Bernstein realized [Russell] had a limited range with four good notes that he used brilliantly in Ruth’s duet with Eileen.” Dick further states, “the middle section of ‘Ohio’ was much easier for Rosalind since it required what Comden correctly called ‘speech song,’ in which the lyrics had to be musically inflected rather than sung full voice.” Dick, *Forever Mame,* 158.
40 Book writers Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov originally set the play specifically in 1935, but in 1953 were more vague about the date stating the show takes place “in Greenwich Village in the 1930s,” which allowed for more variation in the pastiche nature of the score. There are, however, several references in the libretto to 1935 specifically: the tour guide announces the year at the beginning of his tour and signs for an art contest in 1935 are requested in the stage directions for “Christopher Street.” For a thorough analysis of the specific musical “time-markers” used by composer Leonard Bernstein see Helen Smith’s *There’s a Place for Us: The Musical Theatre Works of Leonard Bernstein* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).
and HUAC hearings, during a period when many of Bernstein’s colleagues were under siege helps depict a progressive undercurrent within the show. To start, the leering action of the men crouching by the sisters’ window hints at the anxieties surrounding surveillance in the 1950s in the entertainment industry and beyond. The sense of one’s actions being watched or spied on at the time led to an incredible amount of paranoia and fearfulness. Positioning much of the musical inside the sister’s apartment, always with the street window above them, expresses a continued sense of close observation, and the leering men draw attention to this. Comparatively, the 2003 revival of the show on Broadway in a post-9/11 period of heightened social and political tension supports the nostalgic power of the show to provide both escape and consideration of community in the U.S.

Interrogating how this purposeful nostalgia is embodied helps clarify what social dance is doing in Wonderful Town beyond celebrating the era. I trace how the vernacular movements from the 1930s are intertwined with some movement styles of the 1950s, creating an embodied association with both past and present styles. This temporal blending helps signal how nostalgia can be understood, as described by Patricia Rae as a “renewed commitment not to the past but to a future of significant social change.”

By political design, everyday social structures in the 1950s had become more about the atomization and oppression of society. The fear of accusation, persecution, and damage to one’s reputation as a result of an allegiance to various communities, opinions, and self-expressive activities was real. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had begun

42 The 2003 Broadway revival of Wonderful Town was directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall and starred Donna Murphy in the role of Ruth. The case could be made that given the musical is still set in the sister’s apartment (for the most, not all of the show) there is still a sense of observation or bird’s eye view that could connect to the heightened surveillance by Homeland Security post-9/11.
43 Patricia Rae, “Radical Nostalgia in George Orwell’s Coming up for Air” in Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics ed. Tammy Clewell (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 149.
investigations in 1945, and by the mid-1950s, many entertainers had been deported or arrested.\textsuperscript{44} In a move that can be considered a massive abuse of power on the part of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, artists had no choice but to censor their work for fear of being called out. While Comden and Green insert subtle undertones into \textit{Wonderful Town}, playwright Arthur Miller is more forceful. In fact, Miller’s play \textit{The Crucible} had been running for a month on Broadway before \textit{Wonderful Town} opened, and the two productions ran concurrently on Broadway for a large part of the year. Though \textit{Wonderful Town} is not political in the way \textit{The Crucible} is (using the Salem Witch trials of 1692 as a metaphor for HUAC activities and accusations), there is an undercurrent of liberal thought to \textit{Wonderful Town}. Significantly, as is shown in the first few scenes of \textit{Wonderful Town}, Ruth and Eileen quickly make a community for themselves and create a sense of belonging within a group in Greenwich Village that is shown to be liberal and open-minded. As will be explored, the movement in \textit{Wonderful Town} enhances the communal aspect of the 1930s society and creates an embodied nostalgia for these modes of expression, particularly given government intolerance for such liberal activities in the 1950s. In this structure there is a tension set up between competing ideas of community: the cosmopolitan mixing of the 1930s versus the republican desire for a conservative, less inclusive community structure of the 1950s.

\textbf{Background of \textit{Wonderful Town}}

Joseph A. Fields and Jerome Chodorov wrote \textit{Wonderful Town} in 1953. Leonard Bernstein composed the music and Betty Comden and Adolph Green wrote the lyrics. The

\textsuperscript{44} Carol Oja describes the build up to this moment: “Two years earlier the famous ‘Hollywood Ten’ had appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee, charged with Communist affiliations, and they had refused to answer questions resulting in prison sentences for contempt of congress and subsequent blacklisting by the Hollywood studios. Oja, \textit{Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 114.
musical is based on Fields and Chodorov’s 1940 play *My Sister Eileen*, drawn from the short stories of aspiring “proletarian writer” Ruth McKenny. Wonderful Town is composed of dramatically linked vignettes, essentially created as a vehicle for the vast comedic talent of Rosalind Russell, who had starred in the 1942 film of the play. Following the shenanigans that occur in the sisters’ numerous adventures, which for Ruth ends by finding both a job in journalism and love, and fame for Eileen, the show celebrates the uniqueness of Greenwich Village.

Of the case studies in this project, Wonderful Town was produced closest to the era in which it is set and during an era of musical theatre where mythologies of what it meant to be American flourished on stage. Wonderful Town comes from an era of musical theatre when Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s shows played regularly. Elizabeth L. Wollman explains popular musicals at the time, such as *The King and I* (1951) and *South Pacific* (1949), “played simultaneously on America’s collective healing from and nostalgia for the Good War,” while also “touch[ing] on a number of contemporary issues and concerns, including shifting gender roles and the country’s new status as a global super power.” *Wonderful Town*, with an independent woman as the lead role, aligns more closely with *Guys and Dolls* (which opened in 1950, and was still running when *Wonderful Town* opened in 1953) than the works of Rodgers

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45 Elizabeth L. Keathley, “Postwar Modernity and the Wife’s Subjectivity: Bernstein’s Trouble in Tahiti,” *American Music* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 249. Though overt political underpinnings faded from the narrative or were edited out from earlier drafts by the time *Wonderful Town* is produced in 1953, McKenney’s stories, published in 1938, were “the autobiographical tale of a left-wing feminist,” and created a subtle political residue that lingers in future iterations, including the play, the 1942 film, and the musical. Keathley, *Postwar Modernity and the Wife’s Subjectivity*, 246.


and Hammerstein. Both *Guys and Dolls* and *Wonderful Town* follow stories of New York life in the 1930s and essentially appear as “American fairytales” of life in the city where people from all walks of life find ways to live together in harmony. The theme of New Yorkers getting along despite differences and celebrating self-expression avoids overt attempts at education or moral lessons (which characterized various Rodgers and Hammerstein shows) and sets the shows apart from the duos’ substantial oeuvre of work.

As a matter of involvement in social issues, Bernstein, Comden, and Green had been part of a community of artists in the 1930s that were socially conscious and together made up the “cultural front.” Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* explains, “The ‘cultural front’ referred to both the cultural industries and apparatuses—a ‘front’ or terrain of cultural struggle—and the allegiance of radical artists and intellectuals who made up the ‘cultural’ part of the Popular Front.” The Popular Front was an “insurgent” social-democratic movement created out of the political turmoil in the 1930s that aimed to “unit[e] industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching.” As part of the cultural front, Bernstein, Comden, and Green “sought in particular to create distinctly

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49 Wollman, 131.  
50 The song “You have to be carefully taught” from *South Pacific* is the most evident example of this educational emphasis in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals. John Bush Jones explains of Hammerstein’s educational interests that began with *Oklahoma!* “it was then that Hammerstein first expressed on the musical stage his liberal and humanitarian interest in the eradication of prejudice and the need for acceptance and tolerance, however obliquely in his analogy of ‘the farmer and the cowman.’” Jones further explains how this didactic interest stayed throughout the rest of his work with Rodgers. Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 160.  
52 Denning, 4. Keathley further summarizes Denning’s groups as: “antifascist émigrés, such as Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht; disaffected modernists, such as Aaron Copeland and Marc Blitzstein; or ethnic, second-generation Americans born between 1904 and 1923, who were raised during the Depression by working class immigrant parents,” 246.
American art forms that did not erase ethnicity.” This can be seen in the team’s earlier musical \textit{On the Town} (1944) that, along with various choices to include immigrants and a variety of ethnicities in the ensemble and crew, cast the Japanese-American dancer Sono Asato in a lead role even though the U.S. was at war with Japan. These kinds of political overtures were \textit{de rigeur} in the musicals of the 1930s and not uncommon in the early 1940s, however, by the 1950s when \textit{Wonderful Town} was produced these sorts of provocations would be all but eliminated by a general fear of being persecuted for communist or Liberal activity. Conceivably, turning away from more overt political connections on the surface was necessary to protect from HUAC attention. Despite the risks, there are subtle indicators in \textit{Wonderful Town} of the creators’ other interests and values threaded through the play that work to create a nostalgic imperative for the radical intentions of the 1930s, which stands in stark contrast to the witch-hunts that had begun the same year the show debuted on Broadway.

For instance, by putting forth a positive image of female independence in New York in the characters of Ruth and Eileen and an appreciation of self-expression, as seen in the Villagers, \textit{Wonderful Town} identifies with a liberal and public-spirited style associated with the left. As will be explored, Comden and Green’s lyrics, in collaboration with Bernstein pastiche-styled score, weave together a sentimental nostalgia for bohemian Greenwich Village and witty musical comedies, with a reflective nostalgia that allows for contemplation of how displaced one feels in the present world. Daniel Gundlach points out this duality in “Maybe I’d Better Go Home: Nostalgia in \textit{Wonderful Town}”:

\begin{flushright}
53 Keathley, 26.
54 For more on casting practices and political strategies in \textit{On the Town} including the details of casting Japanese American actress Sono Osato in the role of Ivy Smith and her experience in the show see chapter four of Carol Oja’s \textit{Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War}, 2014.
\end{flushright}
Wonderful Town embodies nostalgia for two contradictory things: small-town America (Ohio) and the New York of the mid-1930s when one could safely be a communist, legitimately envisioning and working for a communitarian and egalitarian nation, something Bernstein and Comden and Green (and McKenney herself) strove for throughout their lives.\textsuperscript{55}

I will further develop how these contradictory positions are physicalized in the bodies of the performers, beginning with stiff postures of the sisters arriving from Ohio in contrast with the vitality and looseness of the village residents.

It is important to remember that the entire score and lyrics to the show were pulled together in under a month. As such, it is difficult to surmise how much these greater complexities are strategically layered into the show.\textsuperscript{56} According to Carol Oja, in the rush to finish the score before the contract with Rosalind Russell wore out, the more political or satirical layers were not fleshed out.\textsuperscript{57} Oja found early drafts of the score were more cutting edge, and later drafts “show a process of rounding off political edges.”\textsuperscript{58} Any radical or subversive intentions are to be experienced and interpreted through the nostalgic power of the piece that has the potential for audiences to reflect on an era where self-expression was supported and working classes rallied for equality and fair rights.


\textsuperscript{56} One of the main reasons for the rush was Bernstein, Comden, and Green were pulled in at the last minute after the original composer and lyricist, Leroy Anderson and Arnold Horwitt were let go.

\textsuperscript{57} Oja, “Bernstein’s Wonderful Town and McCarthy-Era Politics,” 8.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
Strategies, Structure, and Layers of Meaning

The use of a narrative style characterized by episodes and multiple locations to express the hustle and bustle of New York City can be seen on Broadway from the nineteenth century in shows such as Benjamin Baker’s *A Glance at New York* (1848) or *The Greenwich Village Follies* (1919) with music by Irving Berlin. The *Follies* in particular celebrated the avant-garde and all things experimental and modern in New York. Impressively, the *Follies* included three dances performed by Martha Graham herself. *On the Town* also shares numerous similarities to this episodic style of narrative.59 One of the main differences between *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*, however, is the temporal distance between when the show is set and its production. *On the Town* was essentially set in its present day and “aim[ed] to capture the city’s street life and its potential for a devil-may-care fling during a reprieve from battles on land and sea.”60 There is a sense in *On the Town* of investigating the New York City right outside the doors of the theatre. Conversely, *Wonderful Town* is taking a backwards glance of nearly twenty years, and this colors the show differently. There was already a popular precedent set by *Guys and Dolls* for a playful look back to the 1930s, and given the more bleak economic circumstances for shows on

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59 *On the Town* (1944) follows the story of three intrepid sailors on a twenty-four hour shore leave and their experiences in the city. The musical was based on Jerome Robbins’s ballet *Fancy Free*. The show has been revived numerous times, most recently in 2014, *IBDB Internet Broadway Database*, https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/on-the-town-497107, accessed September 19, 2018. 60 Oja, *Bernstein Meets Broadway*, 4. Oja explains this was the mission of the ballet *Fancy Free*, the inspiration for *On the Town*. In regards to the realism or believability of the storyline of *On the Town*, in 1944 sailors would have been in town for shore leaves, and women would be filling jobs such as taxi drivers (as the character Hildy does in the show). Additionally, there was a real Miss Turnstiles competition called Miss Subways that happened between 1941 and 1976. The winners would have their photos and biographies framed in the subway cars and stations. Andrew Savulich, “Miss Subways through the years: The iconic NYC subway queens then and now,” New York Daily News, May 25, 2018, http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/subways-nyc-iconic-beauty-queens-gallery-1.1311904.
Broadway in the 1950s, engaging with nostalgia for the 1930s would prove to be a smart marketing move given expensive production costs.61

With this intention—what is Wonderful Town at the very basic level? The two-act musical with ten songs is most obviously a musical comedy with a stellar cast and Bernstein’s modern music filled with theatrical potential. As Brooks Atkin articulates in his 1953 review, Wonderful Town is about a point of view: “The satire of Eileen and of the Village is affectionate. Even the charlatans and delinquents are likable characters.”62 The friendly satire uses wit, gentle mockery, and plenty of exaggeration to poke fun at people’s behavior, foolishness, and vices. The musical showcases a breadth of tolerance and acceptance of people’s oddities and idiosyncrasies, while also tracing the journey of two women stepping out of expected family roles for women at the time.

Though the women’s struggles to find jobs at the beginning is quite playful, Ruth does not accept her expected role of pursuing female designated jobs such as being part of a secretarial pool. Rather, as Elizabeth L. Keathley observes, she “struggles to be taken seriously and repeatedly encounters conflicts between her professional goals and her personal relationships in ways that are specific to the situation of working women.”63 After World War II and continuing into the 1950s, women’s roles were redefined to be in the home as caretaker of the family and

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61 As Raymond Knapp explains of Guys and Dolls, and I find true of Wonderful Town, “only a startling lack of joie de vivre, and an utter refusal to accept American culture, could lead to a total rejection of Guys and Dolls, although it makes an equal investment in Americana.” Knapp, The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity, 110. Regarding economic conditions and financial risks of putting on a show in the 1950s Wollman explains, “During the first fifteen years of the postwar era, the cost of production of Broadway increased sharply, especially for musicals, which often demand more than straight plays in terms of casting, costuming, scenery, technology, orchestral accompaniment, and crew;” additionally, in the 1950s, “ticket prices on Broadway doubled.” Wollman, A Critical Companion to The American Stage Musical, 125.


63 Keathley, 249.
household. Keathley explains this backwards step from earlier decades; “by mid-century ‘modernity’ was translated into ‘New Look’ dresses, helpful household appliances, and devotion to housewifery and motherhood.” The character of Ruth stands in stark contrast to these new designations. Ruth is a writer who seeks out opportunities to sell her stories, en route to becoming a legitimate journalist. Not only do her forays for work fail, so do her attempts at getting a date. Her self-mockery of her inability to attract a man in the song “One Hundred Easy Ways” is a lament of her lack of male companionship in the narrative, but in fact also supports women’s liberation. Comden and Green’s lyrics uphold women’s abilities to succeed on their own and show a mastery of masculine jobs. Ruth sings:

You’ve met a charming fellow and you’re out for a spin.

The motor fails and he just wears a helpless grin—

Don’t bat your eyes and say, “What a romantic spot we’re in.”

Just get out, crawl under the car, tell him it’s the gasket and fix it in two seconds flat with a bobby pin.

That’s a good way to lose a man. (37)

Strategically, in a Brechtian-styled move, as the show is set in the mid-1930s when women were becoming part of the work-force, Ruth’s behavior would fit in. Keathley explains the necessary distancing needed; “Ruth Sherwood could appear in a period piece set in the 1930s, but she could not represent the concerns of women in the postwar era.” As an additional safeguard, Russell played Ruth in the 1942 film, establishing her comedic talent and the character’s independent streak, while also associating her with the role early on. In 1942, women were still filling the jobs of absent men who had become soldiers, so some of that “radical” behavior could

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64 Keathley, 222.
65 Ibid., 250.
be carried through to the 1953 musical. Regardless as to whether purposeful critical moves were noticed by audiences or critics, these tactics, as in the lyrics of “One Hundred Easy Ways,” still would have been precarious as “all liberationist movements were bracketed together as anti-American.” The freedom of expression of the 1930s, as seen in the opening of Wonderful Town, was a thing of the past in the 1950s. Keathley explains, “Postwar America was a place quite different from 1930s New York, for the radical culture of the Popular Front had been decimated by the Cold War fear of communism and all that was associated with it.” By and large Wonderful Town is part homage to the 1930s and part a petition to not forget the way life used to be, a nostalgic turn that is both sentimental and political.

One of the main shifts the creative team made from the 1940 play that brings greater social impact to the production was to move Ruth and Eileen outside into the world of Greenwich Village and beyond. The play took place entirely in the sisters’ apartment and only referred to outside experiences. By putting Ruth and Eileen in the apartment and around the city, a more palpable construct between the rural and the city, the personal and the public, and individualism and nationalism is able to percolate to greater or lesser extent throughout the show. Further, by taking the story “to the streets” the sense of community makes the scene more relatable for the audience coming into the theater from the streets of the city.

There is very much a mixing of different groups in Wonderful Town. There is a utopian wish in Wonderful Town that despite political, social, religious, or sexual differences and individual foibles we can find a way of living together with love and laughter. The opening resonates with hopefulness sung by the quirky denizens of the Village:

Here we live,

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66 Keathley, 221.
67 Ibid., 250.
68 Ibid.
Here we love.

This is the place for self-expression.

Life is mad,

Life is sweet.

Interesting people live on Christopher Street! (9)

At the same time, it is important to mention that there was a subculture in the 1950s that was striving to remove itself from societal control and expected roles. The Beat generation of the 1950s was renowned as anti-conformists, left wing, and anti-war. Bernstein, Comden, and Green use some of the lighter sensibilities and stereotypes of the more popular branch of that generation—the aptly named “Beatniks”—in Wonderful Town. As we will see in “Swing!” and to some extent in the opening, various affectations of youth culture in the 1950s, including long hair, Bebop jazz, and a variety of fashion affectations, are used in the musical that draw attention to ongoing grassroots social movements going on amidst the political brinkmanship and paranoia of the 1950s.

Modern Moves: Choreographic Strategies and Imagined Communities

Brooks Atkinson applauds the contributions of what he calls “ballets” by “dance arranger” Donald Saddler for “the skill with which they help portray the rag-tag and bobtail street life of the old Village and satirize the bizarre forms of revelry that manage to destroy the sobriety of Manhattan.” Saddler (1918-2014) was a soloist with American Ballet Theatre for many years but often returned to musicals, with which he had experience through Hollywood.

69 Atkinson, 1953.
movies as a teen. Though he had been involved with various shows as an assistant, his first credit as a Broadway choreographer was *Wonderful Town*. Saddler was highly respected by dancers, and as the original program to *Wonderful Town* states, “a favorite with balletomanes.”

His ballet background is very apparent in his choreography, and he borrowed dancers from the ballet world for the production. Even in the small amount of footage of the original, a lifted (or upright) balletic style is apparent. As can be seen in the telecast, however, Saddler shows the eclectic group of community residents through his playful choreography that uses small group choreography threaded together to create a sense of community. This tapestry of styles is not an easy feat as a myriad of lifestyle choices and thus movement styles defined the modern moment of the story in Greenwich Village, a different mode of performance from the storybook characters and narratives common in ballet.

Though Saddler is credited as the choreographer and received the Tony Award for Best Choreography, there are several accounts of Jerome Robbins helping out. Humphrey Burton explains, “Jerome Robbins was brought in—uncredited at his request—to ‘show-doctor’ the dance routines, reportedly after Miss Russell was accidently dropped by a male dancer at a performance in Boston.” Despite the fact Saddler had performed in a variety of energetic Hollywood musicals, because *Wonderful Town* was such an “acrobatic production,” particularly “Conga!,” there may have been a need for advice or assistance from Robbins, given his

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70 Saddler was in the chorus of numerous MGM musicals, *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Babes in Arms* (1939), *Lady Be Good* (1941), and dozens of others. He went on to be a very successful choreographer of television musicals and specials including the Tony Awards in 1983 and *Alice in Wonderland* in the same year.


72 Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1994), 225. Gundlach also reports in “Maybe I’d Better Go Home: Nostalgia in *Wonderful Town*,” that Carol Oja “cites documentary evidence that Robbins was called in to “essentially take over” the choreography of “Christopher Street” in particular, 10.
experience as the creator of the athletic dancing in *On the Town* and its precursor, *Fancy Free*. Robbins did not take over the show or drastically alter the dancing, though credit is sometimes wrongly assigned to him. In *There’s a Place for Us: The Musical Theatre Works of Leonard Bernstein*, Helen Smith affirms Robbins’s absence in *Wonderful Town* as she finds the dancing “all spectacle rather than narrative.” Robbins’s style had always been to forward the plot using dance as in *West Side Story* (1957) or *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), and as Smith indicates, the dances in *Wonderful Town* are more distinct production numbers.

While Saddler did not use dance emphatically as a plot device, the musical is always physically in motion, an effect that helps to envision the vibrancy of the community. There are two main instances in the musical that best demonstrate this momentum as well as a physical connection to collective memory that readily creates a sense of embodied nostalgia: the opening introduction of Greenwich Village and its denizens as described earlier, and “Swing!” in the second act. These production moments show popular ways of moving and how the “life blood of the community” flows in 1935. Ruth’s engagement with the Brazilian navy cadets in “Conga!” adds a comical bent to the challenges of trying to get an interview, as well as some subtle political undercurrents that will be discussed last.

As described, the opening number introduces the cacophony of sounds, people, and movements of the city. There is a sense of contrast between the rural or Midwest United States, represented by Ruth and Eileen, and the capitalist metropolis of New York shown in the opportunist hustlers and bustlers of the city. Within that difference there is also a polarity between the conservative values of a small town and the more liberal ways of New York

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75 Malnig, 4.
displayed through movement and body language. Eileen and Ruth stand stiffly with their arms close to their bodies and suitcases held tight. They move around the stage in small tentative steps, staying clear of any engagement with strangers. Residents of the village, conversely, move broadly around the stage with swooping strides and grand arm gestures that denote their profession, whether a painter or a restaurant owner. The modern dancers bring the grandest moves to the repertoire of movement, their overt seriousness part of the comical structure of the musical. The stiffness of Ruth and Eileen as travellers from Ohio would have been apropos to the 1950s as their posture at the beginning of the show embodies conservativeness. The residents express the bohemian flair of the village in their freedom of movement, possibly triggering a sense of nostalgia for a more open-minded way of life. In both cases bodies are shown to be “inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them,” influencing how they move through the world of the musical.76

The “Swing!” section is of interest in this case study because of its upfront interpretation of and poking fun at the music and social dance of the time, blended with some aesthetic sensibilities of “Beatniks.” The scene explores how the body takes on the physical expressions of the era: liberated movement, social gatherings, and expressed sexuality. This is an area where the blending of past and present styles, as seen in the body, points towards a sense of social change. For instance, there is a teaching or persuasive quality to the piece as the Villagers instruct Ruth (and the audience) how to feel the groove of swing and get “hep.”77 Getting “hep” can be seen also as a wish for an open, aware, socially progressive attitude moving forward. In this structure there is a political signal to how much current conservatives could use a lesson as well. The

76 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, x.
77 The term “hep” was first coined by Cab Calloway meaning “hip” or “cool.” Calloway used the term as in “are you hep to the jive?” The term also refers to being up to date with the latest trends and happenings. Urban Dictionary, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hep, accessed September 4, 2018. This sort of play on language was also a characteristic of the socially and self-declared modish Beatniks.
scene involves Ruth’s reluctant employment experience as a street promoter for the new jazz club The Village Vortex. She must go about the Village wearing a large belt that flashes “VORTEX.” The street location of the song, as seen in the 1958 telecast, sets forth swing dance as a more working class or community dance. When Ruth runs into Bill (her connection to the publishing world and eventual love interest), she is embarrassed to be found out having abandoned her writing pursuits and tries to convince him she is headed to the opera. The club promoter barges in to tell her to get back to work and tosses a pamphlet at her to read. Ruth begins to read the pamphlet with much hesitation: “Get hep, Step up, Step up” (140). On the second try she gains more confidence and rhythm and a drumbeat underscores her patter. As she begins to sing, a female dancer in cigarette pants moves in behind her, shuffling her feet in time to the music with her hips pushed forward. Two other dancers, in the same streamlined silhouettes come in hunched over with fingers snapping and heads bent down. They pivot, low to the ground with hips swivelling as others join in. All are obviously trained ballet dancers, visible in the turn out of their legs and hips as they walk. The swing dance styles (deeply bent knees, swivelling hips, markedly low centers of gravity, etc.) are so exaggerated that the effect is comical. A train of four dancers enters from between two buildings in the same hunched over pulsing step and arrive at Ruth’s spot. They roll up to a straight standing position waiting for her next line. As Atkinson observes, Saddler’s greatest contribution is that “he satirize[s] the bizarre

78 These descriptions are from the 1958 CBS telecast of Wonderful Town.  
79 These stylized movements in 1953 production (bent over, snapping etc.) would precede Jerome Robbins’s work in West Side Story (1957). Though, with the live telecast in 1958, some aesthetics of the movement may have been influenced by the opening of West Side Story a year earlier and adapted by the arranger of the dances for the telecast, Ralph Beaumont.  
80 The movement qualities of swing dancing, particularly the lower sense of gravity, stand in contrast to the lifted more ethereal emphasis in ballet training. The parody of the dance in “Swing!” points to how not ‘hep’ the white dancers are particularly in contrast to the African American founders of the dance, who are nowhere to be seen. An excellent example of the lower center of gravity and bent knees can be seen in the 1941 film Hellzapoppin. A link to where they specifically do the Lindy hop can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkthxBsleGQ.
forms of revelry” that functions to disrupt the sense of alienation and paranoia that was taking
over society in 1953.\textsuperscript{81} Indeed, the movement gets more playful and ridiculous in its
interpretation as the song progresses. The dance begins to take on more affectations of the 1950s
Beatnik style (hunched over, disaffected expressions, low swinging arms, and finger snaps) that
works to imagine a connection between the progressive groups of the 1930s and those of the
1950s.\textsuperscript{82}

Ruth tries to move a little in the swing style, with which she is obviously unfamiliar. The
Villagers are unimpressed and wander off, but linger back as she continues to sing with more
gusto. They turn with arms high and fingers splayed primed to show her how the dance is done.
The Villagers break into a jazz square sharply accentuating the first beat and then swinging their
hips around in a square to come back and hit the down beat again. They repeat this action several
times, using their bodies to get Ruth into the groove. In this way, the only way to get “hep” to the
music is to feel it in the movements of the body. Musically the “Swing!” number is different
from anything else in the show. Smith finds the mixture of musical styles and genres in
\textit{Wonderful Town} “creates the effect of a vaudeville show,” which fits into the pastiche style of
the musical.\textsuperscript{83} Bernstein was recycling or adapting various unused pieces from his past, which is
understandable in the rushed time frame of production. Smith observes that with “Swing!” the
main point of the number is a lively communal spectacle, and though the time marker of 1935
does not specifically fit the song, small historical inaccuracies are “unimportant when the visual
and musical impact of the number is considered.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{81} Atkinson, 1953.
\textsuperscript{82} Some similarities can be seen between the style of the swing dancers and Audrey Hepburn’s “Beatnik Dance” choreographed by Eugene Loring for the 1957 film \textit{Funny Face}. Hepburn’s Beatnik style may have influenced the changing of costumes from dresses in 1953 to cigarette pants for the women in 1958.
\textsuperscript{83} Smith, 89.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 87.
Once Ruth gets the movements, she is able to improve on her jazz-styled vocals. The stage directions describe how she is to sing to the Villagers: “Answering in Cab Calloway fashion” to improvise some scat. The stage directions then describe, “By this time Ruth is in a glaze-eyed hypnotic trance . . . she delivers patter in a husky dreamlike monotone” (143). She begins:

Well, yes, yes, baby, I know!

That old man Mose kicked the bucket,

The old oaken bucket that hung in the well –

Well, well, well, baby I know. (143)

She begins to improvise on these lyrics and her performance gets more and more distorted the deeper she gets into it. Her scat in the style of Cab Calloway, likely of much delight to audiences, particularly at she takes a masculine posture as she does it, adds a bizarre twist to the number. Importantly, there is a signal in the comical parody of her scatting to the cultural theft by white musicians, dancers, and orchestra leaders of African American forms, which by 1953 (and even more so in 1958) was quite common.85 Katherine Baber takes on the racial and gender issues in Wonderful Town and On the Town, which both use jazz music and dance as a uniformed American creation, “[h]owever, deploying what was still essentially black musical style for a white female performer also aligns On the Town (and eventually Wonderful Town) with other manipulations of gender within the Broadway tradition,” to which I would add race as well.86 The teaching aspect to the number, of the Villagers (played by a mostly white cast) transferring knowledge to the white woman from Ohio, stands as another example of the transmission and

85 Much like in Millie and the ethnic parody Angela C. Pao describes, there could be more signals that this is a full on parody or satire.
86 Katherine Baber, “‘Manhattan Women’: Jazz, Blues, and Gender in On the Town and Wonderful Town,” American Music 31, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 80.
appropriation of African American moves and music. Norman Mailer, in his renowned 1957 essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” describes this development in the 1950s: “The hipster had absorbed the existential synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro.”  

Wonderful Town, as seen in the 1958 telecast, displays this kind of absorption of African American styles. In analyzing the chronology of swing music, Smith explains the “Swing!” number “can also be seen as derived from the music of white bandleaders, despite the Calloway call-and-response section.” This taking on or racial impersonation was part of how the younger generation moved through the world, claiming that which is “hep” as their own. Mailer finds this grandiosity so astonishing because of the absence of self-recognition (or “narcissistic detachment”) of their actions. Mailer tries to understand this shift in the younger generation, “So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man’s code to fit their facts.”  

It is hard to ignore the racial impersonation, except to explain that in the effort to illustrate Greenwich Village as a community obsessed by jazz culture, the exaggerated parody is meant to be light-hearted and affectionate. Musically, “Bernstein’s aim was not to create an exact imitation of a swing piece but to suggest the genre.” The show’s motive was not to tell of the history building up to 1935 in the village but rather to show a whimsical snapshot of the time, aimed to both entertain and amuse, but also to jog people’s memories back to a time of self-expression and a buoyant sense of community, however imagined it may be. Still, “Swing!” reminds of the genuine thrill of the music and dance without acknowledging African Americans or referring to

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88 Smith, 84.
89 Mailer, 281.
90 Ibid., 279.
91 Smith, 84.
Harlem, except the Cab Calloway reference. A case could be made that “Swing!” conceivably points to the government whitewashing the complexity of civil rights issues and equality by HUAC, as with the mostly white cast there is a marked absence of African Americans on stage. However, given casts were hardly diverse on Broadway in the 1950s, this is probably a reach. The diverse cast in the 2003 revival certainly dispels this notion. On the whole, “Swing!” is not so much about racial appropriation but uses exaggeration and parody to make one consider the broad assumptions of those who would condemn communities of artists and freethinkers. Notably by the end of the number there is a celebration of those who get “hep” and “Dig the message,” learning to embody rhythm and groove, essentially supporting diversity in cultural contributions. This message to “step up” stands in stark contrast to the conservative voices sowing paranoia and fear across America in 1953.

There is also a practical explanation behind the instructive, and thus imitative nature of the piece that may help to understand the way of learning the aesthetics of jazz in the show. Saddler explains that when he was first working with the creative team, Russell, a renowned film actress at the time, confided in him that she was quite insecure about her dancing, and confessed she was not as talented dance-wise as the others. She asked Saddler if he could possibly create movement scenarios for her that allowed her to follow. In this manner, the dancers “teach” her in the rhythm and ways of swing. This choreographic strategy helps to explain the structure of the piece and how the more the moves increase in difficulty the more Russell is coaxed into place by the ensemble. The dancers pace around Ruth in low, close to the ground crouches with knees deeply bent. She quickly picks the style up encouraged by the dancers who chant “you gettin’ hep.” Through this instructive style of choreography where the dancers lead her on with

the latest moves she figures out how to get “hep” (much like the two gangsters encouraged to
dance in *The Drowsy Chaperone*). There is a sense that the audience too could learn to get “hep,”
through taking on music, singing, and dancing styles.

**Good Neighbors, the Conga, and Female Independence**

In line with the creative team’s purposes, the narrative grows in excitement as Ruth and
Eileen come to take control of those around them and help each other to achieve their goals.
Their body language has shifted from the earlier stiffness to a more supple and confident
dynamic. In 1953, there is potential for an embodied nostalgia to emerge in consideration of
prospects for women. When men came back from the war, “Women were offere[ed] domestic
activities to replace their productive wartime roles, bequeathing those “masculine roles to
returning veterans.” Men came back to the U.S., and many women returned to the home and
were expected to take on the role of homemaker. Keathley explains while around the world
women were becoming more and more independent, “the United States seemed intent on turning
back the hands of time.” Baber explains the showcasing of Ruth’s independence in the musical
stands at the crosshairs of “a portrayal of feminine independence in tension with postwar
‘American family values.’” However, through this independence and confidence female bodies
in *Wonderful Town* are produced as determined and filled with agency and a reminder of a time
when female agency was a more tangible and attainable concept.

Perhaps the gutsiest move by Ruth in *Wonderful Town* is her dedication to pursuing a
career in journalism that takes her to the docks to interview Brazilian navy cadets. The “Conga!”
section celebrates the thrill of dance and physical engagement in 1935 while also allowing Ruth,

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93 Keathley, 223.
94 Ibid., 223.
95 Baber, 83.
acting as a journalist, to question the foreigners about what they think about the United States. The interview of newly arrived Brazilian navy cadets is thought up by Chick Clark, a sleazy newspaper employee, to get Ruth out of the picture while he makes moves on Eileen. Ruth gives her best attempt to interview the cadets, who only want to dance the “American Conga.” Ruth reluctantly agrees to show the sailors the Conga in exchange for their answering of her questions. She starts with, “What do you think of the USA...the NRA...TVA?” (108). They never answer, as they speak no English, however Ruth persists: “What’s your opinion of women’s clothes, Major Bowes, Steinbeck’s prose, How do you feel about Broadway Rose?” (108). As Humphrey Burton explains, the time-marker questions “illustrate the collaborators encyclopedic knowledge of the thirties.”96 The number also functions to showcase Ruth’s spunk and come-what-may attitude and, importantly, provide an outrageous act one finale.

Fig. 2. Rosalind Russell in “Conga!” 1952, Wonderful Town
Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.97

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96 Burton, Leonard Bernstein, 225. Humphrey further explains Russell reported getting over 1000 bruises in the run of the show.
The switch over to the Cuban beats of the conga is also a clever way Bernstein can play with a variety of music styles, a “trademark eclecticism” that comes to full fruition in *West Side Story*.\(^9^8\) A slightly troubling aspect of the dance is how much the Brazilian sailors “man handle” Ruth. Of concern also is the appropriation and inaccurate portrayal of Cuban and Brazilian culture. As the number becomes more physical, Ruth makes a plea to the sailors:

> Good Neighbors—Good neighbors,
> 
> Remember our policy—
> 
> Good neighbors—I’ll help you
> 
> If you’ll just help me. (108)

An innocent enough request, there exists deeper meaning in the lyrics, particularly “Good Neighbors,” which is repeated three times in the song. Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced the Good Neighbor Policy during his tenure as president (1933-1945). As Brian Herrera explains in *Latin Numbers*, the policy was aimed “toward Latin America and to encourage ‘friendly’ commercial, cultural, and military relations among neighboring American republics.”\(^9^9\) By 1953 however, this policy had generally dissolved and was “redeployed in the postwar era away from Pan-American collaborations toward proto-Cold War engagements.”\(^1^0^0\) Ruth’s reference to the policy would be correct for the 1930s. Her repetition of the phrase adds emphasis to the terminology, which draws one back to a simpler time, evoking nostalgia for a policy that would seem quite distant in 1953. Herrera explains, “Ruth’s admonition to ‘remember our policy’ also

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\(^9^8\) Brian Cockburn, “Wonderful Town (Review),” *Notes* 62, no. 3 (March 2006): 791.


\(^1^0^0\) Herrera, *Latin Numbers*, 36.
reanimates inter-American rhetoric in a nostalgic register, evoking the Good Neighbor ethos as a quaint policy of the past.”

This humorous and entertaining number, moreover, is about how far Ruth will go and how much she will endure to get a story. In continuance of Russell requesting movement scenarios that allow her to follow others, the “Conga!” functions similarly as the cadets “move” her around in their exuberance for the dance. Historically, the conga was “an adaptation of a long-standing Cuban carnaval tradition, ‘conga line’ performances had been seen in commercial venues in the United States and United Kingdom since at least 1935.” As opposed to a coupled social dance, the Conga features an entire line, often made up of dozens of participants, physically linked together doing the same moves. The kinesthetic connection between dancers extends from the start of the line all the way down to the end. Each participant holds the shoulders or waist of the person in front of them as the line surges forward. The thrill of the Conga comes from the leader snaking in and around the space leading the participants in unexpected ways. In Wonderful Town the Conga line does just this. As Ruth attempts to detach herself from the group, she inadvertently leads the sailors back to the Village.

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101 Herrera, 43. Daniel Gundlach also makes this connection in “Maybe I’d Better Go Home: Nostalgia in Wonderful Town.”

102 Barry Kernfeld and Pauline Norton explain that the Conga is “A Latin-American carnival road march that gained prominence in the USA from around 1937. The [Cuban-born] bandleader and actor Desi Arnaz was chiefly responsible for transforming it into a social dance craze, especially through his appearances in Rodgers and Hart’s Broadway musical Too Many Girls (1939). The music for the dance is built on a repeated rhythm, which corresponds to three shuffle steps on the beat and a kick that slightly anticipates the fourth and final beat, with the torso twisting from side to side.” Kernfeld and Norton further explain that Bernstein parodied the dance in Wonderful Town. “Conga,” Grove Music Online January 20, 2001, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093.

103 Herrera, 19. John Storm Roberts further explains that Conga dance and music was popular towards the end of 1930s, because of Arnaz but also “the conga rhythm is more easily simplified than most Cuban rhythms and was a natural for nightclub floorshows.” As such, “Conga!” in Wonderful Town fits within the historical timeline as a style audiences found highly entertaining. By the time Wonderful Town opened 1953 Latin music (particularly the mambo) continued to be fashionable and so Bernstein’s take on Latin rhythms would be suitable. Roberts, The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 224.
members join in bumping and jostling through the neighborhood, creating such mayhem that the police come in and arrest Eileen, who Ruth—in desperate need of a break—forced to take her place leading them around. The dance works as a plot forwarding device as it lands Eileen in jail, where her notoriety on the front page of the newspaper the next day is noticed by a club owner who gives her a shot on stage. The collective nature of the dance functions to uphold a sense of community. The uniformity suggests a sense of togetherness that all are willing to join in the “foreign” dance, while also parodying the dance and the inability of Ruth and Eileen to stop it from multiplying in intensity and size. The joy over the collective physical action from the sailors and the community members who join in sits in contrast to the desperate attempt from Ruth and Eileen to escape the Conga line. This situation sets up a playful physical tension between self-expression and collective action that leans towards an encouragement of collective behavior and how quickly it can happen. However, in the farcical nature of the piece we are encouraged to enjoy the silliness and the music. In the narrative, the “Conga!” episode and Eileen’s newfound notoriety firmly establish that Ruth and Eileen cannot return home now.104

Critical Reception

There’s an old rule in theatre that most of us keep forgetting: Everyone looks wonderful in a wonderful show.

—Brooks Atkinson on Wonderful Town

104 The melody of “Ohio” lingers in fragments throughout the show, a sort of leitmotif for when things are not working as planned for Ruth and Eileen. The intermittently reoccurring theme of home in Wonderful Town helps to create nostalgia in the show. Whether it is a place one longs for, or when one realizes they can never really go home again, the nostalgic frame works to unite thinking across a nation that is immersed in the complicated aftermath of World War II.
Because of its “natural blend of friendliness and satire,” critics generally adored *Wonderful Town.* Brooks Atkinson recognized the charm that Bernstein, Comden and Green tried to bring to the show; “They made the Greenwich Village of the 1930s look crack brained without being unsociable.” Political undercurrents or social meanings are not mentioned by critics, nor are the Good Neighbor references; most reviews understandably focus on Russell. Walter Kerr describes how she embodies her performance, “instead of attacking a song, she inhabits one, moving around in it, with such confidence and grace and honest exuberance as to make it entirely her own.” Kerr briefly mentions Comden and Green “have remembered their own village pasts with enough ardor and irony to supply some accurate and inventive lyric ideas.” *Time* went so far as to put Russell on the cover of their March 1953 issue, stating her performance “represents the triumph of personality over technique: she communicates to her audience all the rewarding warmth and humor of shared experience.”

In regards to the choreography, Donald Saddler’s dance numbers are thought to “[c]apture perfectly the raffish individualism in village life.” Though Saddler’s “ballets” can stand on their own, they are recognized for the way they each show the flavors of the people of the village and a sense of community. Atkinson finds each one stirs up a sense of nostalgia for

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105 Atkinson, 1953.
106 Ibid.
108 Kerr, 1953.
109 Kerr, 1953.  
111 Atkinson, 1953.

Because of Saddler’s strong association with the ballet world at the time, his choreographic contributions are often called ballets, out of both respect for his previous work and to keep an association with the ballet community.
the music, the moves and the moment—“A colorful phantasmagoria of village scenes.” Kerr states Saddler “tells a dance story with verve, clarity, and high good humor.” Looking at numerous reviews of productions over the last few decades, there is no mention of subtle politics. The lasting power of the show is in its unabashed and joyous portrayal of New York City. Ben Brantley responds to the 2003 Broadway revival, “And no matter how long you’ve lived in New York City, you start to see it with the eyes of a new arrival who believes anything is possible here.” While Brantley finds the revival (directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall) “unfinished” and not “an obvious candidate for the minimalist approach,” the show itself has lasting quality because it “melds urban jitters and jive with a wistful melodic romanticism,” supporting the nostalgic power of the piece to imagine 1930s Greenwich Village.

In all, Wonderful Town illustrates the “foibles” of Manhattan life, and this becomes an attractive subject matter because of the very nature of audiences. Whether audiences are residents of New York, or tourists, the show offers a glance into the life of residents in 1935 New York City. The physicality of the show does much to recognize how 1935 was about movement, action, and expressing oneself socially and politically through the body, which stands in contrast to overall conservatism in the 1950s. By the time of the production of Wonderful Town, geopolitical tensions were increasing and McCarthyism was all around, however, the Americanness of “Swing!” or the intensity of “Conga!” draws attention to female ingenuity and resilience. Wonderful Town, using entertaining and clever social satire filled with comedic

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112 Atkinson, 1953.
113 Kerr, 1953.
momentum, allows us to enjoy, but also reflect on, a different time with greater freedom of expression and movement. The collaborators use nostalgia for the 1930s to imagine a community in the face of precarity, reminding through subtle hints that self-expression and community involvement had the potential to instigate change and could again. Being part of the choreography in Wonderful Town is to be part of a progressive undertone that circulates throughout the shown. The embodiment of the adventurous and spirited lifestyle of Greenwich Village in the 1930s marks the body as self-expressive and open to ideas. Conversely, the continued weaving in of the melodies and softness of “Ohio” keep a memory of the charm of small town life and simple living imprinted in the body of the singers, if only for the duration of the song. These two embodied manifestations create nostalgia for a time where people were not using fear and intimidation for political advantage. As has been demonstrated, the embodied nostalgia in Wonderful Town becomes the subversive element that brings the performances’ social and political meanings to light. In the next case study, dancers feel a more visceral desperation in their situation, breaking their bodies and souls for a chance at prize money at dance marathons in Depression-era Atlantic City.

III. Steel Pier and Nostalgia as a Survival Method

*Ladies and gentlemen! Take a good look at our boys and girls. After 338 hours, Do they truly have what it takes to make it to the end of. . .The sprints! For ten minutes, around the floor, our couples must run. . .To the last two Couples to make it across that finish line— and to anyone else who falls— We must bid a sad—but final—adieu...Or as the French would say— oor-yay out-ay! On your marks, get set...*

—“The Sprints” by John Kander and Fred Ebb

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116 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, x.
Ocean waves are heard crashing against the New Jersey shore. The wood slats of the pier shimmer in the early dawn. Seagulls caw above the waves. A group of intertwined dancers unfold onto the stage from upstage left. Limbs linked together, the bodies reach forward toward the pier, then are pulled backwards in an undertow that spreads them out across the upstage corner. They surge forward again, this time lunging and diving downward to recover and arch backwards. They spiral around themselves to stand upright for a breath and are drawn backward again. The ethereal opening scene is bathed in blue light that slowly opens up to reveal a sandy outline of the shore. The dancers circle around with legs drawing deep compass-like circles; the shuffling of feet sound like a small cascade of waves on a wet beach. The sea becomes the land and the bodies of the dancers unravel to form a long chain center stage. The dark blue light fades and the dancers in their airy garments take on an array of positions that once the morning haze drifts away comes to be seen as a line up of ballroom dancers, frozen in various stages of dance—a women bends back in an arching dip; a man’s square shoulders form a dance position that encircles a woman pulling backwards with outstretched arms; a woman is seated on the thigh of a partner, her legs frozen mid-fan, mermaid-like washed up on the shores of her partners legs. The lacey effect of intertwined arms and legs draws the eye in. Abruptly the bodies turn towards center and the middle couple snaps into a formal and strict dance position. The other dancers connect creating an extended machine-like “factory” of dancers now methodically and diligently repeating the same waltz step over and over. The shift from the lithe ocean waves to the robot dancers is jarring, the lights darken, the sound of the waves crashing increases, a discordant waltz rises from the strains of the music, and as quickly as they arrived, the lilting rhythm of the music pushes them off the stage leaving only the barren Steel Pier. Rita Racine stands watching the waves, swearing this will be her last dance marathon.
Background of *Steel Pier*

Choreographer Susan Stroman explains the original impetus for *Steel Pier* was the desire to do a show with “a great deal of dance in it.” When she sat down with director Scott Ellis, book writer David Thompson, and composer and lyricist team John Kander and Fred Ebb, they asked, “Where is dance set? How can we do that?” Stroman points out in the group’s creative process; “John Kander always looked for a darker story and tried to find light within [it]. You know whether it’s a Latin prison or Nazi Germany.” The idea of the dance marathon occurred to the team as a captivating place to set a story that could provide a “metaphor for what people had to live for” in the time of the Depression, as a scenario where stakes were extraordinarily high for the body in motion. There was a desire as well to tell the story of the exigencies and exploitations of the American phenomenon of dance marathons.

Set in 1933, *Steel Pier* revolves around Rita Racine, a star of dance marathons and part-time singer in vaudeville circuits who is promised by her marathon promoter husband this will be her last marathon. The story is set in Atlantic City on the famous Steel Pier, suspended out over the ocean on wood pilings. The impending doom of the pilings set to plunge into the water is poignant—dance marathons during the Depression were about life or death. As Rita is preparing below the pier on the beach she meets up with Bill, a stunt pilot. In an expressionistic thread to the show, we find out Bill has died in a plane crash and has been granted three weeks to live in order to cash in a coupon he got at one of Rita’s shows for a dance. Rita, however, remains unaware of Bill’s ephemerality until his final day, melding her recognition of his impending death with the anguish of the dance marathon. Rita’s husband is eventually exposed as a fraud.

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117 Interview by author, June 22, 2018. All further interview excerpts in quotations.
118 Stroman is referring to Kander and Ebb’s previous shows *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1992) and *Cabaret* (1966) respectively. Stroman had worked with Ellis, Kander, and Ebb on *Flora the Red Menace* in 1987. The group (without Ellis) worked together on *The Scottsboro Boys* off and on between 2002 and and its premiere in 2010. Fred Ebb’s death in 2004 paused the project for several years.
and cheat. Realizing Bill is dead, Rita leaves her husband and the dance marathons behind and walks away from the sparkling marquee lights of the Steel Pier.

The 1997 musical is a haunting tale that exposes the ugly truths about the desperation of many in the years between the Depression and the build up to World War II loosely disguised as a romantic adventure. Stroman explains the structure of the show: “the marathon became a cradle to tell this love story.” The dance marathon setting also provided the opportunity to show dance in a diegetic manner that allows for the social and political meaning already embodied in the dances to come to the surface, or at least underscore the narrative. Stroman describes: “It gave us the opportunity to show dance, all different dance of the social dance forms that were in America at that time, and before that time, now in one space.” Having a narrative reason to be able to put so many dances on stage (the Lindy Hop, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, the Fox Trot, etc.) opens up the opportunity to explore the nostalgia inherent in the dances and what the body can do in these situations, when the poorest and most desperate of people are clinging to survival through dance. Brought together by circumstance, the eclectic group of competitors find a fleeting sense of belonging in their shared desperation and imagined community. As some marathons lasted for weeks and months, participants had a temporary place to be, a home, a job, and a goal (cash prizes) to reach for. The marathon provided a place where one could feel they belonged to something, and no matter how fleeting or imagined the situation, it was much better than being out on the streets. In this consideration, Steel Pier explores how the economic, social, and personal stresses are manifested in the body in motion.
Choreographic and Dramaturgical Strategies

Part of the challenge of creating the dance marathon on stage is contending with the idea that people could possibly look back on the marathons (often filled with Americana) with nostalgia, or at least be thrilled by the continuous dancing. Even though a film like *They Shoot Horses Don’t They?* (1969) exposes the darker side to the marathon world, many may take delight in watching continued dancing all night long, especially on Broadway. With only a few breakout scenes where Rita and Bill talk during short rest periods, the dancing continues the entire duration of the show. The dramaturgical strategy was to begin the marathon in quite a “jolly” manner, and then as “the show goes on the dancers get more exhausted and wounded and hurt and sad.” Bodies begin to slouch, polished smiles start to fade, and fancy footwork is sacrificed for shuffling and swaying. The structure of the musical is opposite to how dance has operated in Stroman’s previous productions, where it is regularly used as a plot-forwarding device or dramatic tool. In *Steel Pier*, Stroman and director Scott Ellis also use the rest moments in the marathon to forward main plot points. Due to the diegetic nature of the marathon in the show, contestants can only really talk to each other during the breaks, whether it is in the women’s dressing room, or outside on the pier where Rita and Bill get to know each other.

One of the most effective dramaturgical and choreographic choices Stroman and Ellis make is communicating the passage of time of the three-week marathon and the subsequent mental and physical breakdown of the dancers within a two-and-a-half hour show. To achieve

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120 Stroman’s previous shows are often recognizable by how the movement is strategically woven into the plot, or make up the plot all together as in *Contact* (2000). Selections of Stroman’s other shows that have highly integrated choreography include: *Crazy for You* (1992), *Show Boat* (1993), *Oklahoma!* (2002).
the effect, every ten minutes or so the lights darken to a deep blue and the music changes from upbeat swing music to more complex, sensual, and discordant jazz rhythms. This shift provides a disturbing, near uncanny, contrast to the story of the saccharine-sweet marathon. In these moments, time is seen rushing by on a counter just below the proscenium arch and the dancers shift from presentational-styled social dance to more contemporary-styled gestural choreography. Stroman proceeds in this manner balancing the choreography between the collective and communal dances of the marathon and the internal moments of self-expression. This back and forth conveys the tension between inner expressions of humiliation and despair and an outward clinging to a remnant of the American Dream. At the intersection of these modes of being emerges a sense of nostalgia for a time when social dancing meant socialization, not survival. A more thorough comprehension of dance marathons and their history helps to critically examine this social and political complexity and the stakes for the participants.

Background of Dance Marathons

The earliest dance marathon in the U.S. was recorded in 1923. At first there was a novelty and charm surrounding the marathons. Young ingénues would sign up as a way to be discovered for potential film or stage work. In the wild years of the 1920s, interest in leisure activities was paramount and the younger generation sought out physical amusements at which they could thrive and be noticed. The interest in and creation of dance marathons came from what Carol Martin in Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s describes as, “a cultural discourse in the 1920s about breaking records,” and in this era she

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explains, “people would do anything on a dare.” An enthusiasm to be the best at something, or to take on an outrageous challenge, was part of American culture. This “Age of play” of the 1920s provided a release from the intensity and anxiety that had surrounded World War I. Martin explains dance marathons, unlike more serious feats, were attractive, as no special skill was needed except “intemperate stamina and enthusiasm.” Audiences delighted in the long nights and collection of characters that joined up, along with an interest in a battle of the sexes—could men or women last longer? Frank M. Calabria in Dance of the Sleep Walkers: The Dance Marathon Fad explains why audiences were so fascinated by dance marathons, “It was as if viewing others in perpetual motion allowed spectators to vicariously release the collective anxieties and tensions of the turbulent decade following America’s first global war.” There was a fascination for the body in motion, which is reflective of both the modernization and mechanization in the era.

After the stock market crashed in 1929, the dance marathons took a much more disreputable turn, mirroring a disconnected, poorly managed, and unregulated economic system. Promoters took advantage of the participants, who were increasingly desperate for the promise of food and a roof over their heads for the duration of their participation. Martin explains the system of exploitation at the heart of the marathons; “The primal dance marathons’ theatricality was raw industrial capitalism operating in the midst of nostalgia for agrarian self-

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122 Martin, 5.
124 Martin, 7.
125 Ibid., 10.
126 Calabria, 6.
127 See Mark Franco’s The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) for more on how the body, particularly the female body becomes defined by the mode in which it moves.
128 Walsh and Platt, 80.
determination and control.” Individualism and self-expression get sacrificed, and thus longed for, as the dancers become cogs in the capitalist machinery of the marathon. Promoters would invent all sorts of scenarios, competitions, and false narratives around participants to fuel interest, particularly from sponsors. Competitors were pawns to be manipulated by the corrupt “officials.” The commodification of participants’ suffering leads to a sense of dehumanization. Audiences, whose sense of humanity was perhaps dulled by the hardships of the time, paid to watch participants go through the humiliating activities of the promoters.

In spite of these conditions, for the participants, being part of a community dulled the reality of the economic disparity that surrounded them. Though for participants it also became about one’s own crisis relative to one’s place in the world, as is explored to some extent in Steel Pier. While the marathons did operate in “the ability to endure,” the events “exploited the daily grind, exposing the economic dangers lurking in everyday life, even while celebrating the heroism and perseverance of ordinary people.” In this very precarious structure there is nostalgia for the return of social dance as a place of socialization and bodily expression, not humiliation and hardship. The co-opting of this nostalgia by promoters of the dance marathons becomes a very cruel manipulation of dancers at their very lowest, using what was once dear to them and turning it into something painful and exhausting. The “commercialization of leisure” becomes a very dark and ill-intended manipulation of the general populace and popular entertainment. Calabria observes marathons were a “dehumanizing spectacle accompanying hard times,” as identities get lost amidst the competition. Social dance that was once about both self-expression and a sense of belonging to a community in the dance marathon becomes a

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129 Martin, 104.
130 Martin, 53.
131 Ibid., 13.
132 Calabria, 3.
kind of social ill infected by capitalist greed and self-interest on the part of the promoters. The nostalgic meaning within the dance becomes a survival mechanism for the dancers, and society writ large.

**Embodied Nostalgia and Survival Mechanisms**

Stroman explains the nostalgia inherent in social dance in the 1930s and 1940s and why it is such a poignant era to bring to life on stage: “after the Twist was invented, no one touched anywhere. No one danced together any longer, and all the dancers became separate, and they still are today in the social world.” A social dance event, as Stroman observes, “was the first time a man and a woman touched romantically, and ultimately if you slow danced with the right person that night, you ended up falling in love.” This romantic potential is part of the structure of *Steel Pier*. The show opens on a very rosy nostalgic note, much like *Ragtime*. The title of the show is written in bold letters across the scrim. Inside the letters there are historical photos of social dancing with girls in formal dresses and men in suits. There is a suggestion of the dance marathons, though it is all very sunny, with bold yellow bands radiating from the letters, and various amusement park fixtures in the background of the letters.
To start the marathon, a spectacular façade of the entrance of the ballroom on the pier descends from the ceiling; the sparkling bulbs and ornate shapes light up the night. A build of final calls to enter the dance marathon culminate in Rita (Karen Ziemba) declaring this marathon will be her last as she signs up with Bill (Daniel McDonald).

The opening song of the marathon, “Everybody Dance,” begins and couples come spinning in dancing an array of different styles. Most swing dance, some do a one-step, but all join in on the festivities, keeping in time to the rhythm of the swing-styled music. The celebration of social dance is exceptional and the desire to get noticed and win is palpable in the various added flourishes such as high kicks, lifts, and dips from couples. Mick, the host, chastises a couple for doing the Grizzly Bear, announcing it is not allowed (too sensual and non-

moving), but the Bunny Hug is. As the musical quickly unfolds, the operation of the marathon—its scams, fixed moments, and preferential treatment—expose the social and economic structure that created this phenomenon. A fraying of the edges of the imagined community created by the marathon begins for the struggling participants. Foremost, the effect of the economic depression becomes visible in the bodies of the dancers; the exasperation and despair begin to show in their slouched shoulders and heavy feet.

Despite the excruciating circumstances, there are moments of hope from various secondary characters who believe maybe it will all end and they can return to the life they had before the economic crash. This utopic desire hints at the naivety of those in the Depression Era who thought the market would realign itself soon after the economic crash. Rita mentions several times how she longs to return to her and Mick’s home after the marathon. The final straw for Rita is when Mick’s admits he sold their house a long time ago, that there is no going home. The knowledge spreads through the rest of the dancers as none have homes anymore. This bleak moment of recognition connects to the larger economic situation in the 1930s. As the economic depression spread into Europe there was the realization that global financial and social systems needed to change. Governments, communities, and individuals were forced to adjust and discover new actions for survival. In Steel Pier, the nostalgia Rita had for her home and a simpler time is shattered, and she realizes continuing to be part of Mick’s “dance” is futile. While the dance marathon is, as Stroman said, “a cradle for a love story,” its pointlessness and forced collision with one’s lost past forces reflection beyond the framework of a love story.

In this manner the choreographic strategy of transitioning between sections to show the passage of time, allowing an internalization of the outward experiences and contemplation of the moment, takes on a profound meaning. In these moments, though the dancers are still partnered,

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The Bunny Hug is a tamer, less physically connected dance than the Grizzly Bear.
arms reach out in desperation as they circle low to the ground and even transition to the floor, as if sinking into the abyss of the internal frustration of the marathon. Stroman explains this transition effect; “It would be showing the reality, how they were feeling and really struggling and more the inner thoughts of the dance in a more abstract way.” This effect sets up an important contrast between the external community aspect to social dance and the internal dialogue or embodied sense of navigating this moment of competition, anguish and endurance. In the social dance of the marathon, there is a sense of conformity, or at least a desire to keep up as part of the collective community (standing in for the nation). The participation sits in contrast to the internalized moments where anguish is physicalized as partners push and pull against each other in personal levels of desperation. As the marathon becomes starker, there becomes less reason for Stroman to replicate the social dance, particularly as the embodied nostalgia the participants believed in begins to crumble in the face of both physical and mental exhaustion.

The choreography in Steel Pier plunges into an exploration of the tension between self-expression and individuality, and necessity and survival. The flourishes, breakaways, and tricks of the swing dance are gone. Partners cling to each other, going through the motions, moving closer to a sense of collective survival than expressed individuality. Calabria describes the loss of humanity that comes with the dance marathon as dancers become shells of their former selves and “live the life of the automaton thereby restricting spontaneity and freedom.”135 The imagined community is a straw man, a fallacy created by the promoters as well as the participants themselves. Continuing to dance is an illusion that Rita had come to believe as a way of belonging in the world. Rita realizes the reality of her situation: there is no person, or ideology, that can save her, and she is losing herself into the void of the marathon. Rita leaves before the marathon is over. In her wake, the remaining dancers, now fully distorted in their movements,

135 Calabria, 3.
collide together in a broken jumble at the archway of the ballroom on the pier. The image of the over-worked shells of human beings crashing into each other in the doorway is a very bleak closing—a broken machine serving no individual or collective purpose. A small sense of hope emerges with Rita’s departure, though the overwhelming impression of a country adrift in the wake of national effort to fix the economic woes circulates in the space.

Rita’s break from the marathon opens up a space for contemplation of the perhaps misplaced or misunderstood nostalgia society has for the Swing Era. The music and dance of the era was appealing and exciting on the surface and celebrated the zeitgeist of the time, however, it was also an era where self-expression was overshadowed for American modernization and the move of the U.S. towards global power.

**Critical Reception**

Even in a show about dance overall there is little mention or interrogation of the choreography in the reviews. There was, however, a general consensus that Stroman was able to blend the social dances with her innovative movement signature and create appealing dance numbers. Greg Evans does briefly discuss the choreography and is quite positive regarding the talent of the collaborators stating: “choreography by Susan Stroman that cannily blends period steps with her trademark innovations, and some of Kander and Ebb’s strongest writing in years overshadow whatever missteps this musical makes.”\(^\text{136}\) In essence, by keeping a semblance of the social dances in their original form they are both recognizable to the audience and retain a historical grounding. Evans explains Stroman is able to tell the numerous stories that circulate in

the marathon, while at the same time “showcasing [her] vibrant choreography.”

Evans is an astute observer of the dance commenting, “The dances range from the fox trot and tap to the Lindy Hop, and even within the constraints of the historical dance styles, Stroman works her idiosyncratic touches.” He refers to the scratching sounds the dancers make on the floor in the opening moments that “mimics the sound of ocean waves.” Evans picks up on the details that amplify the meaning of the social dance and stakes of the dance marathon.

As a matter of explanation, Stroman trained as a ballroom dancer herself. She describes she brought the cast into the world of the dance marathons by having daily social dance classes. This was both to get them physically connected and familiar with the vocabulary of the dance and to make her and her assistant Chris Patterson’s job easier. They were able to simply call out social dances for the ensemble to do at certain points. Stroman explains her strategy; “if they learned their terminology of what the entire show was about, the entire company, they’re in it together and they understand it’s tough. It’s almost like they lived in that time period.”

The challenge is to make movement that is engaging and follow a narrative that has bodies resorting to minimal repetition and eventually breaking down. Ben Brantley picks up on this downward spiral in the novelty of the dances. He finds the tone of the show “is not the urge to make it but to escape.”

The transformation in the dance displays the deceitful side of the marathon that motivates Rita’s flight, yet Brantley finds there is no conclusion to this exploration.

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137 Evans, 1997.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 The sheer amount of dancing in *Steel Pier* does have a certain political quality to it in the sense there would be a tremendous amount of labor going into eight shows a week. In our interview, Susan Stroman felt Broadway dancers are so much more protected, supported, and well cared for on Broadway today than they were fifteen or twenty years ago years ago, suggesting perhaps working conditions were not as strictly regulated in the 1990s for dancers providing a hint of double meaning to the marathon plot.
Brantley does concede Stroman “has provided some lovely dance numbers that find the kinetic poetry in physical exhaustion.”\(^{142}\) His description effectively reduces the danced-through musical to what seems like a couple of movement showcases. When Rita refuses to continue to dance the change is stark, her stillness is palpable amongst the persistently moving dancers. Unfortunately such depth of movement was often lost or understood as repetitious or “tiresome,” which is in fact what it was meant to be.\(^{143}\)

Stephen Mosher is one of the few critics to mention the “Sprints” number that closes the first act. Dancers are tied together in pairs and forced to run a number of laps around pylons. The last couple to cross the finish line is eliminated. This senseless race is hyped up through much of the first act, and when Rita takes the first corner, she falls. The whole ensemble freezes mid-fall and begins to rewind. Mosher describes, “In one of the most baffling moments I have ever, ever, ever seen onstage, the music sounds like a record album being played backwards and all the runners begin moving slowly in reverse.”\(^{144}\) This moment in the musical begins the descent or shift of the musical into a more expressionistic style.\(^{145}\) We want Rita to get a second chance and this reversal allows her to correct her step. This rewinding fulfills a wish so many had with the economic crash, “if only” one had been more responsible or safeguarded their funds. A nostalgic reflection on past decisions is sparked in this moment of reversal.\(^{146}\) The frozen dancers embody


\(^{145}\) This moment is very clever and pre-empts Hamilton’s “Satisfied,” by nearly twenty years. In “Satisfied” Angelica Schuyler rewinds time to where she first meets Alexander Hamilton, and reconsiders her choices.

\(^{146}\) Sean Scanlan, echoing Boym, explains that a reflection on the past can often be considered nostalgic not in the sense of yearning for the past, “but about provoking a secondary reaction,” Introduction in Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 5, (2004): 4.
the potential of the American experiment in this moment of second chances, where there is a brief consideration of past moments of self-expression and economic freedom before returning to the collective body of the marathon. Throughout Steel Pier there continues to be the possibility that one might win, and this false hope encapsulates how abandoned U.S. communities felt before the promises of the New Deal began to take effect many years later.

**Survival, Nostalgia, and the American Dream**

Dance marathons were very much built on the concept of the American Dream—not that the promoters would let dancers achieve it—but by relying on and co-opting mythologies around the American Dream they drew people in and exploited their desperation. Dancers would cling to this longing for a home or a dream that their parents had, or that they once knew. Martin explains the manipulation of the nostalgia and myth in service to patriotism: “To be jobless and to protest was construed as anti-American behavior. Marathon promoters wanted above all to be American. They decorated their theatres with patriotic bunting, and the masters of ceremonies proclaimed the American-as-Apple-pie virtues of the contests.”147 The marathon in Steel Pier creates this sense of Americana.

As marathons began to be banned in more and more states, those who continued to participate in them were seen as part of the problem and as having no self-respect.148 It became too frightening to see these people slowly degrade in front of spectators’ eyes; it was too close to the “unemployed vagrants sweeping across the nation.”149 Towards the end of Steel Pier, the marathon begins to fall apart; a husband leaves his obstinate wife; the brother of the famous brother and sister duo begins to lose his mind and is forced to leave against his will. Mick pushes

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147 Martin, 133.
148 Ibid., 134.
149 Ibid.
on with his promotions and continually ramps up the stakes of the marathon, and those who cannot keep up leave as fellow participants shrug in their exhaustion. Martin explains the new image the marathons dancers began to take on; “The unemployed were now unpleasant reminders of the failure of the American Dream.” This is seen in the broken dancers who in the act of stopping to dance and stand still—slumped, exhausted, and broken—embody so much of the disappointment and damage that the Depression had caused, at first nationally, then through Europe and Asia. Rita breaks out: she stops dancing, she stops believing, she stops longing, and she steps slowly away. Stroman explains the ending:

It’s almost like as she’s walking away from it, it gets even uglier and uglier. She’s really walking away, and it’s right that she walks away from it. There’s nothing about [the marathon] she should be involved in. It has an uglier side to it.

The boy does not get the girl at the end of this show; there is no conclusion to happily tie up loose ends. Rita walks away seemingly strong in her own mind, and in this way it does not follow the regular conventions of a musical.

Steel Pier has been shown to be a complicated example of what deeper meaning is gained when social dance is brought on stage. In a show with continuous dancing, the impact of the social pressure on the body is amplified when the body stops moving. Notably, the emotional shift for Rita comes when she stops dancing. Stroman’s original impetus to seek out where dance happens as a setting for a musical becomes the struggle for the show, a contradiction to the original motivation. Indeed, some critics say the very dance marathon nature of the show slowed things down or detracted from the plot. The marathon structure also represents a different sort of structure for a musical, taking the diegetic construct to its most saturated degree; the dance is always diegetic. Stroman suspects the reason for the short run; “in fact perhaps that’s why,

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150 Martin, 134.
another reason, people didn’t accept it as much is because it was bucking the norm of a musical.” While there are a variety of “I want” songs and certain big show-stopping numbers, the show, while appearing as a traditional musical, in fact takes on a more abstract feel without following any complex formula. The phenomenon of the dance marathons was a real and problematic development in U.S. history that cannot be overlooked. In the dance marathon, there was no way to dream away the present. It was the reality of life twenty-four hours a day, exposing the American experience in the Depression Era. Martin concludes the dance marathons were “a vibrant distorting mirror, refracting a society’s desires, entertainments, working habits, scams, and brassy personalities.”

The friction between the individual and the system that creeps into Steel Pier leaves little optimism. The marathon stands in for so much more than an excuse to dance all night long at the theatre—the economic strife, the political corruption, the cultural falsities, the dismantling of nostalgia, and the exploitation of the poor. Ben Brantley picks up on the crumbling hope for humanity in Steel Pier, “this microcosmic world is clearly meant to be a metaphor for a sick society.” Steel Pier opened several months after the start of Bill Clinton’s second term. What began as a year of hopeful promises crumbled first with a global economic crisis, and then the eventual exposing of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment trials of Clinton over the following year. There is something precarious about Steel Pier, similar to the house of cards that seemed primed to fall in the politics and economics of the time. As Stroman describes the pier, “anything could collapse, anything could go wrong. It’s not even on firm ground.”

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151 Martin, 146.
When Rita is given a second chance in “The Sprints” and Bill says in the instant of frozen time, “You can’t fall now”—Rita gains strength from the moment. Stroman uses social dance, and the internalization that the marathon forces through its exhaustive and mind-bending journey, as a way for Rita to come to her decision. While her departure withholds any happy-ending, female resilience and integrity are shown to prevail, a nuance that is only brought to light by her refusal to continue dancing. The eventual fragmentation of the nostalgia exploited by the marathon makes this empowerment possible. While the marathon was a sort of self-imprisonment for Rita and the community of participants out of desperation and hopelessness, in Allegiance the confinement is very real.

IV. Allegiance the Musical and Destabilizing Nostalgia

Yesterday morning Japan attacked the United States at several points in the Pacific. President Roosevelt ordered United States forces into action and a declaration of war is expected this morning . . . As New York City went on a war footing the FBI began the detention of Japanese nationals.

—The New York Times, December 8, 1941

The thorny silhouette of the internment camp fence casts a fractured shadow over the homemade banner that reads “Heart Mountain Dance.” The banner is attached to a communal yard post and camp table along with homemade paper flowers that hang from the austere barracks. The haze of thick Wyoming dust lingers as the sun sets behind the barbed wire. Finally able to let off some steam, the younger residents of the Japanese American internment camp enter down stage right in a low, coiled position primed to unwind into a series of hip shaking,

heel twisting “sugars.” The dynamics of the dance moves grow in intensity along with the build towards the chorus of the 1940s-styled swing music. Partners quickly find each other, bodies pull together, and the music, coming from a small ramshackle radio, hits the melody—horns wail and drums crack and thud, and the toe-tapping music fills the auditorium. Bodies that had been uncomfortable, resistant, and anxious in the hushed meeting of the previous scene are energetic and, for a moment, visibly content. The modest dresses of the women flare out and up as partners, encouraged by the burgeoning melody and percussive beats of the music, become more enterprising in their moves. The Japanese American internees show off their dance moves to one another as elder family members look on with pleasure. The choreography builds to a hot finale, complete with the trademark overhead throws and big breakaways of the Lindy Hop. For just a moment, if one focuses on the bodies dancing and not the structures of imprisonment surrounding them, the situation seems like any dance on a Saturday night in the U.S. in the early 1940s. The energy is palpable, couples playfully flirt, and bodies come together in a harmony of motion. Spirits seem high. After the first song, a dancer proclaims, “Welcome to our first—and hopefully not annual—Heart Mountain dance!”

In this investigation of the 2015 Broadway musical Allegiance I consider how the embodied perspective brought forward by social dance moments, such as the one described above, provides a unique method towards attempting to understand, permeate, and challenge the borders between “them” and “us,” and between the individual and the nation. In the heated and controversial moment of the internment of Japanese Americans that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, national identities, personal freedoms, and outlets for self-expression were

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154 Sugars are a common move in Charleston and swing dance where dancers keep their weight on the balls of their feet and with each step to the side the knee follows in line with the leading foot. This alternates left and right creating a twisting or shimmy-like action with the lower body.

155 Allegiance: 2015, music and lyrics by Jay Kuo and a book by Marc Acito, Kuo and Lorenzo Thione, inspired by the personal experiences of George Takei.
thrown into chaos as the Japanese American body was condemned as the “other,” or even the “enemy.” The choreography and how Japanese Americans move in the world of Allegiance helps to define nationhood, national identity, and formations of the self. The swing dance sensibilities choreographer Andrew Palermo uses at the “Heart Mountain Dance” create a mode of identity formation and communal belonging for the internees, collapsing presupposed ideas of race and “Americanness.” Investigating the embodied meaning of Japanese Americans swing dancing destabilizes the nostalgia inherent in the dance and helps to recover the notion that a Japanese body can also be American and a vital part of U.S. culture.

**Background of Allegiance**

With music and lyrics by Jay Kuo and book by Marc Acito, Kuo, and Lorenzo Thione, Allegiance was motivated by the experiences of actor George Takei and his parents in a Japanese American internment camp during World War II. Takei, popularly known for his role as Hikaru Sulu in the original Star Trek series and subsequent movies, was incarcerated as a young child at the Rohwer, Arkansas, camp and the Tule Lake, California, camp in the 1940s.

Kuo explains he ran into Takei two consecutive nights at the theatre in 2008. Kuo decided to go up to him and ask why he was crying during the show (In the Heights), particularly the number “Inútil” (about a father feeling useless). Kuo explains Takei’s answer in an interview:

He told me that the song had reminded him of his own father who had been unable to help their family escape the terror of the internment and had lived with that feeling of
uselessness. It was at that moment that George told me his story of growing up in an internment camp and I was mesmerized.\textsuperscript{156}

Takei began telling him about his past, to which Kuo suggested it would make an excellent piece of theatre and would like to send him some ideas. The creation of the musical began from there with readings followed by workshops, leading to its eventual premiere in San Diego in 2012. After considerable changes, the musical opened on Broadway in 2015 and ran for 37 previews and 111 performances. The musical has an extensive website detailing nearly every aspect of its journey from inspiration, to creation, to premiering in California and then transferring to Broadway.\textsuperscript{157} The website provides an “Educators Resource Guide” for teachers that discusses the history of the Japanese internment and the politics surrounding World War II.\textsuperscript{158} An enormous amount of effort has been made to include as much information about the creative process, as well as the history of Japanese internment, as possible. Despite the short Broadway run, Takei and the creators remain determined to get the story out to America. They have filmed the musical, which has been presented at movie theatres across the U.S. on at least two occasions. Takei, through his work on the show and his significant social media presence, has been a vociferous advocate for awareness and reconciliation of the Japanese internment.\textsuperscript{159}


\textsuperscript{158} There is a vast amount of information available on the Allegiance website including “Translating a Painful History for Broadway;” “A Lesson in Hateful Politics’ Consequences,” “Diversity, the New Lead Role on Broadway,” “What My Time in an Intern Camp Taught Me” (by Mike Honda the U.S Representative for California), and “George Takei’s New York.”

\textsuperscript{159} George Takei is one of the most followed celebrities on Twitter. Jeremy Cabalona explains, “Takei knows his audience very well. While he has expanded his following through strong involvement in the gay rights movement (his \textit{It’s Ok to be Takei} initiative, for instance) and Asian American groups (he is on the board of the Japanese American National Museum), his core fan-base consists of Star Trek fans who appreciate Takei for his self-aware humor.” Cabalona, “How George Takei went from \textit{Star Trek} to Social Media Superstar,” \textit{Mashable}, April 20, 2012, https://mashable.com/2012/04/20/george-takei-social-media/#3Pbxvz26Juq4.

The plot of \textit{Allegiance} follows the incarceration of the fictional Kimura family, which includes: Ojii-chan the Grandfather, Tatsuo the Father, his son Sammy, and daughter Kei. The family is taken to Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming and settles in amongst fellow Japanese Americans. A conflict of generations quickly arises, as Sammy wants to enlist in the Army to prove his loyalty as an American citizen, whereas his father refuses to admit an allegiance to the United States and gets sent to a work camp. Sammy clashes with Frankie, a fellow resident of the camp who refuses to go along with the ethics of the incarceration. Though cooperation with camp authorities would be seen (supposedly) as a sign of loyalty to the U.S. and possibly ease the difficulties of their confinement, Frankie stages protests and riots. When friends and family members clash over the “Loyalty Questionnaire,” Sammy joins the 443 regiment, an all-Japanese squadron known to be sent on the most dangerous, largely suicide missions.\footnote{The War Department and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) determined whether someone was loyal to America or the Emperor of Japan. The WRA created what was casually called the “loyalty questionnaire.” This form, formally known as the “Statement of United States Citizen of Japanese Ancestry,” also titled Selective Service Form 304A, becomes the crux around which the conflict of the story operates. The questionnaire can be narrowed down to two main questions, number 27 and 28: would you be willing to serve the U.S? and would you be willing to swear allegiance to the U.S? In \textit{Allegiance} Sammy declares he will answer yes to both, while his family and Frankie vehemently answer no, not because they don’t consider themselves Americans but to protest the injustice of the internment. Cherston M. Lyon, “Loyalty Questionnaire, \textit{Densho Encyclopedia}, n.d. \url{https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Loyalty_questionnaire/}, accessed June 15, 2018.} Sammy goes on to become a war hero, but in his absence his sister joins up with Frankie, both romantically and ideologically, and the two work together to help get the camps dissolved. The story ends over fifty years after the war when Sammy receives word that his sister Kei, whom he never saw again after she joined with Frankie, has died. Kei and Frankie’s daughter Hana (his niece) brings
him the news, and in their new relationship they start the lengthy work of personal forgiveness and recovery. The broader theme of national reparation and acknowledgement that still needs to be done around the Japanese internment in the U.S. hangs heavy in the air as the curtain falls.

The complicated story traces the question: What makes someone American? And what happens when national ideologies and security override self-expression and individualism? The musical interrogates how loyalty or allegiance is deeply imbricated in the formation of an American identity. The show explores other facets of cultural formation and trustworthiness, from food to language, and demonstrates how ideologies change from generation to generation. Given the conventions of musical theatre and the propensity (and demand) to enhance emotion through song and thrill through dance, the moments of movement and music used to express “Americanness” stand out and become a pronounced measure of national identity. When self-expression through swing dancing, as in the circumstances of the “Heart Mountain Dance,” is considered as a nationalizing force there is a cleaving of previous assumptions about America’s melting pot reputation and the formation of identity in the United States.162

**Choreographic Strategies in *Allegiance***

Choreographer Andrew Palermo has had an extensive performance career as a dancer on Broadway, as well as a substantial career as a choreographer in both musical theatre and concert dance.163 He explains the draw of the show for him: “It did give me the opportunity to work in different styles across the show. There’s swing, there’s traditional Japanese dance, there’s my

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162 This instance puts into question what Sherrie Tucker calls “the dance floor of the nation” and how in the circumstances of the Japanese Internment the government wants to have it both ways (Tucker, xix).

gestural stuff, there’s hardcore jazzy in ‘Victory Swing.’ For me it was fun being able to flex muscles in all the ways.”

Palermo’s choreographic strategy uses swing dance and some Japanese traditional dance to imagine a community and enable a greater understanding of how identity and nationality is shaped and embodied.

Swing dance culture in the U.S. specifically at the time of World War II was tied to one’s coming of age in America, thus it would be apropos that the youth in Allegiance do it. Megan Pugh observes in America Dancing that, as the popularity of swing dancing spread, “observers celebrated it as a new national folk dance, proof of the American melting pot at work. When the country entered World War II, the Lindy began to seem like a sign of American grace, modernity and strength.”

Prior to the “Heart Mountain Dance” in Allegiance, the younger generation is shown taking on more of a leadership role amongst the internees at the camp. They gather and make a list of their demands for their time in the camp. They decide that dance was a main leisure activity prior to their internment and should continue to be. They create for themselves an imagined community in the face of precarity, and social dance is where they start. Being interned against one’s will in a location far from one’s home makes impossible any sense of belonging; however, swing dancing outside on a hot summer night was how these American-born internees found a sense of belonging and self-expression prior to internment, and they use it as such in the camp in order to maintain a sense of comfort and Gaman as encouraged by the elders.

The dance space is set up and the internees make their depressing circumstances bearable for at least

164 Interview by author, July 6, 2018.
165 Megan Pugh, America Dancing, 235.
166 Early on in the show the Japanese term Gaman is introduced. In the author’s note in the program, book writers Marc Acito, Jay Kuo, and Lorenzo Thione explain, “‘Gaman’ is a word we learned from George Takei, the inspiration and guiding light of this production. It’s Japanese for ‘endurance with dignity’ and was a principle that sustained George, his family and the 120,000 Japanese-Americans unjustly incarcerated during World War II.” Allegiance,” Playbill, accessed November 11, 2018, http://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea8-d936-a7fd-eefe72ea0009&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=6
one night through music and dance. The nostalgia inherent in the dance, established as “the American dance form” as early as 1937, helps them to imagine a sense of community in the internment camp and attempt a sense of normalcy.\textsuperscript{167} The dance also provides a plot point for the beginning of Kei and Frankie’s relationship.\textsuperscript{168}

The Japanese American body swing dancing amongst the shadows of the fences and the armed watchtowers is a complex image entwined with notions of identity, memory, and nostalgia for simpler times on the part of the internees. The dance creates a complex image of the Asian body in the narrative as there is a juxtaposition between the dancers, who are “Nisei” (second generation Japanese American), and the “Issei” (Japanese born immigrants) who are watching but do not dance. In effect, the constant strain in the story between one’s commitment to one’s sense of self and family and an allegiance to the nation is sensed in the choreography, particularly through choices of who does it and how. For example, in the “Heart Mountain Dance” the three couples dance in impressive unison enhancing its collective feel; there is no individuality in the breakaways, and all bodies move as close as possible in similar fashion. The choice to choreograph the dance as three couples working in precision is thrilling but also transforms the general roots of swing dance as a playful popular pastime where one could experiment with new moves and fun breakaways to a sense of solidarity or collectivism as the three couples mirror each other with each step. The individual personalities fade in the move of the social dance to the stage to give space for a sense of solidarity between community members

\textsuperscript{168} Following the “Heart Mountain Dance” number, Frankie and some of the young women internees perform the song “Paradise,” a cutting parody of Mike Masaoka, the leader of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). Masaoka is a controversial player in the Japanese internment (and the only non-fictional character in the musical) as in general he felt it was counterproductive to fight back against incarceration.
and their legitimate claim to be citizens. The dynamic and expert execution of the swing dance by the Japanese Americans in the internment camp disrupts the accusations of “otherness” and enhances their “Americanness.”

Further, the skill and ease displayed by the dancers has the potential to arouse expressions of a simpler America. The dance and music inspire memories of dance halls, school gyms, and patio dances and represent moments of peace and pride in the U.S. for many, a nostalgia for a time before the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the South Pacific. Palermo employs swing dancing in collaboration with Jay Kuo’s 1940s-styled score to break down racial tropes and demonstrate how social dance can be used to indicate and inspire inclusion and understanding across cultures. The group precision and presentational style in the onstage dance amplifies these meanings.

**Japanese Bodies on Stage**

The theatricalization of Asian Americans in internment camps on stage in *Allegiance* draws focus to a U.S. crisis of identity during and after World War II. Even as Asian immigrants they were already marked and with their internment the image of the U.S. as a melting pot or multicultural nation is revealed to be nothing less than a tightly held mythology. The paranoid singling out of the Other exposes the failure of America as “the good society, the epitome of enlightenment and modernity.”  

Karen Shimakawa, in *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage*, explains the “irreconcilable contradiction” in the singling out of Japanese Americans:

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169 Walsh and Platt, 197.
Regardless of the citizenship status, and unlike (white) immigrants from other countries then at war with the United States, Japanese Americans were deemed suspect, deprived of their constitutional rights, removed from their homes, and imprisoned by the “War Relocation Authority.” ¹⁷⁰

This contradiction to the treatment of other immigrants that have greater ease in their assimilation (able pass as American because of their whiteness) complicates how nationhood or a national citizen is formed. This bias is alluded to in the production when Sammy asks why Joe DiMaggio is not being interned despite his Italian roots. The internment calls into question how identity is defined and by whom, as well as the global implications of identifying with a particular nation. The frustration in this paradigm that Allegiance briefly addresses is the absurdity of the situation set against the conflict of World War II. In fact, what was being fought against overseas was happening in the U.S. Shimakawa observes, “The democratic principles ostensibly being defended abroad—freedom from racist genocide and colonial/nationalist brutalities—led directly to racist-nationalist oppression and property theft at home.” ¹⁷¹

The “Heart Mountain Dance” works to create a sense of home for the internees. The dance, and the various antics that follow including Frankie’s parody of Mike Masaoka (the leader of the Japanese American Citizens League), helps to demonstrate that having fun and challenging the status quo are one’s right as an American. Shimakawa proposes, “performance may be pressed into the service of, or may serve as a counter discourse to, those dominant narratives of national belonging and national exclusion,” and the swing dance in Allegiance does

¹⁷¹ Shimakawa, National Abjection, 10. It is also important to note that all military units segregated African Americans from White Americans during World War II.
just this. The term “uncanny strangeness” is used by Shimakawa to describe the presence of Asian American bodies on stage that work as part of narratives outside the usual stereotypes so often pursued in the theatre. It is in this realm that Asian American identities can be re-worked beyond stereotypes and move forward to gaining greater meaning. She explains this conceptualization “offers us a ‘practice field’ for reimagining Asian Americanness and its relation to national abjection.” In this consideration the swing dance scene becomes essential in moving beyond stereotypes and potentially destructive “restorative” nostalgia toward a greater reflection of the embodied nostalgia the Japanese American dancers. In particular those born in the U.S. hold within them an embodied nostalgia for a time of normalcy when they could work out their anxieties about life in the dance hall as part of a community along with everyone else, not interned against their will.

Furthermore, the swing scene is augmented in meaning as it stands in contrast to an earlier movement sequence in the show involving Japanese traditional practices. Prior to the internment, the younger generation performs a dance around a tree in honor of Obon, a traditional Japanese festival honoring one’s ancestors. The Japanese-styled dancing used in the scene is simple and elegant, as one would imagine for holiday protocols; a grapevine-like step with flexed hands held at chest level. Conversely, when the swing dancing happens at the

172 Shimakawa investigates several Asian American playwrights that are doing this kind of work: Wakako Yamauchi’s 12-1-A (also about Japanese internment camps, and the conflict revolves around responses to the loyalty questionnaire); Elizabeth Wong’s Letters to a Student Revolutionary; Frank Chin’s The Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon, 163.
173 Shimakawa describes the stock figures often used in performance: the exotic and sensual Asian female, the Asian female who sacrifices herself for her child, the paralyzed or invisible Asian Male.
174 Shimakawa, 160.
175 In regards to creating the Japanese styles dance, Palermo explains that one of the cast members who had done choreography in earlier iterations of the show, Rumi Oyama (who played Mrs. Tanaka), “had experience doing traditional Japanese dance . . . I would choreograph and then I would say to her ‘does this work? Is it authentic?’ How would the hands be? She would be very helpful in that.” He also explains that cast member Janelle Toyomi Dote was helpful in creating the correct gestures for the traditional dance. Interview with author, July 6, 2018.
“Heart Mountain Dance,” it is a complex and virtuosic display of dancing, obviously with many specific skills needed to execute the choreography, particularly in synchronicity. The contrast between the two styles is understandable; however, what is most striking when considering the two is how the traditional dance has a certain familiarity (or accessibility) to it on Japanese bodies, while the same bodies doing West Coast swing dances in effect create a sense of “uncanny strangeness” that provokes a consideration of how the Asian American performers are embodying a sense of nationhood, or “Americaness,” with much skill and enthusiasm. This strangeness of course would vary between audience members depending on if one was Japanese, Japanese American, white or non-culturally aligned. The swing dance embodies a way of being in the world, a way of moving to and changing with the rhythms in uncertain times, and the Nisei Japanese Americans demonstrate this.

**Critical Reception**

The question remains—why was the show not particularly successful on Broadway and what were the dramaturgical strategies that caused the short run? There are various factors that may have influenced the limited success of the play on Broadway. First, the adaptations made from the original San Diego production, though they helped the story, may have hindered the likeability and/or depth of some of the characters. Additionally, the exaggeration of events for emotional effect and theatricality may have been too heavy-handed.176 Second, various critics questioned whether the genre of musical theatre is the correct style to tell such a serious story about a very dark point in U.S. history, including David Rooney who concludes, “An important

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176 Critics and scholars have pointed out that conditions in the interment camps were not as violent and forceful as they are portrayed on stage. See: Brian Niiya, “Allegiance: See the Film, But Watch for These Historical Inaccuracies,” Densho Blog, February 10, 2017, https://densho.org/allegiance-see-film-watch-historical-inaccuracies/.
story that hasn’t found its ideal form as a musical.”

Though musical theatre as a genre has explored challenging or disturbing moments in history, the music and lyrics in Allegiance do not support the magnitude of such a difficult topic. Finally, though the musical was generally well received and attended by audiences, the show lacked the musical sophistication and complexity needed to carry the emotional heft. The score lacked innovation and seemed to be too reminiscent of past musicals such as Les Miserables or Miss Saigon. There is a general consensus among critics that the music and score were lacking, exemplified in phrases such as, “obvious,” “derivative music and pedestrian lyrics,” “workmanlike score,” “generic,” “unmemorable,” and “doesn’t make the grade.”

Again, when considering the success of the show, too often the concentration from critics is on the music and lyrics. Despite prominent images of the dance moments used in promotional materials for the show and included in the reviews, there is little said of the choreography. Though publicity shots are often more sensational images to sell the show, the images overpromise on a “dance musical.” At very least there is an inconsistency in the reviews that add these pictures to their critique while not commenting on the movement aspect of the show.

Markedly, in over a dozen reviews of the Broadway show, few mention the dance, and only then...

178 It is not difficult to make this connection given Lea Salonga was the Tony Winning lead in Miss Saigon. She has also played the roles of both female lead roles (Eponine and Fantine) in the Broadway production of Les Miserables in 1993.
to say it is included. There is no analysis of its use or function, save for Linda Winer, who says it “signif[ies] Americana,” and Jonathan Madell, who says the numbers are “energetically choreographed.” Other short mentions of the choreography include Jeremy Gerard’s statement: “Less successful are the staging by Stafford Arima and the dancing by Andrew Palermo, which have the virtue of avoiding Asian cliché but also fail, like the songs, to give the show wings.” David Finkle also suggests, “Palermo doesn’t do much out of the ordinary.”

To analyze the choreography in Allegiance one must read more deeply into the small descriptions to help figure out what the dance is doing in the show and whether it worked.

The general impression of the reviews is that the dance solicits “Americana” and is “ordinary.” These descriptions can be productive, nonetheless, as the social dance elements, both swing dance and the earlier traditional Japanese-styled moves, do have an everyday grace to them that show how the Japanese Americans embody their heritage and identity as well as how dance is a mode of self-expression and used to create an imagined community for the internees. Indeed, the swing dance is executed with a high degree of skill, its virtuosity helping to forecast a sense of “Americana.” For example, the dance ends with a very difficult high-flying lift that quickly transitions into a low dip where the man is supporting the woman only by her neck (with one hand) in a very low plank-like dip. In the dance’s spectacularization and display of a highly professional level of virtuosity, there is the familiar thrill and excitement culturally associated with the moves and situation, an embodied nostalgia that help fulfills its task of demonstrating “Americanness.” The iconicity of swing dance and jazz music as an American invention in

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181 Winer, 2015; Madell, 2015.
184 In this era of popular dance reality shows such as Dancing With The Stars and So You Think You Can Dance!, which both entertain and instruct audiences in social dance and concert dance, if a choreographer wants to put forth a sense of Americana using swing dance it must assuredly be strong and well executed.
modern society has been built up from years of being associated with the Jazz Age, the Savoy, Harlem, New York, and America in general. Whether one agrees with or buys the sentimentalized story or music, in the discussion of how one shows their allegiance, as Tucker described earlier, swing dance is an expression of a national consensus of American patriotism.\footnote{In the time line of Allegiance, the transmission of swing dance beyond the U.S. would be relatively small, and thus would be identifiable as an American dance. The swing dance did spread to Europe and the rest of the world with increasing intensity, but in the late 1930s early 1940s the dissipation was not yet rampant. Tucker, xvii.} If Palermo had over-choreographed the “Heart Mountain Dance” with a myriad of innovative steps that only hinted at the social dance, the connection to the “ordinary” or everyday social dance of Americans would be lost. As it is, the dance has some spectacular feats and lifts, all generally out of the West Coast Swing vocabulary, that serve to show how bodies that look Japanese can also be American. There are other attempts in the show to demonstrate “Americanness” through dance that do not function as effectively but seem to fit the choreographic strategy. For example, in the number “Get in the Game,” Sammy encourages his fellow internees through a baseball metaphor to get involved and take control of their time in the camp. The number demonstrates the spunk of the group though loses its significance, as there is not another mention of baseball in the show.\footnote{Palermo explains the baseball number “Get in the Game” was originally called “Better Americans.” He explains, “I don’t think it was a baseball number when I first heard it. I heard it and said we should turn this into…So “Get in the Game” developed because of needing to find something that Sammy could lead and take the reins of the camp and the community and because of his age, because of his character. . . and everything he is. . . apple pie and all that stuff—it made sense.” Palermo goes on to explain that there was much more athletic choreography to the number with a broader baseball game enacted. Eventually, the song was cut down because as Palermo explains, “It was kind of a polarizing number. Because some people, audience members, thought ‘I want more of that.’ Other audience members were like ‘why is that in the show?’ Eventually, with cuts for time, the number got drastically edited down. Interview by author, July 6, 2018.}
Shifts in Dramaturgical Strategies and Historical Accuracies

The historical inaccuracies and embellishments in Allegiance are part of the structural changes that occurred through the various try-outs. The earliest iterations of the show seem to be more on point with a clear narrative through-line of the Kimura family’s story, however, and as is common with many shows, by the time it reached Broadway it had evolved from its simple storytelling to be more sentimental and sensational. There is an intentional increase, from the early iteration to the Broadway premiere, in the nationalistic agenda and harshness of conditions in the camps that increase tensions of the geopolitical on self-expression. Critics and scholars have pointed out that conditions in the internment camps were not a violent and forceful as they are portrayed on stage. Residents of the camps were not forced to a strip search, they were not spoken to through a loudspeaker, and soldiers with guns did not order them around. In the musical all Japanese Americans are removed quickly and at the same time and sent directly to camps. Brian Niiya explains this happened over much time and most were sent to an assembly center first.\textsuperscript{187} While these sorts of time-based issues are acceptable given the short time frame of a live production, the choice to omit such details begins a cycle of exaggeration of the situation and an inflation of the tension for dramatic effect. The propagating of the nationalist agenda risks overwhelming the show. Frank Abe suggests the portrayal of the camps is way off: “It’s laughable nonsense, as if the camps were run not by Dillon Myer and the WRA but by Hermann Göring and his Luftwaffe.”\textsuperscript{188} The suggestion from the creative team is that through

\textsuperscript{187} Niiya, Densho Blog. 2017.
exaggeration, attention is drawn to the issue and perhaps helps to begin education about the facts. Abe and Niiya question how far one must go to bring attention to how American bodies were treated and whether it possibly takes a harshness and aggression to recognize these facts. This “shaping” of history worked for a musical like *Hamilton* where the story salutes America and pats itself on the back while celebrating the American Dream. In *Allegiance*, however, when the focus is on American injustices to its own citizens and how the geopolitical took precedence over self-expression, it is certainly not as popular or marketable a topic.

Beyond historical inaccuracies and the portrayal of the truth on stage, Emily Roxworthy explores the deeper effect of the transformations and exaggerations in the show, explaining how empathy becomes key to the success of the performance. She observes, “most of the critical empathy had been stripped away by the time [Allegiance] was sent to Broadway,” making the show a very tedious balancing act of exploring this tension. In earlier iterations the ghost of Sammy and Kei’s grandfather (Takei’s character) haunted the show, which helped to connect the past and the present. Roxworthy observes that the removal of the ghost character “means that the ghost of the internment frames, but does not intrude on, the past unfolding on stage.” This choice perhaps, as Roxworthy suggests, “sanitizes the past for present day audiences.”

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Frank Abe, “Guardian of History Challenges Historical accuracy of ‘Allegiance,’ Resisters.com February 19, 2017, http://resisters.com/2017/02/19/guardian-of-history-challenges-historical-integrity-of-allegiance/#more-3158. Abe further explains, “Here are the facts. No resistance leader was hunted by guards like an inmate escaping Stalag 17. No one at Heart Mountain was beaten bloody by guards. And for god’s sake, no guards shot and killed any white nurse in a jealous scuffle with a resister.” But even among those who acknowledge both the fabrication and falsification of history in *Allegiance*, two excuses are often offered: it’s worth doctoring history if it introduces the camp story to more people, or helps “educate” the public.


190 Roxworthy, 109.
destabilizing the reflection one might have on past decisions and actions or on present day circumstances, leaving it to the embodied meanings to do greater narrative work.191

**Destabilizing Nostalgia and “Uncanny Strangeness” in Allegiance**

The choreographic signature does not thread throughout the show but is broken up into parts. In particular, the moments drawn from social dance, both Japanese and American-styled, bring in considerable meaning.192 As the complicated threads of the story unfold the realization of the difficulty in identifying what constitutes being American permeates the story. As has been previously stated there is a nostalgia that circulates around World War II of the soldier and the nurse, or the reunited lovers, as an emblem of America’s experience in the War. When the “Heart Mountain Dance” begins and the empty stage fills with Asian bodies doing American Swing dance, and doing it well, there is an “uncanny strangeness” that destabilizes the nostalgic image many have come to embrace surrounding World War II and swing culture.193 While their ability to move and sound and behave like Americans does not solve their problems, the audience is shown how “American” the internees are. This moment and the following comedy dance “Paradise,” a satirical take on the absurdity of their situation sung by Frankie, function to force a rethinking of nostalgia and clarifies the substantial impact of the swing dance by contrast. In all, the swing dance in Allegiance deflates the restorative type of nostalgia where one is trying

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191 Roxworthy, 109-110.
192 Palermo discusses the numerous rounds of cutting and different version of choreography that was kept or left behind. Palermo explains, “‘Paradise’ is one of the songs, as well as ‘Camp Dance,’ that changed very little. From the first time I heard a demo, all the way through the Broadway production. Almost everything else got changed hugely or cut or whatever, but those two really stayed,” Interview with author July 6, 2018. The numerous iteration and try-outs make it difficult for a choreographer (who is not also the director) to maintain a choreographic through-line.
193 The renaissance of swing dancing in the 1990s that embraced the music, fashions, and hairstyle of the time, serves to confirm how strong the nostalgic draw of the era is. For more information on this see: William Given: “Lindy Hop, Community, and the Isolation of Appropriation” In The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 729-749.
to patch up the past to make a perfect picture, and offers a reflective angle that forces a taking apart of ingrained notions of who knew and did swing dance in the 1940s.

V. Conclusion

In all three musicals of this chapter swing dance is employed by the choreographer to imagine a community in the face of precarity. Nostalgia has been shown to be the emotional spark that makes this vital and visceral communal connection possible. The study of these shows demonstrates how social dance can embody implicit meanings in a story, and how the embodied nostalgia therein can intimate greater social and political awareness. Social dance in all three musicals is shown to create a community that has the possibility, whether overtly or more covertly, to instigate, or at very least suggest, change. Significantly, the circumstances under which the concepts of community are created are very different. In Steel Pier, set in the early 1930s, swing dance helped a country escape, if only momentarily, from economic realities. In the Depression Era, swing music and dance were integral to enlivening the despair in everyday life, and, as seen in the dance marathon in Steel Pier, about collective survival itself. As the decade (and Depression) progressed and Benny Goodman became the most prominent white bandleader to employ African American musicians in his band in 1936, swing dance and music became also about cultural mixing and civil rights. Though this racial integration was by no means a fait accompli, the embrace of diversity and self-expression as seen in Wonderful Town’s “Christopher Street” was becoming more common. Further, as swing music was circulated much more broadly, the fascination with swing music, dance, and styles such as those displayed in

194 Ted Gioia explains “The various Goodman splinter bands were not the first racially integrated jazz groups, but they were the most prominent of their day.” Gioia, 134.
“Swing!” brought people together with a greater sense of inclusion. By the end of 1941, only a year or so before the emergence of “Bebop” styled jazz music, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led to the U.S. declaring war on Japan. With the devastation of the attack and the uncertainties of being in a state of war, government officials, the entertainment industry, and communities turned to swing music and dance as a morale booster and show of patriotic support. As set forth in the Heart Mountain Dance in *Allegiance*, the one musical of this project that openly examines concepts of nationalism and geopolitics, community is created around swing music and dance as a tenet of American identity. For the choreographers of the case studies, by using swing dance as a framework, the varied meanings and constructs of community embedded in the dance, and inscribed on bodies, adds to the impact and discursive development of the musical.

Though two of the three shows were a disappointment at the box office and to critics, the analysis of the social dance in them has helped to understand what the choreography is doing (or trying to do) in the show. The less successful shows generally suffered because of an unformulated story (*Steel Pier*) or unsophisticated score (*Allegiance*), not because of the choreography. This analysis has shown the importance of investigating choreography in musical theatre through the lens of social dance as it embodies a way of being in the world and being a part of a community. Svetlana Boym has found nostalgia is “coeval with modernity.”\(^\text{195}\) I find this to be true of the relationship between nostalgia and social dance because of continual shifts in social dance and communities over time and place. The audience may not be aware of the roots of a dance but the nostalgia that “co-evolves” with the dance brings the possibility of deeper meaning and understanding of the community who is doing, or created, the dance. This chapter has shown how bodies in motion in the case studies call into question the tension

\(^{195}\) Boym, xvi.
between self-expression, geopolitics, and community precarity.

What is often difficult to explain or attend to after 1945 is the falling off of social dancing throughout the U.S. As the Stearnses observe, “When the swing era faded in the forties, a blackout of about ten years intervened—from 1945-1954—with little or no dancing.”196 There are various reasons for this, one of the main ones being a tax from the federal government on dance floors across the nation.197 In the following epilogue, I point towards the transition into the rock ’n’ roll dances and what this transition means for choreographers, social dance communities, and the body in motion on stage in musical theatre.

196 Stearns and Stearns, 1.
197 Ibid.
EPILOGUE

ENSEMBLE:
It’s like they popped a cork, the clubs are full again.
With all the good time girls and service men.
So grab your sweetheart tight and take the floor
Before you know it it’ll be just like it was before. . .

DONNY:
That’s what they tell me. Why not believe it? They want illusion and they achieve it.
We all relive the past we never want to leave it.
The world is ending. And we’re pretending.

—“Just Like It Was Before”

At the opening of the 2017 Broadway musical Bandstand, Donny Novitski (Corey Cott) returns home from combat at the end of World War II with a heavy heart—he feels responsible for the death of his best friend from friendly fire. He stands stiffly downstage struggling to buy into the optimism the ensemble sings around him that somehow life will return to “just like it was before” he was deployed overseas.¹ Other veterans tentatively enter the space with fists clenched around suitcase handles and shoulders rolled inwards. The transition back into civilian life is a visible burden; the ghosts of dead soldiers (played by men in faded army fatigues and cast in pale light) rest a hand on the backs of the survivors and follow them around the stage. Donny and his friends are broken from their experiences; one struggles with chronic pain, another with trauma from a POW camp, and all are haunted by the atrocities of war. For them, nothing is like it was before—the forced nostalgia is impossible and painful. And yet, Donny returns to his career as a pianist and convinces his fellow veterans to form a swing band and

¹“Just Like It Was Before,” Bandstand, music by Richard Oberacker, lyrics and book by Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor, 2017. Bandstand was viewed live.
pursue a contest to write a hit song to salute the troops; the ghosts fade into the darkness as the mental (and physical) weight momentarily lessens for the men.

The story of Bandstand challenges assumptions of the supposed joyous post-World War II years and explores how a group of mismatched friends, united by their trauma, use music and movement to create meaning in a world they cannot seem to find comfort in. I turn to Bandstand in summation because it is the most recent musical that both builds upon and troubles the embodied nostalgia of social dance in the Jazz Age. Equally, Bandstand is emblematic of the case studies of this project where social dance has been shown to be the spark upon which choreographers build a unique movement signature that explores the visceral experience of a particular moment for a particular community.

As briefly described at the beginning of this project, Bandstand is pitched as a nostalgic escape to the world of swing music and heroes. The description of the show as “a truly American celebration of the men and women whose personal bravery defined a nation” illustrates musical theatre’s ongoing and deep-seated relationship with history, memory, and ideologies of American exceptionalism. While promotional materials make the most of conventions of the Swing Era (late-night swing dances, romance, and overflowing patriotism), the show’s movement signature takes on the complexities of post-traumatic stress disorder and the tension between personal and national pride.

Bandstand director and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler uses diegetic moments of social dance (enhanced by his choreographic innovations) as a platform for the characters to work through their frustrations, anxieties, and personal conflicts in a post-World War II world. In the band’s journey, the after-effects of war—anger, alcoholism, mental illness, and survivor’s

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syndrome—are placed alongside the surrounding community and everyday life in Cleveland, Ohio in 1945. The narrative weaves together the communal healing of the band members with a budding romance between Donny and his best friend’s widow, Julia (Laura Osnes), the singer of the band. At the contest finals, when the band realizes they would be signing away the rights to the prepared song, they instead sing “Welcome Home,” a song that exposes the harsh truth about issues soldiers and survivors face during and after the war. The clash between the bright swing songs of the 1940s and the band’s cutting take on society’s disregard for the repercussions of soldiers’ experiences in war zones dismantles the nostalgia around the show. Blankenbuehler uses physicalized efforts (such as the ghost soldiers) to generate awareness around post-traumatic stress disorder. He keeps the tension between collective memory and individual experience throughout his choreography, for which he won the show’s only Tony Award. I take a very brief look at Blankenbuehler’s choreographic strategies in *Bandstand* to emphasize some of the tactics used to by the choreographers of the nine case studies of this project.

In *Bandstand* Blankenbuehler dissects the features of swing dance to present a perspective on the post-World War II era that both draws on the nostalgia for the time, and also questions the validity of that longing as interpreted by the body in motion. He explains how he creates embodied meaning and excavates emotion:

> I take artistic liberty to exaggerate elements of the social dance to make sure the audience is following the reason it’s happening. For example, I might ride the drums louder, or I might do a lot of stop time moves . . . so in just an instant, the audience can look around and like a close-up on film, see how that person’s shoulders are riding up because they’re

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3 After World War II, the psychiatric disorder was overlooked, ignored, or dismissed as “combat fatigue” in favor of patriotic fervor and rekindled mythologies. “What is Post traumatic Stress-Disorder,” *American Psychiatric Association*, https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd, accessed November 29, 2018.
enjoying it so much, or see they’re letting out so much sweat and actually they’re finding healing. I change rhythm and tempo so that the audience doesn’t miss it. Then when I go back to tempo again, they just know the meaning is embedded in there.\(^4\)

Blankenbuehler brings the essence or “lifeblood of the community” to the story he wants to tell as opposed to vice versa.\(^5\) He uses the example of the movement of the both the soldiers and “ghost soldiers” to explain: “Their physicality on the dance floor has to be the same as their physicality in battle. If you have to bend your knees to not be knocked over by the tidal wave of stress, what does that feel like? Then that’s the position you do your social dance in.”\(^6\) And so, he connects a crouched low to the ground “flight or fight” physicality to the deep plié (or flexed knees) of the foundational roots of swing dance styles. Additionally, in order to keep the diegetic sense of the production numbers he rarely has dancers work in unison or perform facing the audience in a presentational style. While the moves are certainly theatricalized and polished, by avoiding a flat picture he is able to invite the audience into the community, as opposed to performing “at” them.

Taken together, Blankenbuehler undoes the elements of the social dance (timing, steps, musical accents etc.) and interlaces them with original moves and unconventional rhythms to build a mode of non-verbal communication that makes use of the embodied nostalgia in the dance while also adding a more profound resonance and meaning. Graciela Daniele works in a similar and effective fashion in *Ragtime* by deconstructing the Cakewalk to problematize racial assumptions and conflict. Likewise, Savion Glover develops a comparable strategy of fragmenting historical dances from the 1920s and blending them with percussive and hard-hitting urban tap in *Shuffle Along*. Susan Stroman does not deconstruct the dance in *Steel Pier*, but

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\(^4\) Interview by author September 12, 2017.

\(^5\) Malnig, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*, 4.

\(^6\) Interview by author September 12, 2017.
rather, she juxtaposes the animated social dances of the 1930s with moments of intimate lyrical movement to express the internal states of mind of the marathon dancers. By fragmenting the social dance idioms, weaving together modern and historical styles, or by reflecting internal and external emotions through movement what all these choreographic strategies do is meld together subversive undercurrents in the dance with the historical template to produce impact decades later. The physicalization of community memories, longings, and historical meaning demonstrates how social dance can embody implicit meanings in a story and how the embodied nostalgia elucidates racial, cultural, and political consciousness.

Historically, Bandstand takes place toward the end of the 1940s and close to the moment of transition of coupled dancing to more group based social dance. Though this transition did not happen overnight, the Swing Era faded with the approach of rock ‘n’ roll and this shift changed the way people experienced music and dance. The Stearnses explain that with the decline of swing-styled dancing and the transition into Bebop music, there was a “blackout of about ten years with little or no dancing.”\(^7\) There are a multitude of reasons for this, no singular one fully explaining the shift. There was a new federal tax on dance floors causing many dancehall owners to shut down, along with various recording bans in the 1940s that decreased circulation of music. Additionally, there was a distinct shift in jazz music to a more “Be-bop” style that was not as naturally conducive to dance styles as in the past.\(^8\) While swing band leaders at the ballrooms tried to maintain bigger bands, with rising costs, smaller venues were becoming more prominent and bands decreased in size. Scott DeVeaux explains this change in venue and rhythm created a less “popular” sound to jazz: “the rapid acceptance of bebop as the basic style by an entire generation of musicians helped pull jazz away from its previous reliance on contemporary

\(^7\) Stearns and Stearns, 1.
\(^8\) Ibid.
popular song, dance music, and entertainment and toward a new sense of the music as an autonomous art.” Moreover, the growing popularity of rock ‘n’ roll music, particularly with the younger generation increasingly opened up a space that allowed them to rebel from the older generation and their coupled social dances. Though many thought that rock ‘n’ roll was a “vulgar fad that would fade with time” it did the exact opposite. Importantly, the “jukebox” played a key role in shifting how music was consumed and how dance and physicality was experienced. Owing to the invention of the “jukebox,” the idea that music could be in diners, restaurants, schools, and gas stations was a novelty that became immediately popular. Social dances of the 1950s were experienced from a perspective that was mediated and self-curated (learning at home from the television) in a manner that allowed for a sense of self-expression that was both individual and connected to this newly forming sense of popular culture. The Stearnses succinctly describe the new generation:

   Rock-and-roll supplies a temporary solution whereby the teenager has his cake and eats it. As a fan he protests as loudly as his phonograph will permit, or as grotesquely as the latest dance suggest (he knows his parents are unfamiliar with both the music and the dances), and at the same time, he belongs to a group with identical tastes in music and dance. He is both dependent and independent—he belongs and rebels simultaneously.

What did this shift mean for social dance in musicals and what is the reflection of that shift in the contemporary era? When you begin to look at musicals set after the 1950s, in the era of rock ‘n’ roll there is a different sort of nostalgia that emerges, where one may long for spirited group social interactions and explorations of social identity as in *Grease* (1971), or excitement and

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11 Stearns and Stearns, 2.
thrill around teen idols and fads as in *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960). On the whole, the popularity of radio and the obsession of the younger generation with the various radio programs, disc jockeys, and general social community of youth drew people together in a different way than going to a dance hall and hearing live music.

When the Twist became the latest dance fad in the late 1950s, social dance was no longer about physical connection in the same way as swing dance. Social dance, while always about creating and upholding a community ethos, is defined in the second half of the twentieth century as something entirely different, something both individual and communal, yet not coupled in the manner it once was. Susan Stroman explains that, nonetheless, there may always be a longing for the era of partner dancing, “when people see dance historically, and see what it was like when two people actually touched in a dance, I think they even long for it, and wish it were the same today.”

The body, and its movement across the stage, allows popular performance to elevate its commentary and critique of contemporary cultural and social politics. In particular, the dancing bodies of musical theatre can offer important insights and commentary on the “human predicament in the modern world.” On the stage, choreographers and directors have the opportunity to reflect back to the audience how we use our bodies to emotionally relate to each other, and to demonstrate how movement can embody our concept of home or homeland within the greater space of the world, and the significance of our physical presence as part of a community or nation. The term “embodied nostalgia” can be interpreted as an amalgamation of these factors as manifested in the body, whether through postures, movement, or dance.

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12 Interview by author, June 22, 2018.
13 Boym, 351.
While the consequences of adapting social dances to suit the needs of the production are profound (loss of ownership and authenticity), it is equally clear that there is much to be gained (social and political awareness, personal reflection, and community empowerment) when the social dance is set forth as a structure to be cultivated by choreographers. In essence, how we embody our social activities and community identities on stage will continue to be an essential indicator of self, society, and social politics.
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