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BROADWAY BODIES:  
CASTING, STIGMA, AND DIFFERENCE IN BROADWAY MUSICALS SINCE  
*A CHORUS LINE* (1975)

by  
RYAN DONOVAN

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

2019

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Broadway Bodies:  
Casting, Stigma, and Difference in Broadway Musicals Since *A Chorus Line* (1975)

by

Ryan Donovan

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

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Date

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David Savran  
Chair of Examining Committee

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Date

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Peter Eckersall  
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Jean Graham-Jones

Elizabeth Wollman

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Broadway Bodies:  
Casting, Stigma, and Difference in Broadway Musicals Since *A Chorus Line* (1975)

by

Ryan Donovan

Advisor: David Savran

“You’re not fat enough to be our fat girl.” “Dance like a man.” “Deaf people in a musical!?” These three statements expose how the casting process for Broadway musicals depends upon making aesthetic disqualifications. In this dissertation, I study how embodied identities facing social stigmatization are represented on Broadway and contextualize the representation of these identities relative to the social movements from which they emerged. My research considers the politics of representation and makes clear that casting is always a political act, situated within a power structure favoring certain bodies. Previous scholarship on casting largely centers on race and ethnicity as the central issues; my research reframes the study of casting to focus on bodies, inclusive of race and ethnicity but especially relative to ability, gender, sexuality, and size. My research addresses the inclusion of “other” kinds of embodied difference: Deaf and disabled bodies, fat female bodies, and gay male bodies.

In this dissertation, I redefine what bodies *are* fit for Broadway by providing a history of casting specific kinds of embodied difference. Interviews with key players (actors, casting directors, and producers) and archival research support this examination of casting. Though my research is grounded in theatre studies, its intervention is the application of different fields emerging from social movements designed to combat stigmatization and oppression: Deaf/Disability Studies, Fat Studies, and LGBTQ+ Studies. Musicals appear to be among the

most inclusive of the performing arts, yet my findings describe the borders of this inclusivity. The casting process is often the primary barrier for actors as they attempt to fit themselves into not just a character but a system that depends upon the aesthetics of disqualification. These systems of disqualification reenact those of US society at large at the same time that musicals perform a celebration of identities stigmatized off-stage. Broadway's appearance of inclusivity is ultimately just a performance designed to capitalize on difference in order to return profits to investors; this tension is most keenly enacted by and upon non-normative bodies. Musicals typically universalize difference as they simultaneously celebrate individuality; my research highlights the particularity of different kinds of embodied difference. These identities are forged upon histories of stigmatization and exclusion not just from the stage but from many areas of life in the US, especially labor. Each case study investigates a particular embodied identity relative to its representation in musicals and explains how these non-conforming bodies are employed in representation.

In its incorporation of Disability Studies, Fat Studies, LGBTQ Studies, and Theatre Studies, my research asks how the most globally popular theatrical form—the musical—embodies identity. Musicals make meaning through their embodiment of difference; which identities are represented onstage reveals which identities are valued. These embodied differences are profoundly tied to an actor's employability; when an actor enters the audition room she puts her body on the line—does she have a “Broadway Body” or not? In focusing on casting as a site of power relations, my research attends which bodies are cast, and which are cast aside.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my committee. Thank you to David Savran, Jean Graham-Jones, and Elizabeth Wollman for guiding me each step of the way and believing that I was going to be able to put all of the various fields and disciplines in meaningful conversation with each other. This dissertation grew out of a paper I wrote first for David's musical theatre seminar and developed further in Liz's seminar on rock musicals.

Special thanks to Judith Milhous for her encouragement early in my graduate studies as well as supporting my attendance at conferences and the opera. Matt Brim's course on LGBTQ studies was especially useful as I began to formulate my research questions. Rhonda Garelick's confidence in my work came along at a crucial moment and made me a stronger writer.

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## **“I Hope I Get It”: Casting Musicals and the Bind of the Broadway Body**

“You’re too short to be a boy, would you like to be a pony?”—Paul, *A Chorus Line*<sup>1</sup>

I lied about my height on my résumé the entire time I was a dancer, though in truth I don’t think the extra inch ever actually made a difference. There was a reason for my deception: height was often the reason I was disqualified at auditions; choreographers wanted taller male dancers for the ensemble and often listed a minimum height requirement (often 5’11” and up) in the production’s casting breakdown. Being disqualified because of my height before I could even set foot in the audition room made me aware of possessing unchangeable physical characteristics deemed not just undesirable but unemployable by those in power. Though I sometimes did manage to get cast, I became acutely aware of just how much the appearance of our bodies determines, to varying degrees, the paths open to us—not just in musical theatre, but in all facets of American life.

Casting is the process that most clearly reveals these values because it is fundamentally a site of power relations. Theatre scholar Brian Eugenio Herrera suggests that this power has something to do with scarcity, noting, “Because the number of performers seeking opportunities to perform routinely outstrips the number of roles available, great power lays in the hands of those deciding who gets a part and who does not. Every act of casting is then simultaneously a creative act of interpretation and also an administrative allocation of resources.”<sup>2</sup> Allocating

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bennett, James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, Marvin Hamlisch, and Edward Kleban, *A Chorus Line: The Book of the Musical* (New York: Applause, 1995), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Eugenio Herrera, “Looking at *Hamilton* from Inside the Broadway Bubble,” in *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America’s Past*, edited by Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 230.

roles (or resources in Herrera's terms) fundamentally connects to labor issues; for actors, auditions are effectively job interviews. Casting will always be a complicated part of the process of making a musical because of how it informs our ideas about ourselves and others. Theatre scholar Amy Cook explains, "If casting is how we come up with our idea of the others, it is also how we contain our idea of our self."<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation examines casting in order to ask how Broadway musicals stage difference. Specifically, it analyzes the inclusion of non-normative bodies on the musical's biggest stage: Broadway. Through interviews with key players, performance analysis, and archival research, I found that casting as both a labor practice and a series of aesthetic choices reveals the limits of Broadway's tolerance of difference. Casting is a resource distributed in ways that reveal what kinds of bodies are valued not just by Broadway but by US society at large, especially in the years from 1975 to today. The hyper-able Broadway Body has become the ideal body within the musical theatre industry, and, following nineteenth-century conceptions of the ideal body, the Broadway Body is actually unattainable. In sum, the kinds of roles for which an actor will be considered are prescribed by their bodies before they even enter the casting process. The casting of Broadway musicals has largely upheld the status quo of bodily norms, and when non-normative bodies have broken through they are the exceptions that prove the rule.

In this dissertation, I apply theories of embodiment to examine how stigma and identity operate in and through the bodies cast in Broadway musicals. Though grounded in theatre studies, my inquiries are in dialogue with specific fields of embodiment: Deaf and disability

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Cook, *Building Character: The Art and Science of Casting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 33.

studies, fat studies, and LGBTQ+ studies. These fields are situated side by side in this project in order to reframe our understanding of the operation of power in the casting process beyond yet still inclusive of race and ethnicity, which tend to frame how casting is discussed both by scholars and the press. My work, however, foregrounds the axes of ability, gender, size, and sexuality. Putting these identity categories in conversation with each other is not intended to flatten or conceal their very real differences but is done to highlight the interrelatedness of cultural constructions of identity in Broadway musicals. Musicals celebrate identity through song and dance even as casting and other offstage practices stigmatize it; this contradiction sparked my analysis of how musicals employ Deaf and disabled bodies, fat female bodies, and gay male bodies. This chapter begins with discussions of casting, Actors' Equity Association, and Broadway Bodies, followed by an examination of why musicals, especially *A Chorus Line*, pertain to this discussion. The chapter concludes by looking at connections between the identity categories examined in the case studies and also at how embodied difference and identity inform labor concerns.

## **Casting About**

The labor concerns around casting tend to be subsumed under “artistic license,” i.e., the creative team’s prerogative. These aesthetic choices are often about appearance, opening up a host of labor issues largely sidestepped by the professional theatre industry. Theatre scholar Angela C. Pao’s work on casting, race, and ethnicity calls attention to “the need to consider casting practices not just in terms of discursive categories and ideological interests but also as an employment policy subject to many of the same pressures and policies as other forms of work

and commerce.”<sup>4</sup> Looking the part often determines one’s employability onstage, generally presumed to relate to issues of race and ethnicity. While Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Donatella Galella, Herrera, and Pao, among others, have studied casting, theatrical representation and race/ethnicity, this dissertation speaks to different forms of inclusion and exclusion in casting.<sup>5</sup> While typical casting taxonomies are framed around race and ethnicity, there are relatively fewer terms coined for the kinds of difference studied in this dissertation apart from the relatively recent term “size-blind.”<sup>6</sup> Yet what is meant when describing casting as color, size, or otherwise-blind? Isn’t that calling attention to what is *most* visible due to theatre’s materiality? Describing casting as blind to any embodied identity reinforces disability as a metaphor, a practice critiqued later in this dissertation. Performance theorist Richard Schechner advocates for what he terms “open casting,” noting that casting “sometimes [crosses] one line but not others—race but not gender, gender but not age or body type.”<sup>7</sup> Could Schechner’s “open casting” work on Broadway? Even shows noted for their progressive casting, like *Hamilton*, only go so far.

Casting is but one part of various representational systems at play for spectators, yet it is a foundational one. Because race and ethnicity are so foundational to American life, it makes sense that they are often the central axes upon which casting hinges, too.<sup>8</sup> Ability, gender, sexuality, and size co-exist with race and ethnicity and indeed, are inseparable from them but are

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<sup>4</sup> Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[Blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), Donatella Gallela, “Racializing the American Revolution,” review of *Hamilton* GC Advocate, November 16, 2015, <http://gcadvocate.com/2015/11/16/racializing-the-american-revolution-review-of-the-broadway-musical-hamilton/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Herrera, “Looking at Hamilton from Inside the Broadway Bubble,” and Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Schechner, “Casting Without Limits,” *American Theatre*, December 2010, 30.

<sup>8</sup> I consider race and ethnicity central to US American life because of the lasting effects of chattel slavery and mass genocide of indigenous peoples as (and since) this nation was founded.

often overshadowed by them. Race and ethnicity have been the primary lens through which we view casting because of the over-representation of whiteness onstage; less-discussed is the over-representation of certain types of bodies onstage. While debates over diversity (to use the current term) have been part of mainstream theatre in the US since the 1960s, the industry as a whole has been slow to change.<sup>9</sup> Herrera writes of the most lauded musical to arouse widespread attention for its casting, “*Hamilton*’s casting conceit steps into the snarl of whether or not casting can address, much less solve, the persistent gaps in diversity, equity, and inclusion in contemporary theater.”<sup>10</sup> Cook explains how racial power dynamics erase race and ethnicity for white performers, who “are given a kind of VIP pass to enter whatever character-door they want to because white America is not always presumed to be carrying its race around.”<sup>11</sup> While I agree with Cook’s claims about whiteness and actors, I would add that even white actors are still disqualified by factors of ability, class, gender, size, and sexuality even as whiteness gives very real advantages. Casting is the site where these power dynamics are made most visible: the bodies of actors are what spectators gaze upon in the theatre—the writers, designers, directors, and choreographers are not present in the same way despite the presence of their work.

Casting’s double meaning is revealed in its usage: it can be both inclusive and exclusive; casting a wide net reads as inclusive whereas casting off means the opposite. The terms casting and auditioning describe the same situation from different points of view, the former is done by the creative team and producers while performers do the latter. The performer’s job is to become skilled at auditioning. Casting director Jay Binder describes, “The way you get a job on

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<sup>9</sup> See Pao, *No More Safe Spaces*, for a history of the debates around race and ethnicity.

<sup>10</sup> Herrera, “Looking at *Hamilton* from Inside the Broadway Bubble,” 231.

<sup>11</sup> Cook, *Building Character*, 90.



Broadway is: you walk in, and at that particular moment, you are giving an opening night finished performance.”<sup>12</sup> If only it were that simple—Broadway director-choreographer Bob Avian explains that it is not only about talent, saying, “You’ve got to like them right away.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to the intangible quality of likeability and the demand for a finished performance, performers must also be mindful that their body and appearance match what the casting breakdown advertises for the role. Casting breakdowns are but one system of disqualification devised in order to make the audition process work and to appear as fair as possible. Tobin Siebers theorizes “the aesthetics of human disqualification,” which “focus on how ideas about appearance contribute to these and other forms of oppression.”<sup>14</sup> Siebers was not writing about casting, yet his insight on how aesthetics inform disqualification is a central tenet of this dissertation. Disqualifying the majority of hopefuls is a necessary, if unpleasant, task.

Actors’ Equity Association, the union for professional actors, sets rules for casting breakdowns differing based upon the kind of contract the actors will be working under. Here are Equity’s instructions:

**CAST BREAKDOWN AND DESCRIPTION** that meets your agreement’s requirements. Some Equity agreements require complete role descriptions for all productions; others require only a list of available roles, or full descriptions for new plays/musicals only. The more complete information you provide, the better our members

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<sup>12</sup> *Every Little Step*, directed by Adam Del Deo and James D. Stern, (2009; New York: Sony Pictures Classics), Film.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 22.

are able to “type themselves” prior to attending your auditions. Don’t hesitate to give more information rather than less.

Please remember also to **ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION BY PERFORMERS OF ALL RACES AND ETHNICITIES** and, when required by your company’s agreement, to identify roles suitable for non-traditional casting in your notice.<sup>15</sup>

Note that race, ethnicity, and non-traditional casting are the *only* acknowledgements of any kind of difference mentioned in the instructions, reflecting the prevalence of these frames as the dominant ones through which the power dynamics of casting are viewed. Further, it is stipulated that non-traditional casting opportunities need only be mentioned “when required by your company’s agreement.” Most of the guidelines for casting written by Equity are purely procedural. Casting exists necessarily in somewhat of a gray area, especially when it comes to bodies and the practice of typing, which Equity suggests members do themselves. Equity’s instructions on how typing should proceed reveal the intersection of bodies, aesthetics, and labor: “‘Typing’ may be used by casting personnel to audition only those members the casting personnel determine to be physically right for the production.”<sup>16</sup> Typing is a quick way for casting personnel to sift through large numbers of applicants in order to see as many people as possible. It is the embodiment of the aesthetics of disqualification in that it quite literally rejects

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<sup>15</sup> “Auditions and Job Interviews,” Actors’ Equity Association, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/Producers/casting-call-how-to/>. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> “Equity Chorus Call Audition Procedures,” Actors’ Equity Association, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/Producers/casting-call-how-to/ecc-procedures.pdf>. Emphasis removed.

applicants solely on the basis of their physical appearance.<sup>17</sup> This would be unacceptable if not illegal in most professions outside of entertainment.

The competing needs of artistic teams, casting personnel, and producers on one side of the audition table and actors on the other side thus persistently reenact a hierarchy of bodily appearance and ability. This hierarchy is not only present in typing, but in all forms of casting, and is wed to broader notions about who is allowed to perform certain roles—and not only onstage. Representation, then, shapes not only its subjects but its objects. As performance ethnographer D. Soyini Madison explains, “Representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated.”<sup>18</sup> Yet it is not just who is represented that matters: who plays the roles is equally important. Cook’s interest in “the relationship between characters and the bodies that are chosen to represent them”<sup>19</sup> is examined in this dissertation. This relationship reveals, often unintentionally, which bodies and identities are valued.

Actors’ Equity decided that one action they could take to encourage more diverse casting on Broadway was to reward it. In 2007 Actors’ Equity began to award the Extraordinary Excellence in Diversity on Broadway Award, and this award typically has been awarded to productions with notable racially and ethnically diverse casting. Equity’s website explains, “Presented by Equity’s National Equal Employment Opportunity Committee, the Extraordinary Excellence in Diversity on Broadway Award honors shows that exemplify and promote the union’s founding principles of diversity, inclusion, non-traditional casting and equal opportunity

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<sup>17</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cook, *Building Character*, 2.

for all who work in the theatre.”<sup>20</sup> The first awards went to revivals of *110 in the Shade* (2007) and *Les Misérables* (2006) for what Equity’s Equal Employment Opportunity Committee Co-Chair Christine Toy Johnson called, “the kind of unique, diverse casting that we have been dreaming of for years: interracial families and diverse communities that reflected the true tapestry of America.”<sup>21</sup>

The award has typically gone to musicals: only four non-musical plays have been awarded since its inception. *Billy Elliott* (2008) was specifically “honored due to its multi-ethnic casting of the role of the Billy’s.”<sup>22</sup> In the award citation, Johnson explained the importance of this kind of casting, “Though many people claim to cast the ‘best person’ for every role on Broadway, unspoken in that, is the reality that even if the ‘best person’ is of a race or ethnicity not originally imagined, they may not, in actuality, even be considered.” I would add ability, gender, size, and sexuality to Johnson’s formulation. In 2014, productions that were inclusive of LGBTQ+ representations were awarded when *If/Then* (2014) and *It Shoulda Been You* (2015) were the respective winners. In 2016, Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* (2016) shared the award with *Hamilton* (2015) and *Waitress* (2016), marking the first season that three productions were deemed deserving. These awards also function as incentives to producers to cast diversely.

Because acting is at its core playing a role different from one’s self, casting will always confront questions of who gets to play whom and why this matters. Controversies over casting,

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<sup>20</sup> “Extraordinary Excellence in Diversity on Broadway Award,” Actors’ Equity Association, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/awards/DiversityOnBroadway/?page=1>.

<sup>21</sup> “2007 – 110 in the Shade and Les Misérables,” Actors’ Equity Association, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/awards/DiversityOnBroadway/110LesMiz/>.

<sup>22</sup> “2009 – Billy Elliott,” Actors’ Equity Association, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/awards/DiversityOnBroadway/BillyElliot/>.

race, and ethnicity persist; *Hamilton*'s 2016 controversy over a casting breakdown requesting "non-white" performers is but one of the most recent. Caucasian Jonathan Pryce's casting as the French-Vietnamese Engineer in *Miss Saigon* (1991) on Broadway remains the most prominent.<sup>23</sup> The case studies in this dissertation analyze issues that might have produced controversies but failed to do so, which admits the degree to which a hierarchy of bodies has been accepted as the norm. This dissertation examines how stigmatized identities have been musicalized and performed onstage by actors whose own bodies sometimes align with the narratological bodies, and the productive tension between the actor's body and the character's. Casting practices have historically favored normative bodies for all roles, even those calling for non-normative bodies. Think, for instance, of all of the able-bodied actors who have won awards for playing disabled characters. The chance to audition to play roles calling for an identity an actor inhabits should be a given, but it is not. Lennard Davis asks how this actually translates into discrimination:

In what other profession would it be acceptable to discriminate against an identity and get away with it? In what other profession would we counsel young people to forget their hopes and dreams because of rampant prejudice against the kind of person they are? The state of affairs is not acceptable, and only when we routinely see disabled actors playing disabled and nondisabled roles will the stereotypes perpetuated in the media be eliminated.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Paulson, "'Hamilton' Producers Will Change Job Posting, but Not Commitment to Diverse Casting," *New York Times*, March 30, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/arts/union-criticizes-hamilton-casting-call-seeking-nonwhite-actors.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 42.

Davis's call for what might be termed identity-based casting seeks to right a historical wrong—the right for the previously disqualified to play not just their own identity but also the range of roles regularly offered to others. This is not to say that actors should only be able to play their own identity, but that that is the place to start redressing the unequal distribution of roles. Davis contends that seeing actors with disabilities portray characters written without disabilities would effectively de-stigmatize disability, arguing, “the current state of affairs perpetuates ableism by reinforcing the audiences’ expectations both that disability is a state to be magically transformed and that nondisabled actors are high priests who reenact this sacrament every time they don a disability for a role and then remove it when they go home at night.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, performers with non-conforming bodies face the double bind of being expected to only be *able* to represent their personal identity but then often not even being considered for the accompanying roles.<sup>26</sup> When identities that cannot be removed are played by actors who can remove them, casting becomes a problem. As much as this dissertation is about casting, it is also accurate to say that it is also about re-casting. Each case study is concerned with how certain roles in/and certain musicals have been interpreted and reinterpreted through the actor's body; that is to say, casting.

## **Broadway Bodies**

What *are* Broadway Bodies? The term appears to have been popularized by the New York City-based personal training gym Mark Fisher Fitness, along with a stream of *Playbill* articles. In 2011, a sometime-actor named Mark Fisher opened an eponymously-named gym

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The term *non-conforming bodies* is borrowed from Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves, *Framing Fat: Competing Constructions in Contemporary Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

specifically designed for the Broadway community. Mark Fisher Fitness is an unqualified success, winning acclaim from diverse sources ranging from *Forbes* magazine to noted Broadway director-choreographer Jerry Mitchell. The company went digital in 2015 with a notable name: MyBroadwayBody.com. In a promotional email, Mitchell is quoted as saying, “If you want to be your best, go #fullout, and make it to BROADWAY, you can count on Mark Fisher Fitness! It is where I train, and they’re my go to resource for myself and my casts.”<sup>27</sup> *Backstage* recently noted that Mark Fisher Fitness “is particularly popular among those in the performing arts community looking to get a ‘Broadway Body.’”<sup>28</sup> The theatrical press has also picked up on the concept—an article in *Playbill* asks, “Who doesn’t want a Broadway body?”<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the Broadway Body is not just a marketing ploy but an ideology grounded in a hierarchy based upon ability, appearance, and fitness.

The rhetoric of the Broadway Body is always tied to fitness. *Spring Awakening* and *Head Over Heels* (2018) choreographer Spencer Liff was the subject of a *Playbill* feature entitled, “Follow Choreographer Spencer Liff’s Workout Routine for a Broadway Body.”<sup>30</sup> This feature shows off Liff’s hyper-fit body as it ostensibly instructs readers on how to attain their own Broadway Body. Another *Playbill* headline reads, “Thanksgiving for a Broadway Body! How to

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<sup>27</sup> Jerry Mitchell is quoted in a promotional email from Tom Burke Vocal Studio to author, November 30, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Smart, “The Broadway Body Revolution of Mark Fisher Fitness,” *Backstage*, February 9, 2016, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.backstage.com/interview/broadway-body-revolution-mark-fisher-fitness/>.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Patterson, “The Secrets to Broadway Bodies: How ‘Theatrical Ninjas’ Stay Trim, Toned, and Tight for 8 Shows a Week,” *Playbill.com*, January 31, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/the-secrets-to-broadway-bodies-how-performers-stay-trim-toned-and-tight-com-340312>.

<sup>30</sup> Spencer Liff, “Follow Choreographer Spencer Liff’s Workout Routine for a Broadway Body,” *Playbill*, August 15, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/article/follow-choreographer-spencer-liffs-workout-routine-for-a-broadway-body>.

Stay Hot and Healthy This Holiday.”<sup>31</sup> In that article, Mark Fisher dispenses fitness tips (e.g., “If you really want a Broadway Body, the context of your day-to-day eating habits matter most.”) in order to help performers “keep [their] Broadway body” and control their eating, implicitly framing fat as the enemy of the Broadway Body. Mark Fisher Fitness Trainer Geoff Hemingway dispels the notion that the Broadway Body is only one type of body or that possessing a conforming body will lead to more work: “I think a lot of people get wrapped up in that stigma of a Broadway body. I see a lot of people coming in and they’re like, ‘Man, if I can just get fit I’ll work all the time,’ and that’s not true. The fitness doesn’t breed work.”<sup>32</sup> In its advice column for performers, *Playbill* tackled the question of Broadway Bodies. Letter writer “Short and Stout” wrote in to ask, “Do I need to look a certain way to perform on Broadway?” *Playbill* answered, “The answer to which is a resounding YES – but not like how you might imagine. You ‘only’ need to look like the incredibly buff and hairless title characters in *The Rocky Horror Show* if that’s the kind of role you’re seeking.”<sup>33</sup> The article encourages “Short and Stout” to go to the gym for their health but to go to auditions to express their self. *Playbill* missed the mark in their response by reiterating the stigma of being “short and stout” by explicitly admitting that there are certain types of roles that one cannot play because of appearance.

*Playbill* did its part to establish the identity of the Broadway Body as one that is fit, toned, and sexually desirable. Despite this, it has made some nods to bodily diversity. In a

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Gioia, “Thanksgiving for a Broadway Body! How to Stay Hot and Healthy This Holiday,” *Playbill*, November 25, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/thanksgiving-for-a-broadway-body-how-to-stay-hot-and-healthy-this-holiday-com-373013>.

<sup>32</sup> Patterson, “The Secrets to Broadway Bodies.”

<sup>33</sup> Playbill Staff, “Hey, Johnny! Theatrical Advice – How Important Is a Broadway Body,” *Playbill*, January 4, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/hey-johnny-theatrical-advice-how-important-is-a-broadway-body-com-338298>.



feature on the Off-Broadway musical *Gigantic* (2015), *Playbill* asks, “Is there more than just one kind of ‘Broadway Body?’”<sup>34</sup> This article features interviews with members of the *Gigantic* (formerly known as *Fat Camp*) cast, who note that “normally—as they all attest to—shows only have room for one character of their size.” *Gigantic* actor Bonnie Milligan tells *Playbill* her dream is a love story with “a big girl [that] has nothing to do with size. Nobody ever talks about it, [but] I think all the reviews would bring it up. They would all be like, ‘Interesting casting!’”<sup>35</sup> Even when acknowledging that the Broadway Body *could* include a diverse array of body types (*Off*-Broadway in *Gigantic*’s case), bodies that do not conform to the ideal of the fit body are always positioned in opposition to it. Davis explains that the ideological point of the “ideal body” is precisely its unattainability, writing, “in a culture with an ideal form of the body, all members of the population are below the ideal.”<sup>36</sup> The ideal Broadway Body then must be understood not just as unreachable but as a way of regulating behaviors, bodies, and norms.

In fact, very few bodies attain the corporeal standards that US society has established as the norm, largely through representation in popular culture. In 1963, Erving Goffman defined the norm as “a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports.”<sup>37</sup> Goffman’s definition of the norm has retained its grip on popular culture in the US despite its incongruity with the diverse corporeality of the population. Goffman’s norm is

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Gioia, “Is Weight Just a Number? Acting, Auditioning and Being Authentic at a Bigger Size in This *Gigantic* Business,” *Playbill*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/is-weight-just-a-number-acting-auditioning-and-being-authentic-at-a-bigger-size-in-this-gigantic-business-com-375097>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso Books, 1995), 25.

<sup>37</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 128.

accompanied by a normative body. My concern here, though, is how the presence of non-normative bodies onstage challenges notions of who is considered representable.<sup>38</sup> Broadway has made strides toward integrating bodily difference, but like most progress, it has often been slow and halting. Indeed, for every progressive representation, there are numerous foils that merely reproduce the norm—often within the same show.

The concern with physical fitness as the standard for the Broadway Body is related to the rhetoric of the “triple-threat,” a performer theoretically adept at acting, dancing, and singing. The concept of the triple-threat and the Broadway Body especially applies to ensemble performers. Not coincidentally, the ensemble is where the majority of jobs in Broadway musicals exist and also the place where bodily conformity is most highly demanded. Historically dancers and singers were cast in separate choruses within the same musical (the dancing chorus or the singing chorus, respectively). This practice changed after *West Side Story* (1957), in which the performers sang and danced their entire roles—even during the “Somewhere” dream ballet, marking a shift from the double casting of the principal roles in the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* (1943). *West Side Story* was certainly not the first musical to be cast this way, but it was the one that shifted the paradigm.<sup>39</sup>

Dance ability was the variable element that tipped the scales toward triple-threats becoming the new norm in Broadway choruses; of course, this casting practice had economic

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<sup>38</sup> D.A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) There is an argument to be made that Broadway musicals have already upended this definition of the norm in their celebration of female performers. Miller notes, “the female performer will always enjoy the advantage of being thought to *represent* [the musical] stage, as its sign, its celebrant, its essence and its glory” (71).

<sup>39</sup> Brian Eugenio Herrera notes that *West Side Story*’s success “ultimately compelled a rising generation of young performers to train to be what would later come to be called a ‘triple threat.’” In *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 114.

implications as well since producers could now hire fewer performers. This shift also paralleled the rise of the singular director-choreographer, though when Agnes deMille first served in both capacities for *Allegro* (1947) she retained the conventional separation of singing and dancing. Musicals without much dancing regularly designated their cast as “ensemble” as opposed to “dancer” or “singer,” as musicals like *Guys and Dolls* (1950) did. *Wonderful Town* (1953) designated ensemble members by their role in the show, “Greenwich Villager,” rather than their primary skill set. The more dancing a show contained, the more likely it was to still list “dancers” separately in the *Playbill*, as Jack Cole did for *Kismet* (1953). Even a musical like 1954’s *The Pajama Game*, choreographed by Bob Fosse and supervised by Jerome Robbins, still relied on the old system of “dancers” and “singers.” *House of Flowers* (1954) featured noted dancers Alvin Ailey, Carmen de Lavallade, and Arthur Mitchell in choreography by Herbert Ross and Geoffrey Holder but called its ensemble members “townspeople.” There was thus a history of shrinking the size of the ensemble due to the rise of the triple-threat in the years before *West Side Story*, and this practice continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s, notably with *Pippin* (1972) and *A Chorus Line* (1975).

The creation of the triple-threat musical theatre performer thus can be directly tied to economic and labor concerns (hiring fewer performers) as well as aesthetic ones (the consolidation of control in one hybrid director-choreographer). However, the concept of the triple-threat is inherently an ableist one that glorifies extraordinary ability. Siebers explains, “The ideology of ability is at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness.”<sup>40</sup> Triple-threats are

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<sup>40</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 8.

hyper-ables, taking the ideology of ability to an extreme. Disability theorist Robert McRuer explains how “compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice.”<sup>41</sup> Like the Broadway body itself, the triple-threat is an unattainable ideal that disciplines bodies. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson details how this representation itself works to regulate the symbiotic relationship between social legitimacy and what she terms “extraordinary bodies,” bodies that do not conform. She details how “corporeal inferiority” is socially bestowed on “others” by those possessing valued characteristics, concluding, “Representation thus simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform.”<sup>42</sup> Disability studies most fruitfully examines how pervasively the ideology of ability has been mobilized. Siebers writes, “Ability is the ideological baseline by which humanness is determined. The lesser the ability, the lesser the human being.”<sup>43</sup> Lesser perceived-ability makes it easier to disqualify both individuals and groups of people, as well as making it easier to stigmatize them. However, reframing understandings of ability to be fully inclusive of all abilities paves the way to move beyond stigma.<sup>44</sup> Like gender theories, disability theories situate identity on a spectrum rather than a simple binary.

The bodies discussed in this dissertation, whether those of actor or character, can all be considered non-conforming bodies. Non-conforming bodies are defined here as those bodies

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<sup>41</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xiii.

stigmatized by their difference from the norm, both in terms of appearance and behavior. This difference is stratified by other factors from gender and race to ability and size; “the burden of body conformity falls unevenly on different groups. For example, aesthetic body norms are gendered, carrying much more weight for women than they do for men.”<sup>45</sup> Examining embodied difference in Broadway musicals from 1975 to 2015 allows me to question “the complex processes by which *all* forms of corporeal diversity acquire the cultural meanings undergirding a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power.”<sup>46</sup> These cultural meanings cannot be divorced from their relation to capital; during this period, both Broadway and the fitness industry saw massive financial gains. The rapid growth of the fitness industry since the 1970s (to an estimated \$21.4 billion in 2011) has contributed not just to changing notions of what fitness means but also what it looks like to be fit.<sup>47</sup> The Broadway theatre industry has experienced massive growth over the period as well, from grossing \$57.4 million in 1975 to a record \$1.69 billion in the 2017-2018 season.<sup>48</sup>

Broadway musicals attract the largest audiences among forms of theatre and hence have the most potential cultural and political impact in terms of representation. The fact that non-conforming and stigmatized bodies have begun to take center stage is indicative of the growing acknowledgment and integration of difference and diversity into the mainstream of US society. Because musicals are the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in the US, they are a

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<sup>45</sup> Kwan and Graves *Framing Fat*, 142.

<sup>46</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> “The Shape of the Fitness Industry,” *South Source* May 2012, accessed July 9, 2016, [source.southuniversity.edu/the-shape-of-the-fitness-industry-85375.aspx](http://source.southuniversity.edu/the-shape-of-the-fitness-industry-85375.aspx).

<sup>48</sup> *Statistical Abstract of the United States* accessed July 9, 2016, [www.census.gov/library/publications/timre-series/statistical\\_abstracts.html](http://www.census.gov/library/publications/timre-series/statistical_abstracts.html); “2017-2018 Broadway End-of-Season Statistics,” The Broadway League, <https://www.broadwayleague.com/press/press-releases/2017-2018-broadway-end-of-season-statistics/>. These figures are for Broadway only and do not include touring productions or other theatres in New York City.

locus for examining the political and cultural stakes of representation, for, as Stuart Hall notes, “There is no escape from the politics of representation.”<sup>49</sup> Despite the persistent and ever-increasing appearance of non-normative bodies in Broadway musicals of this period, it remains largely the province of the able-bodied and normative, especially in leading roles. Musical paradoxically celebrate difference while simultaneously normalizing non-normative bodies through performance, thereby neutralizing their difference. Musicals use non-conforming bodies as foils to increasingly hyper-conforming bodies in order to *perform* progressive politics within the historically conservative institution of the Broadway musical. This process often works both ways: for example, in Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*, the Deaf leading characters die while the hearing ones live; *La Cage aux Folles* featured a gay couple at a time when that was politically tenuous yet barely permitted them to touch each other; *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* each feature a fat woman in opposition to a thinner one who is staged as more “representable.” Broadway’s onstage performances of progressivism are revealed to be just performances during the casting process, an inherently complicated site where ability, bodies, employment, and labor converge. Broadway is an industry largely controlled by three major theatre owners (Jujamcyn, the Nederlander Organization, and the Shubert Organization) whose primary goal is to rent theatres to long running tenants, usually hit musicals.

Broadway musicals participate in setting aesthetic and political bodily standards but also occasionally challenge them. *American Psycho* (2016) opens with a female voiceover saying, “It took me nineteen years, but I finally developed a good relationship with my body.”<sup>50</sup> This is

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<sup>49</sup> Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (1993): 111.

<sup>50</sup> mentallo, “American Psycho – The Musical – Full Show,” YouTube video (2:16:42), uploaded July 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr911NuaqZA&t=68s>.

followed by a nearly-naked Benjamin Walker, as Patrick Bateman, flexing his muscles and describing his “Morning Routine.” Walker’s white, muscular, hyper-fit body *is* the “Broadway Body,” and he performs the first ten minutes of the show shirtless, his chiseled abs and pecs establishing Bateman’s status as an alpha-male. If *American Psycho* shores up normativity (and national identity earned through appearance and conspicuous consumption), *Head Over Heels* (2018) subverts it in its casting of Bonnie Milligan as Pamela, the most beautiful girl in the kingdom. *Head Over Heels* is arguably the first Broadway musical to star a fat woman in a role where the character’s size is not mentioned in the libretto, and the role *could* have gone to a traditional ingenue-type instead. Walker and Milligan represent opposite ends of the conforming/non-conforming spectrum, yet audiences continue to be much more likely to see Walker’s body-type on Broadway than Milligan’s despite the trend toward fat in actual American bodies, i.e., those of the audience.

Parallel to the increasing shift toward hyper-normative bodies onstage is the fact that nearly 35% of adults in the US are obese.<sup>51</sup> Trends in the kinds of normative bodies represented in popular culture can be seen as directly contradictory to the reality of society’s increasing corpulence. For every visible non-normative body in popular culture, there are scores of normative ones. This means that actors are paying more attention to their bodies in order to remain competitive—the normative body has become hyper-normative. The ever-increasing demands of performing a Broadway musical eight times a week necessitate some of the changes seen in Broadway Bodies, from notably higher technical demands placed upon dancers to

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<sup>51</sup> “Adult Obesity Facts,” cdc.gov, last modified September 21, 2015, [www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 34.9% of adults in the U.S. are obese. These rates are disproportionately higher for non-Hispanic blacks (47.8%) and Hispanic adults (42.5%).

demanding vocal roles. Conversely, there are some actors whose marketability is dependent upon their non-normativity—to flesh out a representative community onstage today generally requires a bit of bodily diversity, though this is certainly not always the goal of the casting process or the creators. Broadway actress Lisa Howard has made her career by carving out a niche as the plus-sized sidekick. She told the *New York Times*, “I’ve gotten that my whole career— ‘If you would only lose 30 pounds, you’d have every lead on Broadway. What’s wrong with you?’”<sup>52</sup> Though often non-normativity lends itself to playing second fiddle, stars like Nathan Lane and Harvey Fierstein have made the leap to leading man in large part because of their idiosyncratic differences.

### **Why Musicals?**

The Broadway Body seems to only apply to musical theatre performers, and though there are numerous examples of plays representing each of the embodied identities studied in this dissertation, musicals embody difference differently because of what musical theatre scholar Stacy Wolf terms “bodies shaped through song and dance.”<sup>53</sup> Song and dance call attention to the inherent unreality of musical theatre even as realist acting conventions continue to dominate the form. Musicals are *about* performance and virtuosity in ways that plays are not simply because the demands upon the performer are different. The pleasure given by song and dance in musicals can obscure the fact that “musicals are necessarily political, even as they appear to be only

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<sup>52</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Lisa Howard on Her Latest Broadway Show, ‘It Shoulda Been You,’” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/theater/lisa-howard-on-her-latest-broadway-show-it-shoulda-been-you.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/theater/lisa-howard-on-her-latest-broadway-show-it-shoulda-been-you.html?_r=0).

<sup>53</sup> Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 33.



entertainment.”<sup>54</sup> Musicals are problematically but productively paradoxical especially in their casting, which has been less-studied than other aspects of musicals.

Musicals are also complicated cultural texts, and scholars have delved well into formal aspects of the musical, especially those related to the so-called “integrated” musical. Scott McMillin’s *The Musical as Drama* lucidly analyzes formal aspects of the musical. McMillin tackles various elements that comprise musicals and their attendant conventions. He addresses the myth of the integrated musical, concluding, “It takes things different from one another to be thought of as integrated in the first place, and I find that the musical depends more on the difference that make the close fit interesting than on the suppression of difference in a seamless whole.”<sup>55</sup> McMillin ultimately concludes that better libretti made the musical only *seem* more integrated. Like McMillin, Andrea Most perceives difference more than integration in the form of the musical. She calls “the separation of the elements in musical comedy an *assimilation effect*.”<sup>56</sup> Among the conclusions of this dissertation is that, since 1975, it has been the inclusion of non-normative and stigmatized bodies actually making the musical more integrated—in terms of representation. This dissertation moves beyond narrative and formal aspects of musicals to study the complex materiality of the bodies performing these texts.

The Broadway musical is an institution that simultaneously gives pleasure and pain through its representation of difference. One need not dig too deeply into the canon to find that even seemingly anti-racist musicals like *West Side Story* and *South Pacific* (1949) are prime

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>56</sup> Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 9.

examples of this, from the stereotype-laden depictions of Puerto Ricans in the former to the Orientalizing characterizations of Asian women in the latter.<sup>57</sup> Scholars have elucidated this contradiction within representation in Broadway musicals. Wolf writes, “the musical often exchanges one problematic representation for another—progressive gender politics frequently accompany racist images.”<sup>58</sup> Musicologist Raymond Knapp addresses the ways that musicals have skirted central conflicts within the United States despite being markers of national identity: “That race is scarcely an issue in these musicals, which purport to portray a country that has in fact been beset throughout its history by racially motivated violence and discrimination, speaks to a smugness endemic to mythologies created . . . to reassure a nation of its essential goodness.”<sup>59</sup> Knapp’s observation about the nation remains starkly relevant in 2016, if we consider how the multi-racial casting of *Hamilton* effaces the fact that the historical figures depicted within the show were nearly all white slave-owners. Hence, the show ultimately embodies mere fantasies of inclusion and of America’s vision of itself as inclusive and exceptional.

Knapp shows “how music helps people to form a sense of who they are, whether as individuals or in relation to others.”<sup>60</sup> One strategy musicals take to shape national identity is by exploring the marriage trope, in which the binding of individuals to each other and hence, the community, stands “allegorically for the resolution of seemingly incompatible peoples—or

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<sup>57</sup> David Savran refers to this as “the combination of an explicitly antiracist politics . . . with a nakedly racist exoticism.” *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>58</sup> Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 122.

<sup>60</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, xvii.

families, classes, races, ideas, ideologies, or whatever—into a stabilized partnership.”<sup>61</sup> For Most, musicals are interesting objects for the ways that their immigrant creators used the musical as vehicles for assimilation into mainstream US national identities at and just before mid-century. The connection of national identity and Broadway must extend not just to its creators but to its performers, enacting these American mythologies onstage. As discussed earlier, the myth of the ideal body informs the “Broadway Body,” and this construction is connected to the national body and representation. Davis explains the operation of this myth: “If individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit.”<sup>62</sup>

In regard to casting, the intriguing relationship between identity and backstage musicals becomes strikingly clear. Every case study in this dissertation is a backstage musical except for Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*, prompting questions of whether off-stage exists for stigmatized identities. Goffman suggests that performance is always happening in contacts between stigmatized and non-stigmatized individuals, writing, “the stigmatized individual is likely to feel that he is ‘on,’ having to be self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making, to a degree and in areas of conduct which he assumes others are not.”<sup>63</sup> This relationship may be one major reason why backstage musicals tend to be about non-normative and stigmatized identities.<sup>64</sup> As I argue in the chapter on Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*, ASL is always already performative, perhaps quelling the need to stage identity via a backstage musical. My research on

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<sup>61</sup> Knapp, *National Identity*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Even *Gypsy*, which might be the ultimate backstage musical, treads this line.

*La Cage* and other representations of gay men in musicals examines how gay men are persistently staged in close proximity to performance.

Backstage musicals sometimes blur the distinction between the “reality” of the musical’s narrative and the performance scenes. As I will discuss regarding *La Cage aux Folles*, this blurring serves to disrupt over-simplified notions of identity. In *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray*, the moves between backstage and onstage (or onscreen and off in the latter’s case) demonstrate how the politics of size inform what kinds of bodies are considered representable. While these musicals are very clearly about performance, *Spring Awakening* is decidedly not, despite the fact that all of the musical numbers comment on but are not part of the action. How, then, do deafness and disability function as markers of authenticity—and how does this relate to other markers of authenticity in the musical, especially like blackness in *Dreamgirls*? What function does authenticity serve in such an unrealistic genre of performance? Why does disability seem both more real and more performative?<sup>65</sup> Siebers concludes that this is “because disability is properly speaking an aesthetic value, which is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel.”<sup>66</sup> Broadway musicals stage identity through aesthetic values in a commercial setting in New York City, the cultural and financial capital of the United States, making the value of bodies onstage not only aesthetic values but also, crucially, economic ones tied to labor issues. No single musical synthesizes all of these myriad concerns about aesthetics, bodies, casting, fitness, and labor better and more succinctly than *A Chorus Line*.

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<sup>65</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

## **“I Really Need This Job”: *A Chorus Line* and Casting as Labor**

This project’s timespan begins in 1975 with *A Chorus Line* for several reasons, the foremost of which is that it is a musical about casting a Broadway show but also, crucially, about how the performance of identity informs the casting process within the show. *A Chorus Line* remains notable for both its inclusiveness and frankness about racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Wolf explains another shift related to the show: “The overall structure and narrative of *A Chorus Line* move away from earlier musicals’ tracing of a heterosexual love story.”<sup>67</sup> While it does not include any LGBTQ+ love stories, *A Chorus Line* humanized gay men (and adolescent sexual experimentation between girls) in ways unlike its predecessors on Broadway by appealing to audiences’ senses of humor and pathos. *A Chorus Line* also explores intersecting lines of identity; what, for instance, does it mean to be a Puerto Rican actress at the High School of Performing Arts or black boy growing up as a dancer in Missouri?

In its turn inward to the lives of chorus dancers, the musical met the moment of the “Me Decade.” The characters sing and dance about everything from gonorrhea to “seeing Daddy naked” as they divulge their secrets to Zach, the director they are hoping will cast them in the chorus line of an unnamed musical. That the musical they are auditioning for is so generic it is rarely mentioned is *A Chorus Line*’s point: the dancers’ bodies are what is visible and specific. Musicologist Millie Taylor describes the paradox that makes the musical work, writing, “while the company is straining to conform to requirements, the director is asking them to articulate their individuality, highlighting, for the audience, the tension between individuality and

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<sup>67</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121.

conformity.”<sup>68</sup> *A Chorus Line* brilliantly embodies a paradox of musical theatre: auditioning for a spot in the chorus ironically requires the dancer to differentiate herself so that she may successfully fit in to a unified ensemble. The audience has been asked all evening to see the dancers as individuals at the same time we desire for them to be cast in the chorus, where they will have to conform.

Musical theatre scholar Bruce Kirle, however, contends that “the characters in *A Chorus Line* fight for assimilation into insider status by ultimately losing their identities.”<sup>69</sup> Kirle’s suggestion that the characters lose their identities is a provocative one, yet wouldn’t this also apply to anyone playing any role in a musical, whether chorus dancer or star? On one level, acting is about taking on new identities; on another, casting reveals the complexity of identity politics by making identity more visible in who gets to play whom. Additionally, the insider status suggested by Kirle is actually that of being a working dancer, which is no small achievement but is also the lowest rung on the hierarchy of employment on Broadway. Kirle forecloses the possibility that identity may actually be liberated by performance in *A Chorus Line*—it is not assimilation they are ultimately after but simply a job, albeit a job that allows them “the chance to dance.” Though Kirle claims the musical’s ultimate message “is not an egalitarian ideal but a demand for mediocrity,” *A Chorus Line*’s message is suggested in its finale, embodying the motto of the United States itself, *E pluribus unum*, out of many, “One.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Millie Taylor, “Singing and Dancing Ourselves: The Politics of the Ensemble in *A Chorus Line* (1975),” in *Gestures of Music Theatre*, ed. Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 281.

<sup>69</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 151.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 151.

However, identity's meaning and its treatment in *A Chorus Line* became major points of criticism for scholars, which matters to this dissertation because this musical presented difference differently and set the stage for the shows that followed. Dramaturg and scholar Warren Hoffman argues that the musical's veneer masks its true priorities, writing, "what drives the show forward is the racial politics of the seventies, which were infused with ethnic multiculturalism, new sparks from a then-burgeoning gay rights movement, and the previous decade's civil rights activism."<sup>71</sup> He goes on to claim that the musical stages its audition-setting as a level playing field, "where one's racial or ethnic background is not a hindrance to that success but an identity to embrace and a reason to celebrate."<sup>72</sup> The very idea of a level playing field is itself a fiction, and arguably *A Chorus Line* depicts both the struggle and the uplift of being a minority in the 1970s-era United States by acknowledging class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality but not essentializing them. If anything, everyone in the show is considered as a dancer first, prompting Hoffman to claim, "racial difference is treated no differently from any other kind of difference."<sup>73</sup>

However, the musical never reveals what or whom director-choreographer Zach is looking to hire beyond four men and four women adept at multiple styles of dance. The dancers in the show *perform* their difference, beginning with Mike's story of being a male dancer in "I Can Do That." These performances of embodied identity are given primarily for an audience of one: Zach, who holds the power over casting the dancers. This power dynamic informs the

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<sup>71</sup> Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 144.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 157.

dancers' presentation of themselves, perhaps precluding the musical from making race and ethnicity even more central. I consider Hoffman's critiques of the show at length because they admit the extent to which casting is typically considered in terms of race and ethnicity. While Hoffman and others contend that *A Chorus Line* flattens ethnic, racial, and sexual difference (Hoffman pejoratively refers to *A Chorus Line* as "the Benetton of Broadway Musicals"),<sup>74</sup> what is gained by this approach is that difference is situated right alongside the more normative identities. Every performer has a song or an individual moment to showcase his or her ability, differentiating it from other examples of Broadway musicals and shows like *South Pacific* that literally deny some characters the right to sing. *A Chorus Line* inspired the research questions explored by this dissertation, precisely because the issues the show raises remain relevant. The show also notably and explicitly highlights the idea of a Broadway Body in Val's song "Dance: Ten, Looks: Three." Body type is specifically tied to ability and, more importantly, employability.

In *A Chorus Line*'s original cast, many cast members were performing versions of their own life stories (or those of their fellow cast members).<sup>75</sup> When casting the 2006 Broadway revival, Baayork Lee, the show's original Connie, quipped, "Do I get a chance to say who I want to play my life?"<sup>76</sup> Critiques of *A Chorus Line* tend to elide its ethnographic aspects as well as what its origins mean for recasting the show. Co-choreographer Avian explains, "Casting always

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>75</sup> There are at least four books devoted to this: Denny Martin Flinn, *What They Did for Love: The Untold Story Behind the Making of A Chorus Line* (New York: Bantam, 1989); Tom Rowan, *A Chorus Line FAQ: All That's Left to Know About Broadway's Singular Sensation* (New York: Applause, 2015); Gary Stevens, *The Longest Line: Broadway's Most Singular Sensation: A Chorus Line* (New York: Applause, 2000); Robert Viagas, Baayork Lee, and Thommie Walsh, *On the Line: The Creation of A Chorus Line* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1990).

<sup>76</sup> *Every Little Step*.



is the biggest challenge. Just finding those people and trying not to duplicate the original cast. The roles, however, are very specific. They corner you in terms of their age and ethnicity and it's difficult to veer too much."<sup>77</sup> Before it became a series of Michael Bennett-helmed workshops, dancers Michon Peacock and Tony Stevens had the idea to form a company of dancers who would produce their own work as a way to ensure that dancers and choreographers were valued contributors but also simply as a way to create jobs for dancers. *A Chorus Line* biographer Denny Martin Flinn explains, "This dancers' repertory company seemed like a viable way to avoid the ridiculous ineptitude under which they so often suffered."<sup>78</sup> Bennett soon became involved in a series of rap-sessions where dancers told their stories, which became *A Chorus Line*'s source material. Not only was *A Chorus Line* sparked by the idea that dancers needed more opportunities to work, but it was created out of their very lives—their identities as dancers, as Puerto Rican, as gay, as the child of divorced parents.

*A Chorus Line* shifted the paradigm of how Broadway musicals were created, both in its inclusion of multiple kinds of diversity and because of its then-unique development process through a series of workshops. These workshops took place downtown at The Public Theater, a few miles south of the Broadway theatre district. Though *Hair* had transferred successfully to Broadway from the Public, *A Chorus Line* was different because of the Broadway bona fides of its personnel. Also, the meta-theatrical conceit of a musical about the process of casting a

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Denny Martin Flinn, *What They Did for Love: The Untold Story Behind the Making of A CHORUS LINE* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 8.

musical made it the ultimate backstage musical.<sup>79</sup> It changed not only the way that musicals were created, but also the way that musicals dealt with difference and identity.

## **Difference, Identity, Labor, and Stigma**

The connection between labor, “fitness,” and ability informs each case study in this dissertation. Fitness, in several senses, has long been the standard for determining ability. In the US, this began to firmly coalesce in the nineteenth century as a result of the Industrial Revolution and capital’s growing need for specific kinds of bodies. The nineteenth century also saw the concept of the “ideal body” replaced by the “normal body.”<sup>80</sup> Normalcy, then, took on the role of setting hegemonic standards of who fit where as physical fitness itself “became more closely linked to notions of virtue, moral purity, and power.”<sup>81</sup> The history of fitness in the US is marked by class, gender, race, and sexuality—the timespan of this project alone includes the rise of the “clone” look among gay men of the 1970s, actor Jane Fonda’s reinvention as exercise guru, the spread of high-priced specialized exercises like Pilates, and the rise of fitness celebrities like Susan Powter and Richard Simmons.<sup>82</sup> However, each of the non-normative body types I address can trace many of the modern roots of their stigmatization to the nineteenth century and changing notions of the body, labor, and physical fitness. Concurrently, there was a change in the perception of the body and fitness among Americans: “The 1800s mark the time

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<sup>79</sup> *[Title of Show]* (2006) would attempt a similar feat about the process of writing a musical and would make the leap from Off-Broadway to Broadway in 2008. It flopped.

<sup>80</sup> Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>81</sup> Shelly McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 2.

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Black, *Making the American Body: The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013). Black provides an in-depth history of the personalities that shaped US fitness trends.

when Americans came to be more comfortable with physical activity for its own sake, and this can be associated with a significantly more favorable view of the human body.”<sup>83</sup> This trend continued into the next century, with the rise of physical culture and physical education programs. Urbanization and industrialization changed bodies and their social position. The growing dominance of the fit body as a physical and moral standard marked bodies that did not conform as deficient and deviant.

Fitness, of course, refers both to mental and physical abilities, but also to general readiness to perform a task or job, inevitably referring to some form of labor. Garland-Thomson argues, “Labor, the definitive creed of Puritan through contemporary America, transforms necessity into virtue and equates productive work with moral worth, idleness with depravity.”<sup>84</sup> If labor is the defining creed of contemporary neoliberal America, how then do non-normative and non-conforming bodies “fit” into the system? How does the institution of the Broadway musical, among the most laborious of theatrical genres for actors performing eight shows a week, employ non-normative bodies? Industrialization and standardization changed both labor and laborers, while also becoming closely bound to notions of national identity—productive workers become productive consumers, hence productive citizens who form a productive nation.<sup>85</sup>

Davis describes the “industrial mentality that saw workers as interchangeable and therefore sought to create a universal worker whose physical characteristics would be uniform, as would the result of their labors—a uniform product.”<sup>86</sup> This mentality can be seen in the concept

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<sup>83</sup> Robert A. Meehikoff and Steven G. Estes, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education: from Ancient Civilizations to the Modern World*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 262.

<sup>84</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 47.

<sup>85</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 86.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

of not just the Broadway Body but also in the well-oiled machine of a big Broadway musical, which requires uniformity of performance night after night. This uniformity need not be negative: on the one hand it is a safety issue for performers and on the other it ensures that audiences are delivered the same product night after night. Recreating a musical eight times a week is a kind of Fordist production, demanding machine-like precision from its bodies. Davis details how the worker's body came to be machine-like, "'Able-bodied workers' were those who could operate machines, and the human body came to be seen as an extension of the factory machinery. Ironically, this reciprocity between human and machine led to a conception of the mechanical perfection of the human body."<sup>87</sup> The Broadway Body reforms this reciprocal relationship in that the body itself becomes the machine revealing how the ideologies of late-capitalist neoliberalism are first and foremost embodied.

Just as industrialization produced changes in bodies through changing requirements of labor, neoliberalism (from the 1970s on) similarly produced new demands that cannot be divorced from their effects on bodies. Neoliberalism regulates the body, which "becomes a place where capitalism's contradictions are temporarily resolved" as bodies both labor and consume.<sup>88</sup> Though neoliberalism is enacted by and upon the body, Lisa Duggan notes how "contemporary neoliberal policies have been implemented in and through culture and politics, reinforcing or contesting relations of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or nationality."<sup>89</sup> Neoliberalism and the growing demands of bodies to be hyper-able also produced strong effects

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>88</sup> Julie Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 192.

<sup>89</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xiv.

for people with disabilities that compounded their already-marginalized position as laborers, dating from the Machine Age.

Disability was increasingly viewed through a moralistic lens of neoliberal personal responsibility in the U.S.<sup>90</sup> Sarah F. Rose describes how “people with disabilities [were rendered] unproductive citizens in the cultural imagination: a concept central to disability policy in the United States during the rest of the twentieth century,” and that this in turn became a self-perpetuating cycle keeping people with disabilities from full participation in the labor market, and hence, from full participation as citizens.<sup>91</sup> Neoliberalism also had profound effects on fat people and gay communities. Sociologists Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves explain, “neoliberalism is closely tied to personal responsibility; if individuals are able to make their own choices and do so in an autonomous and rational manner, then they must deal with the consequences of their choices. This includes any choices they make about their bodies.”<sup>92</sup> The ideology of personal responsibility leads to fatness being perceived as a choice resulting from a lack of willpower. As food studies scholar Julie Guthman explains, “The perfect subject-citizen is able to achieve both eating and thinness.”<sup>93</sup> Citizens will ideally spend money on food and diet and exercise, regulating their bodies by being good consumers.

LGBTQ+ communities have also felt the impact of neoliberal ideologies; as the chapter on *La Cage aux Folles* examines, as the shift from a rhetoric of gay liberation to gay pride emblemizes. Duggan explains that, as a result of neoliberal politics, “gay civil rights groups

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<sup>90</sup> Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s-1930s* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 227.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Kwan and Graves, *Framing Fat*, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies,” 193.

have adopted neoliberal rhetoric and corporate decision-making models. No longer representative of a broad-based progressive movement, many of the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations have become the lobbying, legal, and public relations firms for an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite.”<sup>94</sup> Subsequently, instead of liberation, corporatized gay rights groups fought for assimilation into institutions like marriage and the military. In sum, there are few, if any, identities in American life that have not been shaped by neoliberalism. Since neoliberalism is widely agreed to have developed in the mid-1970s, its trajectory directly parallels the time period of the case studies in this dissertation.<sup>95</sup>

The identities in question coalesced *as identities* in the late nineteenth century and generated associated social movements during or by the 1960s in the US in order to combat the corrosive effects of stigmatization. Stigma connects the embodied identities studied in this dissertation, as stigma has historically been concerned with bodily difference used to disqualify, or discredit as Goffman suggests, its bearers.<sup>96</sup> Goffman explains, “The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids, originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier.”<sup>97</sup> Each of the identities discussed in this dissertation has been historically pathologized, stigmatized, slated for eradication, and remains so today in many contexts. While race and ethnicity generally are considered fixed, the embodied identities examined in this dissertation (specifically, Deaf and disabled people, fat women, and gay men) have historically been considered changeable, curable,

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<sup>94</sup> Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, 45.

<sup>95</sup> See David Harvey, *a Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>96</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Stigma is translated from Ancient Greek as a mark or a brand, usually made by a stick.

or fixable—from current debates over cochlear implants for the Deaf and the rise of gay conversion therapy to the never-ending “war on obesity” and the marginalization of people with physical disabilities. Fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco describes how anxiety over “gay” genes and “fat” genes contributes to what she terms the “new consumer eugenics movement aimed at abolishing aberrations [d]eemed socially or aesthetically undesirable.”<sup>98</sup> Stigma prevents the non-stigmatized from seeing the stigmatized as fully human, which in turn imposes limitations on and discrimination against the stigmatized.<sup>99</sup>

Disability theorists have elucidated how stigma’s purpose is to consolidate power and to regulate the social position of the “others.” In this way it is like neoliberalism’s upward distribution of power and resources, and stigmatization reinforces the dominant group’s power.<sup>100</sup> Goffman’s formulation of the norm addresses how race, size, sexuality, gender, and ability are themselves implicated in hierarchies of normativity and stigmatization. The norm, like gender, is reiterated through repeated performance; this reiteration is how the norm becomes self-reinforcing but also leads to what McRuer terms “compulsory able-bodiedness.” He writes, “If anything, the emphasis on identities that are constituted through repetitive performances is even more central to compulsory able-bodiedness—think, after all, of how many institutions in our culture are showcases for able-bodied performance.”<sup>101</sup> Compulsory normativity regulates bodies and behaviors and “create[s] an imperative to be normal.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, “Quest for a Cause: The Fat Gene, the Gay Gene, and the New Eugenics,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 65.

<sup>99</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 31.

<sup>101</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 9.

<sup>102</sup> Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 39.

Stigmatization is not just an individual problem—it is also a social one. Garland-Thomson notes, “the problems we confront are not disability, ethnicity, race, class, homosexuality, or gender; they are instead the inequalities, negative attitudes, misrepresentations, and institutional practices that result from the process of stigmatization.”<sup>103</sup> Social movements, including those for disability rights, fat acceptance, and gay liberation, arose out of the need for political visibility and social acceptance. To varying degrees, these movements rely on the act of “coming out” as a primary way to achieve their ends. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously wrote about the need to come out fat.<sup>104</sup> For gay liberationists, the importance of coming out can be summed up in Harvey Milk’s dictum, “You must come out.” Coming out is also complicated by the degree to which one’s discrediting attribute, in Goffman’s terms, is visible. Coming out, for all of these identities, alone could not solve the political differences between liberationist and assimilationist factions within social movements. These differences help frame the case studies in this dissertation; for example, I examine *La Cage aux Folles* in the context of gay liberation’s final years and *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* as examples of Broadway’s ambivalence toward fat acceptance, and how Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* stages the effects of mainstreaming Deaf education. Each of these identities also begat academic fields (Deaf studies, disability studies, fat studies, and LGBTQ+ studies), which form this project’s theoretical bases. This dissertation, in its particular application of the aforementioned fields, locates itself as culturally-specific to U.S. interventions in and understandings of these theories of embodiment.

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<sup>103</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 32.

<sup>104</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” in Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 229.



While these fields initially sought to examine and theorize their specific identities, they have all moved toward understanding their inter-relatedness. Disability studies has led the way in this regard, which Siebers explains is because “disability requires a broad consideration of identity politics beyond communities of interest based on race, nation, class, gender, and sex.”<sup>105</sup> McRuer sees connections between disability and queerness, which he contends “both have the potential to disrupt the performance of able-bodied heterosexuality, both must be safely contained—embodied—in others.”<sup>106</sup> LeBesco details how “fatness and queerness disrupt U.S. social and economic hierarchies” as they intersect with class and race.<sup>107</sup> Central to the fact that these identities often intersect is the fact that all were considered disabling by the late nineteenth century:

Eugenics saw the possible improvement of the race as being accompanied by diminishing problematic peoples and their problematic behaviors—these peoples were clearly delineated under the rubric of feeble-mindedness and degeneration as women, people of color, homosexuals, the working classes, and so on. All these were considered to be categories of disability, although we do not think of them as connected in this way today.<sup>108</sup>

Disability remains the most contentious and also the most capacious identity category; while all of the terms for identity are umbrella terms, disability retains such stigma that it is resisted—even when it may be politically advantageous for some groups to claim disability in certain

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<sup>105</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 72.

<sup>106</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 24.

<sup>107</sup> LeBesco, “Quest for a Cause,” 68.

<sup>108</sup> Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 14.

contexts. This is often due to overlapping oppression; LeBesco notes, “Many fat activists have resisted political affiliation with disability activists, despite significant commonalities, because of the double whammy of stigma that such a liaison might occur.”<sup>109</sup> Davis concludes, “disability is the identity one may become part of but didn’t want.”<sup>110</sup> Disability is also the one identity category many people age into and one that they fear.

The place of importance given to disability studies in this project highlights, as disability theorist Michael Bérubé explains, the fact that “disability . . . is a particularly elusive element to introduce into any conjectural analysis, not because it is so distinct from sexuality, class, race, gender, and age but because it is always already so complexly intertwined with everything else.”<sup>111</sup> An aim of this project is to query what counts as ability in musicals, for whom, and to interrogate how musicals *use* disability. What about fatness or sexuality? How might other stigmatized bodies relate to this paradigm? As a performance idiom that celebrates ability and virtuosity, musicals provide a unique paradigm for analyzing performance and non-normative bodies from a critical disability studies perspective. How, what, and whom do musicals disable and/or enable and how does a focus on casting illuminate this?

## Chapter Summaries

The case studies in this dissertation present exceptions to the rule of the norms of casting Broadway musicals. Each of these musicals was a breakthrough in some way and each offers the chance to reflect upon what casting reveals about the normative operations of representation in

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<sup>109</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 74.

<sup>110</sup> Davis, *Bending over Backwards*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Bérubé, forward to McRuer, *Crip Theory*, viii.

Broadway musicals. As Siebers explains, “Some bodies are excluded by dominant social ideologies—which means that these bodies display the workings of ideology and expose it to critique.”<sup>112</sup> Even when bodies not usually seen in certain roles or contexts appear there (like a fat woman playing a romantic lead), musicals remain complex texts and evince ambivalence at the same time they seem to be celebratory. LeBesco clarifies, “Even cultural transformations that seem intended to destigmatize can position their constituents in politically precarious places.”<sup>113</sup> Each of the following chapters interrogates casting through its respective academic field and related social movement.

Chapter Two examines the use of fat suits in *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* in relation to casting and recasting the female leading roles, the only two to usually cast fat women on Broadway during this period. The use of fat suits calls identity into question, in that the suit can be taken off at will unlike one’s actual weight, which reifies stigmatizing ideas about fat people: that they can change their body but choose not to. These musicals have an ambivalent relationship to fat; *Dreamgirls*’ creative team went to lengths to disavow fatness while still using fat suits, while *Hairspray* contractually required actors to maintain a certain weight while simultaneously promoting exercise regimes and unhealthy diets on them.

Chapter Three studies how *La Cage aux Folles*, the first Broadway musical to feature a same-sex romantic leading couple, parallels the then-contemporary tactical shift of the gay rights movement from a rhetoric of gay liberation to gay equality and pride. The musical’s revivals in the vastly changed landscape of gay rights in the early 2000s are considered relative to how their

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<sup>112</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 33.

<sup>113</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 119-120.

new historical context produced new meanings and new receptions. The stars of the original production proclaimed their heterosexuality regularly in the press but when the first revival actually cast two gay men in the roles, this historic fact was not reported. This chapter also explores the implications of the mixed-gender casting of the Cagelles in the original production and how this was used to attract audiences.

Finally, Chapter Four considers how Deaf West Theatre's Broadway production of *Spring Awakening* forces reconsideration of the notion of ability in its inclusion of acting, dancing, signing, singing, and wheeling performers. This production is theorized as a contact zone (after Mary Louise Pratt) between Deaf and hearing people both onstage and in the audience and how this stages Deafness and disability as inherently pedagogical identities for ableist audiences. While the other case studies evince a strong amount of ambivalence about non-normative identity, Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* sidesteps this for several reasons explored in the chapter. However, while the other musicals in this dissertation were long-running hits, *Spring Awakening* was a critical success but a financial flop.

Musicals make meaning through their embodiment of difference; which identities are represented onstage reveal which identities are valued. As such, musicals extend the promise of "a place for us" so that we, too, might just feel free to declare "We Are What We Are." These embodied differences are profoundly tied to an actor's employability; when an actor enters the audition room she puts her body on the line—does she have a Broadway Body or not? This moment was memorably musicalized in *A Chorus Line*'s "Dance: Ten, Looks: Three," in which the character Val relates noticing how her appearance prevented her from getting cast until she underwent plastic surgery (she bought new "tits and ass," as the song goes) to have a conforming appearance. Suddenly, she was getting cast (in national tours). Casting is exciting because it is

dangerous. It can be the difference between a success and a failure. It can cause controversy and it can give hope. In focusing on casting as a site of power relations, my research attends which bodies are cast, and which are cast aside.

## **“Such a Big, Big Girl!”: Casting and Fat Stigma**

“But, after a while I caught on. I mean, I had eyes . . . I saw what they were hiring.”—  
Val, *A Chorus Line*<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins “Dance: Ten; Looks: Three,” commonly referred to as “Tits and Ass” after the body parts the song is about. This chapter begins with the character Val’s song from *A Chorus Line* because it directly addresses the relationship between body type and employment in Broadway musicals. As the song progresses, Val details the lengths that she has gone to just to get cast in musicals: body modification surgery to conform to dominant standards of beauty. Val relates that the surgery worked and, as a result, so did she: “Suddenly I’m getting nash’nal tours!/Tits and ass won’t get you jobs/Unless they’re yours.”<sup>2</sup> While other jobs may have certain physical requirements to perform certain tasks, how many other industries require a body to look a certain way to gain employment? On Broadway, as often as not, bodies are required *not* to look a certain way in order to gain employment. Though Val now sports a conforming body, the experience she describes admits that the demands placed upon non-conforming bodies are even greater, while their employment opportunities are even fewer, especially if you are a fat woman.

While all forms of entertainment confront this issue, this chapter examines how Broadway, which prides itself on being a progressive space within the entertainment industry at large, continues to rely upon outdated and narrow notions of body type when it comes to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bennett, James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, Marvin Hamlisch, and Edward Kleban, *A Chorus Line: The Book of the Musical* (New York: Applause, 1995), 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

casting—an inherently discriminating (as opposed to explicitly discriminatory) labor practice, the consequences of which extend beyond simply who gets the part.<sup>3</sup> To varying degrees, being discriminating in casting falls under the umbrella of creative license, yet the lack of opportunities for fat actors reveals that weight-based discrimination is and has been so widespread on Broadway that it is accepted as natural. “Just as years of discrimination against people on the basis of skin color has led to a cycle of oppression which continues to challenge the foundation of the country’s commitment to equality, so, too, will weight discrimination if left unchecked,” contends legal scholar Sonda Solovay. “Discrimination in employment creates a legacy of lost opportunity for some and unfair advantages for others.”<sup>4</sup> This chapter examines bodies that do not conform (“nonconforming bodies”) to dominant socio-cultural standards in order to gain employment on Broadway despite the stigmatization of being fat and female. The relation of anti-fat stigma to the labor practice of casting informs the research questions that this chapter considers: How do fat female bodies fit into socio-economic and representational systems that stigmatize them, especially the closed economy of Broadway musicals? How is fat gendered, racialized, and sexualized in the musical? How do Broadway musicals paradoxically normalize *and* stigmatize these bodies in production through the use of fat suits, and in reception via critical responses?

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<sup>3</sup> Broadway performers have a long history of forming activist groups and giving benefit concerts in response to sociopolitical issues from AIDS (Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS) and marriage equality (Broadway Impact) to the election of Donald J. Trump (Concert for America). These groups have been driven by Broadway performers rather than Broadway producers.

<sup>4</sup> Sonda Solovay, JD, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 118.

These questions are investigated through case studies of the *only* Broadway musicals post-*A Chorus Line* (1975) to cast fat actors as the female lead: *Dreamgirls* (1981) and *Hairspray* (2002). Each musical is notably a backstage musical, raising provocative questions about the relation of fatness and performance and whether a fat female actor could play the lead on Broadway in a musical *not* about performance in some way. Casting director Craig Burns worked on *Hairspray* from the beginning, and it remains his favorite production after nearly twenty years of working as a casting director. He explains that this was because he enjoyed working with people who “just weren’t normally considered for leads in a show, and now all of a sudden these girls are getting a chance because we need a fat girl. There was so much joy in that.”<sup>5</sup> This chapter proceeds with a discussion of how the stigmatization of fat in the US relates to representation in Broadway musicals, and explores how fatness is imbricated with fitness before delving into the two case studies. Each case study begins by describing the narrative of the musical in question, with a particular focus on how the text attends to fat. The case studies then detail the casting processes of each musical’s leading role, address the musical’s critical reception, and conclude with first-person accounts of involved parties. The visibility of these female leading roles has given them iconic status, not only due to the particular performance demands but also because their visibility as roles usually cast with fat women underscores how the narrative arc of each of these characters is in some way tied to a fight for their own individual visibility.

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Burns (casting director, Telsey + Company), in discussion with author, September 2017.



## Fat, Representation, and Stigma

Fat, of course, is notable for its visibility, which paradoxically raises the specter of feeling invisible as a fat person; LeBesco explains how “fat, unlike gender, *is* written on the body for *all* to see.”<sup>6</sup> Stigma, too, rests on a paradox of visibility, because it makes certain bodies invisible due to the very visible attributes that stigmatize them—fat people may be seen but ignored as a result. Stigma, of course, has been grounded in bodily difference since the Greeks coined the term “to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier.”<sup>7</sup> Anti-fat stigma is a specific kind of oppression that cuts across class, gender, and gender, though it affects poor women of color disproportionately. Anti-fat stigma is inherently intersectional:

The stigma of being fat is similar to other traits that have been used to oppress, but it is also different. Is being fat more like being queer, in that you don’t have a “community” growing up, you sense that it is an intimate part of your identity, and you might try hard to change it before you accept it? Is it more like being a member of a stigmatized ethnic group, because you cannot hide it from other people and it can be a reason you don’t get a job? Is it more like being seen as disabled, because it can affect your mobility and access? Is it more like being a smoker, because it is supposed to be your own fault, you supposedly could change it if you tried hard enough, and maybe you do have the experience of changing it temporarily? Or is it more like being a woman,

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 1.

since so much of the stigma has to do with the despised (alleged) traits of femaleness (neediness, being out of control, and the overwhelming appetites of the female body)?<sup>8</sup>

Activists and scholars have banded together to combat stigma by making visible the processes and structures that enable its persistence and its pervasiveness. This chapter intervenes by examining how Broadway musicals, even an ostensibly fat-positive musical like *Hairspray*, are complicit in labor practices that unintentionally contribute to anti-fat stigma due to the economic imperatives of a big Broadway production. Even though each of these shows won multiple Tony Awards, including for Best Actress in a Musical, and ran for years, Broadway has not cast fat women as the lead outside them. Size-blind casting has not yet gained the currency of color-blind or color-conscious casting.

Fat is stigmatized partially because it is viewed as something that a person can put on or take off at will, something that one *can* control but does not. The social psychology of stigma indicates that “‘visibility’ and ‘controllability’ are the most important dimensions of stigma for the experience of both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized person.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, fat people shirk the mandate of personal responsibility (or “controllability”) that is the hallmark of neoliberal capitalist society.<sup>10</sup> In *Framing Fat*, sociologists Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves

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<sup>8</sup> Deb Burgard, Elana Dykewoman, Esther Rothblum, and Pattie Thomas, “Are We Ready to Throw Our Weight Around? Fat Studies and Political Activism,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 339.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Dovidio, Brenda Major, and Jennifer Crocker, “Stigma: Introduction and Overview,” in *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, eds. Todd F. Heatherton, Robert E. Kleck, Michelle R. Hebl, and Jay G. Hill (New York: The Guildford Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>10</sup> See also Jennifer Crocker and Diane M. Quinn, “Social Stigma and the Self: Meanings, Situations, and Self-esteem,” in Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, and Hill, *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, 153-183. Crocker and Quinn explain how the Protestant ethic of individual responsibility also affects anti-fat attitudes.

build upon David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism to explain how this ideology becomes enacted upon the body:

As economic ideology, neoliberalism works with the assumption that these choices [of individuals] are autonomous and rational. The neoliberal subject is presumably rational and acts without undue influence. As such, neoliberalism is closely tied to personal responsibility; if individuals are able to make their own choices and do so in an autonomous and rational manner, then they must deal with the consequences of their choices. This includes any choices they make about their bodies. Subsequently, the body is a domain of personal responsibility, and any risks it might incur are assumed by the individual, not the community.<sup>11</sup>

While there are many factors that determine the size of one's body (from environment and genetics to usual suspects like diet and exercise), weight is seen too often through a moralistic lens that equates fatness with failure. This perceived failure is both the inability of the fat person to control not just their behaviors and appetites but also their inability to conform to dominant aesthetic bodily standards.<sup>12</sup> On Broadway, a nonconforming body potentially limits the kinds of employment options available and, at the same time, may also paradoxically be the reason an actor works a lot; this chapter demonstrates how anti-fat stigma follows fat actors even when they break through to play a leading role on Broadway.

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<sup>11</sup> Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves, *Framing Fat: Competing Constructions in Contemporary Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer-Scott Mobley argues that the fat person's perceived failures are a violation of American ideals of "individual freedom and responsibility." Jennifer-Scott Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 24.

Drawing upon Fat Studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco's theorizing of all bodies as "communicative bodies", and her description of "fat-identified people whose bodies do not conform to society's wishes and who therefore do not fit so easily into tight, prestructured explanations," provides a frame for reading bodies on a spectrum from "conforming" to "nonconforming" (as Kwan and Graves prefer) or even "resisting" hegemonic standards.<sup>13</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell's notion of the "civilized body" explicitly ties anti-fat stigma to classed, gendered, and racialized hierarchies and histories in the US.<sup>14</sup> None of these terms can be untethered from conceptions of the fat body relative to the community and to the state. Indeed, the US government itself has been responsible for the so-called "war on obesity," along with supporting medical research advancing the prospect of fat as pathological, all of which "has caused and reinforced the treatment of fat people as second class citizens."<sup>15</sup> Within these frameworks, fat bodies are understood as the nonconforming, resisting (or revolting, in LeBesco's terms), uncivilized bodies. The bearers of anti-fat stigma are caught in a bind between being simultaneously understood as both autonomous individuals and (failed) members of a group. It is crucial to note that "because stigma is both an interpersonal and an intergroup phenomenon, understanding it requires a knowledge of both (1) personal processes, reactions, and identity; and (2) collective processes, action, and identity";<sup>16</sup> stigma persists because of how collective superstructures, including those related to labor and representation, determine what and who is valued in a given historical context. Understanding how anti-fat stigma operates in

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<sup>13</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 14; *Ibid.*, 16; Kwan and Graves, *Framing Fat*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 113.

<sup>15</sup> Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice*, 150-51.

<sup>16</sup> Dovidio, Major, and Crocker, *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, 13.

Broadway musicals requires detailing both interpersonal and intergroup experiences of actors with nonconforming bodies, in addition to elucidating how musicals are part of a broader representational system that values some bodies more than others. Because stigma is always dependent upon its contexts, it is helpful to note that according to findings published in 2014 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “more than two-thirds of American women [were] classified as overweight or obese.”<sup>17</sup> Despite the vague and sometimes indeterminate meanings of “overweight” and “obese” and their pathological implications, the point is that the vast majority of women in the United States have nonconforming bodies. This begs the question: why aren’t we seeing more nonconforming female bodies onstage? When more than two-thirds of female bodies do not conform to unrealistic yet still dominant standards, one must confront the systemic, structural nature of the value placed on the minority rule of conforming bodies.

The interdisciplinary academic field of Fat Studies explicates how anti-fat stigma extends beyond the perceived moral failures of the fat person to how fat people, especially fat women, are denied full participation in US society in areas ranging from labor and accessibility to theatrical representation. “Fat studies is a radical field, in the sense that it goes to the root of weight-related belief systems,” argues Marilyn Wann, who adds that because of this radical bent, fat studies scholarship is explicitly not neutral scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Like other fields borne of liberation movements—like critical race studies, gender studies, and queer studies—“fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the

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<sup>17</sup> Deborah A. Christel and Susan C. Dunn, “Average American women’s clothing size: comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1988-2010) to ASTM International Misses & Women’s Plus Size Clothing,” *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 10, no. 2 (2017): 129.

<sup>18</sup> Marilyn Wann, foreword to Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, ix.

negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body.”<sup>19</sup> Fat Studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco notes “how, in the United States, the bearer of a fat body is marked as a failed citizen, inasmuch as her powers as a worker, shopper, and racially ‘desirable’ subject are called into question.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, to be a fat woman is to have your subjectivity itself questioned; “as thinness becomes a performance (and requisite of) success in a neoliberal world, it effectively becomes a criterion by which one is treated as a subject, a marker of deservingness in a political economy all too geared toward legitimizing such distinctions.”<sup>21</sup> Yet to claim fat as an identity position itself is fraught as well; the word “fat” comes with pejorative associations and assumptions. Fat, of course, has meant different things to different people at different times, but it has been viewed in increasingly negative terms over the past century. Today, one is as likely to hear fat pathologized in medical terminology—like “morbidly obese”—as one is to be aware of fat as the enemy of thin according to popular media.

Fat Studies provides much of the linguistic and theoretical framework for this chapter, especially in the ways the field has reframed discourse around the typing of bodies. Simply saying or writing the word “fat” can initially be discomfiting; yet in order to neutralize the stigma associated with the word, fat studies has reclaimed and repurposed “fat,” avoiding euphemism or medicalized terminology and opting for qualitative? description. Marilyn Wann notes how claiming fat is not just a personal but a political project: “In fat studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word *fat*, both as the preferred neutral adjective

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<sup>19</sup> Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum, introduction to Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 193.

(i.e., short/tall, young/old, fat/thin) and also as a term of political identity. . . . Seemingly well-meaning euphemisms like ‘heavy,’ ‘plump,’ ‘husky,’ and so forth put a falsely positive spin on a negative view of fatness.”<sup>22</sup> Casting notices are littered with these euphemisms, masking the stigmatization of fatness while aiming not to offend potential candidates. *Hairspray* star Marissa Jaret Winokur kept a record of the euphemisms used to avoid describing her as fat when she was starring in the musical on Broadway; these included “‘chubby,’ ‘hefty,’ ‘dumpling-shaped,’ ‘dimple-kneed.’” She noted, “People don’t want to say the word ‘fat.’”<sup>23</sup> Winokur is not alone in re-claiming fat as a part of her identity.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously proposed that one could come out as fat. In Sedgwick’s *Tendencies*, Michael Moon, her co-author on the essay “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion,” compares the closeting of fatness to the closeting of sexuality: “The closet, that is, seems to function as a closet to the degree that it’s a glass closet, the secret to the degree that it’s an open one. Nonsensically, fat people now live under the same divisive dispensation; incredibly, in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn’t herself know.”<sup>24</sup> Here again, the visibility of fat is foregrounded. Even when fat (or sexuality for that matter) may appear obvious, the fat individual claims power by coming out as fat according to Sedgwick. She explains, “[I]t is a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of *the representational contract* between one’s body and one’s world.”<sup>25</sup> Coming out as fat

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<sup>22</sup> Wann, foreword to Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, xii.

<sup>23</sup> Joe Dziemianowicz, “Baby, You’re a Big Curl Now,” *New York Daily News*, August 14, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” in Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 229.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

acknowledges the representational power of language, repurposes this power to claim one's subjectivity as a fat person, and thus explicitly blunts the effects of stigma.

The devaluation of fat subjectivity is most clearly articulated through its lack of representation. *New York Times* columnist Lindy West details this process in her memoir:

Thanks to a glut of cultural messaging, I knew very clearly what I was not: small, thin, pretty, girlish, normal, weightless, Winona Ryder. But there was precious little media telling me what I was, what I could be. . . . As a kid, I never saw anyone remotely like myself on TV. Or in the movies, or in video games, or at the children's theater, or in books, or anywhere at all in my field of vision. There were simply no young, funny, capable, strong, good fat girls. . . fat women were sexless mothers, pathetic punch lines, or gruesome villains.<sup>26</sup>

This lack of positive fat representation has also been rampant in Broadway musicals. With few exceptions, Broadway has continued to cast conforming bodies in leading roles, and to program musicals that ignore nonconforming bodies. The stakes of whether bodies conform or resist are about much more than appearance: as Moon, Sedgwick, and West describe, the visibility of fat representations informs not just how fat people feel about themselves but also their sense of what is possible. Despite the relative visibility of fat people everywhere, they have been largely invisible in Broadway musicals, especially when it comes to women playing lead roles. This invisibility points toward uncomfortable truths about what kinds of bodies are valued in the

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<sup>26</sup> Lindy West, *Shrill* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016), 3.



United States, and how to be fat is statistically the most common American kind of body to inhabit and yet simultaneously the most un-American.

### **Some Body: Fit or Fat in Broadway Musicals**

As the work of musical theatre scholars Andrea Most and Raymond Knapp elucidates, Broadway musicals profoundly embody ideas about national identity and belonging. Knapp explains, “the defining issue is who counts as American, and how that matters.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, *who* is represented onstage and *how* they are represented determines their status as an American both within and without the musical. Knapp and Most outline how musicals can be considered fundamentally about assimilation, whether in terms of the outsider being assimilated into the community, or immigrant writers writing their way into Americanness itself. Most, in particular, describes how musicals “tell a story about difference and community. In each play, there are outsiders who need to be converted, assimilated, or accepted into the group.”<sup>28</sup> Given how fat bodies are marked and how musicals attempt to define who counts as American, where does this leave the fat body on Broadway? *Dreamgirls* is about the fat body getting kicked out of the group, whereas *Hairspray* depicts the fat person as the one who assimilates the insiders into her outsider aesthetics and ambitions.

Onstage and off, Broadway musicals have long been a haven for stigmatized people at the same time that they reproduce values of the dominant culture that dictate the notion that *some*

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<sup>27</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>28</sup> Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3. Though her case studies end in the 1950s, Most’s theories of difference and community apply to all of the musicals in this study, which premiered decades after the era she details.

bodies are superior to others, and that assimilation or compliance with dominant standards is the desirable goal. Even the language used around casting reinforces dominant perspectives about body type and visibility: we speak of “getting seen” for roles and whether or not one “is the right fit,” which means that some bodies are *not* seen and do *not* fit. Broadway is an industry that traffics in stereotypes, and actors are often bluntly told they aren’t “the right fit” because of the way their body looks. One actor I interviewed was told, “You’re not fat enough to be our fat girl.”<sup>29</sup> While there are numerous subjective factors that must be taken into consideration during casting, the fact remains that one’s body is often the barrier to employment. In terms of theatrical representation and production, the tendency to view fat people as less than human is revealed in the lack of roles available to them and how leading roles are typically cast with conforming bodies, even when the script or character description does not mention weight. In terms of reception, research presented later in the chapter will show how the language used to describe Jennifer Holliday in the press by both her colleagues and critics admits this particularly venomous anti-fat stigma. Broadway has not cast a fat Cinderella, Laurey, or Eliza Doolittle—even though there is nothing about these roles that inherently requires a conforming body in them—because to do so would be to admit that fat women are humans who deserve love, as well as the full range of representations commonly available to thin people.<sup>30</sup>

Consider the fact that *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* are the *only* hit Broadway musicals of the past forty years where fatness is *sometimes* a prerequisite for playing the female lead. These

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<sup>29</sup> Katrina Rose Dideriksen (actor), in discussion with author, April 2017.

<sup>30</sup> In the West End, film star Rebel Wilson played Miss Adelaide in a 2016 production of *Guys and Dolls*, marking a notable departure from standard casting for the role. Wilson, of course, is best known for playing a character named “Fat Amy” in the *Pitch Perfect* film franchise.

musicals are bound together by more than just the size of their leading ladies, however; *Dreamgirls* is about which bodies get to make music on television and on stage, while *Hairspray* is about which bodies get to dance to that music on television—essentially, which bodies are considered thin and white enough to be seen on TV. These roles are unique because they give a fat character and a fat actor the chance to play a full range of emotions and to emerge as something other than a victim. Marisha Wallace, a standby for Effie in the 2017 West End premiere production of *Dreamgirls*, explains just how the role of Effie is a rarity:

I love that about this role. You get to have an arc, a full arc, and as a black woman of color, you never get a full arc, you only get a caricature or a 2D thing. That's what I try to bring to my Effie. . . . She has all the colors of the rainbow, instead of just . . . sassy black girl and sassy black friend. That's kind of nice to do all of those things in one show, and to be like, why aren't there more roles like this?<sup>31</sup>

The meeting of each actor and each character represents a range of intersections, but when we examine body size on its own, it becomes apparent just how rare it is for fat people to receive the full range of representation readily given thin people. Fat women in Broadway musicals are always considered in terms of their bodies and fitness, whether moral or physical, which this chapter will expand upon by detailing the casting of the case studies as well as how the bodies of their leading ladies were commented upon in the press.

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<sup>31</sup> Marisha Wallace (actor), in discussion with author, June 2017.

Fatness is often erroneously seen as the opposite of fitness. Whether in the latest fitness trends, news reports about the so-called obesity “epidemic,” or the plethora of fad diets, weight is one of the central ways US culture attends to bodies. Fatness has historically been used to determine who fits where in society, which venues one is allowed to participate in, and what kind of labor one’s body does or does not do.<sup>32</sup> Many of the roots of contemporary anti-fat stigmatization can be traced to the nineteenth century and the growing industrialization and urbanization of America, which changed the kinds of bodies capital needed for labor.<sup>33</sup> Fatness went from being a sign of wealth to a sign of excess, self-indulgence, laziness, and moral failure. During this time, fat underwent a class change that has had profoundly material effects continuing to hold sway over US society. Laura Fraser explains, “When it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat was no longer a sign of prestige”; wealthier women, in turn, began to lose weight to avoid association with laboring, working class bodies.<sup>34</sup> Paul Ernsberger is one of many researchers who have studied the connection between fat, economic mobility, and social class; his research supports the case that “fatness is impoverishing,” leading to a cycle of stigma and downward economic and social mobility: one is not fat because she is poor, but vice versa.<sup>35</sup> At the same time that fat people, especially fat women, are economically disadvantaged, the US economy relies upon consumer spending on diet, exercise, and weight loss products devoted to eliminating fat, to the tune of over \$60 billion

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<sup>32</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>33</sup> See Scott-Mobley, chapter 1, for a detailed description of this process.

<sup>34</sup> Laura Fraser, “The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Ernsberger, “Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 26.

per year. In terms of fat and neoliberalism, “spending money on becoming thin is the perfect solution for both neoliberal subjectivity and neoliberal capitalism more broadly.”<sup>36</sup> *Hairspray* will return us to the hailing of fat subjectivity through consumerism.

The meanings attached to fat continued to change throughout the fitness-obsessed twentieth century in relation to shifting bodily ideals and the growth of the middle class. Increasingly, popular media spouted the benefits of being thin and having a low body fat percentage. The growing power of the fit body as a physical and moral standard marked nonconforming bodies as deficient and “other.” Conceptions of which bodies are ideal ones increasingly tilted toward thinness over the course of the twentieth century, to the point that what once was considered average is now seen as fat in a culture obsessed with weight loss. The national trend was reflected on Broadway, and especially its leading ladies. Nearly all of the iconic female Broadway stars became famous when they were young and thin, from Ethel Merman (*Girl Crazy*) and Mary Martin (*Leave it to Me*), to Gwen Verdon (*Can Can*) and Chita Rivera (*West Side Story*) in mid-century, to late 20<sup>th</sup> century divas like Bernadette Peters (*Mack and Mabel*) and Patti LuPone (*Evita*). While attaining the title of Broadway diva requires a certain ineffable excessiveness, this excessiveness is usually centered in a mixture of charisma, persona, and voice—not their bodies per se. If an actor’s body does not align with the “ideal” type of a leading lady (pretty, thin, white, and young) it becomes measurably more difficult to land a break-through role and even harder to sustain a career on Broadway as a leading lady. In fact, it is nearly unachievable.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 193.

<sup>37</sup> Audra MacDonald, as Broadway’s Tony-winningest performer, is the obvious exception to this rule.

In recent years, canny entrepreneurs have capitalized on the crossover of Broadway and fitness. Companies like Broadway Bodies, Fit for Broadway, and Mark Fisher Fitness are all marketed to sell the *idea* of a Broadway Body and a “fitness” lifestyle, though they simultaneously seek to combat body-shaming. Broadway Bodies’ website highlights prominently that Broadway Bodies is a “shame-free community” (note the explicit association of Broadway and community here).<sup>38</sup> Your body is your brand when you’re an actor looking for work and it plays a major factor in determining which “type” you will be seen as by casting personnel.

Mark Fisher Fitness trainer Geoff Hemingway relates an anecdote about one of his clients: “When she started she was like, ‘I just played Tracy Turnblad in this regional production of *Hairspray*. That was my dream role, and now I’ve done it and I don’t want to be fat anymore.’ Since coming in to Mark Fisher, she’s shed about 50 pounds and is now being seen for ingénue roles.”<sup>39</sup> Tracy Turnblad, of course, *is* an ingénue role, but perhaps her fat body prevented many from seeing her as such. This anecdote underlines the internalization of anti-fat stigma within the industry and its relation to this actor’s legitimate concerns regarding employability. This former Tracy knew that she would not be considered for other leading roles if she looked like a Tracy Turnblad type when she walked into the audition room.

### **Casting Questions**

While the language in casting breakdowns guides actors to self-select which roles are appropriate for them, gender, height, race, and weight requirements narrow the pool even further.

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<sup>38</sup> “Home,” *Broadway Bodies*, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://broadwaybodies.com/>.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Patterson, “The Secrets to Broadway Bodies: How “Theatrical Ninjas” Stay Trim, Toned, and Tight for 8 Shows a Week,” *Playbill*, January 31, 2015, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/the-secrets-to-broadway-bodies-how-performers-stay-trim-toned-and-tight-com-340312>.

Last year, casting notices for the City Center Encores! production of *The Golden Apple* repeatedly stated, “We are not looking for heavy character actresses.”<sup>40</sup> Though casting typically remains an invisible part of the production process, it sometimes becomes a spectacle itself, and in such cases often a controversy grounded in racial representation, as in the original production of *Miss Saigon*’s use of yellow-face or with the replacement of a relatively unknown black actor with a white celebrity in *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*.<sup>41</sup> Casting spectacles are not always negative or always tied directly to issues of racial representation, but sometimes are used instead as publicity ploys to generate attention. The process of casting Effie White in *Dreamgirls* and Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray* often generates a notable amount of attention. Both of these musicals were long-running hits, spawning national tours, international productions, and film versions that had to be cast over and over again, leading John Waters to quip that *Hairspray* was “*Cats* for fat people.”<sup>42</sup>

The amount of attention paid to casting these leading roles demonstrates how fat bodies are always fair game. The press was there to document it when over 1,000 fat actors lined West 43rd St. in Manhattan in April 2016 hoping for a chance to play Tracy in NBC’s adaptation of *Hairspray*. The role ultimately went to newcomer Maddie Baillio, a college student attending her very first professional audition.<sup>43</sup> A nationwide search to cast Effie in the *Dreamgirls* film is

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Gioia, “Heavy Character Actress Need Not Apply? Women Get Real on Casting,” *Playbill*, August 25, 2016, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/heavy-character-actresses-need-not-apply-women-get-real-on-casting>.

<sup>41</sup> See. Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 55-61, for a summary of the *Miss Saigon* controversy; for more on *The Great Comet*, see Michael Paulson, “Diversity Concerns Prompt ‘Great Comet’ Casting Shakeup,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/theater/mandy-patinkin-oak-onaodowan-great-comet.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Mark O’Donnell, Thomas Meehan, Marc Shaiman, and Scott Wittman, *Hairspray: The Roots* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2003), 13.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Rorke, “‘Hair’ She Is!,” *New York Post*, June 8, 2016.

reported to have attracted nearly 800 hopefuls before former *American Idol* contestant Jennifer Hudson won the role.<sup>44</sup> One open call for *Hairspray*'s 2002 Broadway production drew around 400 performers.<sup>45</sup>

There are a few factors at play here: first, these roles are often cast through open calls attracting hundreds of aspirants. Because they tend to be cast with young performers making their professional debuts, the press agent's job is to get the press there and create a sense of excitement. The relative scarcity of such roles reveals the fact that the supply of performers willing to put themselves up for consideration far outstrips industry demand for them. A second reason for casting through open calls is that they actually work to find new actors, in addition to being good publicity opportunities. Burns, *Hairspray*'s casting director, notes that he cast "six or seven" Tracys from open calls.<sup>46</sup> Keala Settle won the role of Tracy at an open call; though she had to endure seven callbacks before being offered the standby position to Carly Jibson, and she later remembered she "had no idea" what she was doing through the process, admitting her relative inexperience at the time.<sup>47</sup>

And yet the attention paid to casting these two musicals begs the question: Why doesn't casting other leading roles for young women attract comparable amounts of attention? Where are the media at an open call for Julie Jordan in *Carousel* or Celie in *The Color Purple*? The attention paid to casting these roles is not necessarily negative or stigmatizing; the more attention

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<sup>44</sup> Nekesa Mumbi Moody, "Jennifer Hudson Steals 'Dreamgirls' Show," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2006, accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/12/AR2006121200939.html>

<sup>45</sup> Elena Malykhina, "Sizing Them Up," *Newsday* (New York), September 23, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Burns, in discussion with author, September 2017.

<sup>47</sup> "Keala Settle," *Theater People* 31, podcast audio, February 8, 2015, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/19639.rss>.



paid to bodily diversity on Broadway, the better. Nevertheless, highlighting the number of aspirants ideally should force reflection on why these actors are not seen in and for other roles. Their inclusion here belies their exclusion from other opportunities. In the *New York Times*, John Waters wrote that he hoped the musical adaptation of his film *Hairspray* would be a hit so that “there will be high school productions, and finally the fat girl and the drag queen will get the starring parts.”<sup>48</sup> He understood that the enforcement of bodily conformity in casting is present even in high school; indeed, Effie and Tracy are both teenagers when their respective musicals begin. These two musicals are powerful for the ways that their onstage narratives of inclusion/exclusion, conformity/nonconformity, and assimilation/liberation intersect with the offstage narratives of getting cast in them, a process that all too-often makes a spectacle of the young women hoping, like Effie and Tracy, for a big break. The following case studies will begin with a description of each musical’s narrative, followed by discussion of casting particulars, and how these nonconforming leading ladies were written about in the press.

### **CASE STUDY: *DREAMGIRLS***

Michael Bennett’s production of *Dreamgirls* opened on Broadway on December 20, 1981 and ran for 1521 performances; a trimmed version of the original played 177 times in revival in 1987. A 2009 US national tour directed and choreographed by Robert Longbottom notably had its out-of-town tryout in Seoul, South Korea, before being re-cast in New York and opening at the Apollo Theater, the setting of *Dreamgirls*’s opening scene.<sup>49</sup> As of this writing, a 2017 West

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<sup>48</sup> John Waters, “Finally, Footlights on the Fat Girls,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/11/theater/theater-finally-footlights-on-the-fat-girls.html>.

<sup>49</sup> The Korean production cast an average sized Korean actor, Hong Ji Min, as Effie, as seen in a photograph in the *New York Times*: “‘Dreamgirls’ in South Korea,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2009,

End production, helmed by Casey Nicholaw, is planning for a Broadway transfer during the 2019/2020 season. Henry Krieger's score is a pastiche of 1960s and 1970s soul, pop, and disco sounds; Tom Eyen's book and lyrics support the sung-through musical's rapid narrative development. Bennett, co-choreographer Michael Peters, Eyen, and Krieger ensured that the pace of the musical was fast and furious.

### **“Nobody Can See Her on a Record!”: Narratives of *Dreamgirls***

*Dreamgirls* introduces itself as a backstage musical in its opening moments, set simultaneously onstage and backstage during a talent contest at the Apollo Theater.<sup>50</sup> The musical tells the story of the Dreamettes, a girl group fresh off the train from Chicago, who have travelled to New York for the contest. Effie Melody White is the group's lead singer, while Deena Jones and Lorrell Robinson sing back up. Backstage at the Apollo, they cross paths with a talent manager, Marty, who proposes that they take a gig as backup singers to Jimmy Early. Effie rejects the idea, saying, “I don't do ooohs and aaahs.”<sup>51</sup> A Cadillac dealer named Curtis happens to be backstage, and he and Marty collude to tilt the contest against the Dreamettes in order to make singing backup for Jimmy a more attractive prospect, setting up several themes the show will depict: singing backup versus singing lead, the underhanded practices of the music industry, the

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[http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/03/13/theater/20090314-dreamgirls-slideshow\\_index-8.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/03/13/theater/20090314-dreamgirls-slideshow_index-8.html); see also Choe Sang-Hun, “For ‘Dreamgirls,’ Pacific Overtures,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> The plot is widely considered to be a loose re-telling of Diana Ross's replacement of Florence Ballard as the lead singer of the Supremes, something the musical's creators both denied and admitted at various times. Mary Wilson, the third member of the Supremes capitalized on the connection, calling her memoir *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme*. A more apt comparison than Ballard for Effie would be Aretha Franklin, whose big voice and big body are closer to the role than Ballard's.

<sup>51</sup> Tom Eyen and Henry Krieger, *Dreamgirls* Final Draft, I-I-6 January 10, 1983, Michael Bennett Papers, YCAL MSS 538, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Further text references are to act, scene, and page of this unpublished version of the libretto.

commodification and packaging of women as products, and men's attempts to control the way the women who work for them sound and look. As the Dreamettes discover that they have lost the contest, the chorus sings, "Show Biz, It's Just Show Biz," which becomes a recurring leitmotif in the musical, underscoring the seemingly impersonal nature of business decisions (I-I-10). Curtis becomes the Dreamettes' manager and negotiates their backup deal. In Bennett's production, Curtis makes the idea especially attractive to Effie by forcefully flirting with her, pressing his body into hers as he talks her into the backup gig.

When a white group has a hit with a song written for Early ("Cadillac Car"), the musical swiftly introduces its other recurring themes: the material, political, and aesthetic effects of white supremacy, appropriation, and crossing over or selling out. "Cadillac Car" is as much about the politics of assimilation as it is about commodification: Curtis sings, "You got to get a smoother sound" as he explains the Cadillac car itself as a symbol of assimilation into the "American Dream" (I-I-16-17). He wants to break into the white pop charts, believing that the way to achieve this is to make "black" music sound "whiter" to be a palatable commodity for white audiences to consume ("Steppin' to the Bad Side"). The aesthetic and political conflicts between what the musical positions as "white" versus "black" music are thus firmly established and will be extended to address not just the sound of the music (and which venues are appropriate for it) but, crucially, how its singers should look in order to appeal to white audiences. This becomes the crux of the matter regarding Effie's spot as lead.

Through act I, Effie and Curtis's flirtation develops into a romantic relationship, priming the audience for Curtis's betrayal of Effie. Near the middle of the first act, Curtis comes to the Dreamettes' dressing room to inform them that he's breaking them free from singing backup to

finally have their own act, known henceforth as the Dreams, before he springs the bigger surprise:

CURTIS  
And, Effie...Deena's going to sing lead.

EFFIE  
Deena's doing what?

CURTIS  
Lead.

EFFIE  
What do you mean? I do lead. I always sing lead!

CURTIS  
We're changing, Effie.

EFFIE  
We finally get the chance to have our own act and Deena's doing lead? She can't sing like I can.

DEENA  
She's right, Curtis, I can't. I don't want to do it.

CURTIS  
You've got to. It's a whole new act! It's a new sound. A new look...

EFFIE  
New look? Nobody can see her on a record!

CURTIS  
Well, sweetheart, we're not just going to be on records! Clubs, television! If you want to make it today, you've got to make it on television.

EFFIE  
So, Deena's going to sing lead because you like the way she looks? Am I ugly to you, Curtis? (I-8-34)

After this betrayal, the group tries to comfort Effie and to assimilate her back into their "family." Yet the "family" begins to splinter from ever-increasing internal conflicts, with Effie's resentment at singing backup growing sharper and more disruptive. Deena's star rises quickly as

Effie struggles with being pushed to the background because of her appearance. The tension begins to intensify in a television studio, where the Dreams perform their new single, “Heavy.” The setting in the television studio further underlines the central conflict of how a body looks versus how it sounds, and who is considered presentable on television. Deena sings, “You used to be so light and free/You used to smile just looking at me/Now all you give is jealous hate/Come on, baby, better lose some weight” (I-10-44), lyrics that are rather obviously understood to be directed at Effie, who storms out during the middle of the performance. It soon becomes clear that Deena and Curtis have become romantically involved and that Effie will be fired from the Dreams (“It’s All Over”). As the first act ends, Effie enters the dressing room to find that her dress is missing precisely at the moment her replacement walks in wearing the dress Effie thought was her own:

EFFIE  
I TURN MY BACK AND FIND MYSELF OUT ON THE LINE  
YOU COULD HAVE WARNED ME BUT THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN TOO KIND

CURTIS  
I’VE BEEN WARNING YOU SINCE CHICAGO TO CLEAN UP YOUR ACT.  
YOU’VE BEEN LATE, YOU’VE BEEN MEAN  
GIVING ALL KINDS OF BULLSHIT FLACK.

EFFIE  
THAT’S A LIE. THAT’S A LIE. IT’S JUST...IT’S JUST  
I HAVEN’T BEEN FEELING THAT WELL.

CURTIS  
EFFIE, PLEASE! STOP EXCUSING YOURSELF  
YOU’VE BEEN LATE, YOU’VE BEEN MEAN  
AND GETTING FATTER ALL THE TIME. (I-12-51)

“Fat” is Curtis’s ultimate insult to Effie as he effectively dumps her and kicks her out of the group. They are left alone in the dressing room when Effie launches into the show-stopping act I closer, “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going.” Bennett’s original staging famously ends

with Effie reaching out toward the audience over her dressing table, which is swiftly moved upstage as Deena and the Dreams enter downstage singing over her. Effie is upstaged by Deena and literally pulled to the background against her will once again. The act ends with the unseen chorus singing the show's leitmotif, "Show Biz Justa Show Biz" three times (I-15-56).

The second act picks up seven years later as Deena and the Dreams have gone on to great success while Effie has struggled to remain afloat. Marty has become Effie's manager and is trying to arrange a comeback for her. She is late to an audition he has arranged that is understood to be her last chance, which she almost blows by refusing to sing with a new accompanist, telling Marty she was late because of her babysitter. In an understated and, notably, spoken rather than sung moment in this musical, the audience realizes that Effie was secretly pregnant with Curtis' child at the end of Act One, which conveys why she sang of "not feeling good" and "having pain." Effie's audition song is "I Am Changing," which itself changes halfway through the number, morphing into her successful comeback performance (in addition to being a metaphor for Effie's personal growth).

Effie and Deena end up recording competing versions of the same song ("One Night Only") causing Curtis to use payola to make Deena's version a hit and Effie's a flop. This sets in motion a series of events culminating in the reunion of Deena and Effie. Effie reveals to Deena that she has a seven-year-old girl, unbeknownst to Curtis. Deena resolves to leave Curtis after discovering what he has done to Effie. The show ends with the farewell performance of the Dreams; Deena invites Effie to join the group onstage to sing lead one last time, in a moment that celebrates her inclusion back into the fold and Deena's liberation from Curtis. The plot, needless to say, has a lot of loose ends to tie up in the second act, which is due in part to the demands of Jennifer Holliday, Broadway's original Effie.

### **“What About Me?”: Jennifer Holliday and Effie White**

*Dreamgirls* made an overnight star of twenty-one-year-old Jennifer Holliday in 1981. Holliday had been with workshops of the show since she was nineteen, famously leaving the production during the summer before its Broadway opening after a disagreement over her character's downward trajectory and absence from the second act. Holliday and Bennett reconciled, Effie's character was written into the second act, and Broadway history was made. Both Holliday and Bennett agree that her departure was a mutual decision, yet in the summer of 1981 they could not have foreseen how this incident would come to mark Holliday's life and help to blur the lines between character and performer. The parallels between the two were striking: in 1981, both were young, fat black women with big voices perceived as difficult to work with. Holliday's career would come to mirror Effie's: she too experienced a comeback, but never again reached the heights she had as a young singer. Holliday has yet to return to Broadway in anything but a secondary role and, even then, only as a replacement. While starring in the Los Angeles production of *Dreamgirls* in 1983, Holliday told an interviewer:

There's never been an identity problem. From the very beginning I've managed to maintain the separate identity from the show that I've always hoped for. When a performance of *Dreamgirls* ends at 11:20pm, Effie stays on stage and Jennifer goes home. To be perfectly honest, I don't mind having that

close identification with the character because, quite frankly, I do consider it my show.<sup>52</sup>

By 2006, however, Holliday would come to see the parallels, telling CBS *Sunday Morning*, “I am Effie, it’s not, ‘no I am not the essence of Effie,’ I *am* Effie.” She argues further that after starring in the film, Jennifer Hudson “got to take Effie off and I never got to take Effie off. I always had to be Effie . . . that destroys me more than anything else.”<sup>53</sup> Holliday is routinely referred to as “Broadway’s original dream girl,” and Effie remains the sole part she has originated on Broadway. Her returns to Broadway have all been in featured roles: as a replacement Teen Angel in the 1994 revival of *Grease*, a stint as Mama Morton in the 1996 revival of *Chicago*, and recently as Shug Avery in the 2015 revival of *The Color Purple* in the role originated in that production by Jennifer Hudson. Holliday’s casting as Hudson’s replacement was, in effect, a neat trick on the part of producers to further associate these actors with these seemingly excessive characters (Shug in terms of her open bisexuality; Effie in terms of her attitude, body, and talent).

The conflation of a character with an actor is not unusual, yet the overlap between Effie and Holliday remains striking, especially because it is one that Holliday herself came to acknowledge. Her public Instagram account, which allows her to communicate directly with fans and followers, furthers her association with Effie, as its handle is “jenniferhollidaydreamgirl”. CBS *Sunday Morning* correspondent Russ Mitchell confirmed this overlap, noting, “offstage Jennifer Holliday and Effie White were becoming one and the same: struggling with weight

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<sup>52</sup> Marc Shapiro, “Jennifer Holliday: The Lady Does Things Her Way,” Stanley Bennett Clay’s *Hollywood*, Oct/Nov 1983, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Holliday, interview by Russ Mitchell, *CBS Sunday Morning*, February 22, 2007.



problems and feelings of rejection. Holliday gained one hundred pounds in one year and became more and more isolated.”<sup>54</sup> In a 2016 interview, Holliday remembered her body when she was starring in *Dreamgirls*: “It was such an awkward size for me, you know, so it’s still sometimes very hard for me to look having lost two hundred pounds. And now and so to kind of look back at that time, sometimes I feel like I don’t want to go back there.”<sup>55</sup> Holliday became known as much for the size of her body as the size of her voice.

To be fat and starring in a Broadway hit in 1981 was to be the open target of scorn in the press. Holliday’s size was frequently denigrated, often in the same sentence in which her talent was celebrated. Just as Effie’s weight is commented upon in the first act of the musical, Holliday’s size has been part of her persona ever since *Dreamgirls* opened. Acknowledging her weight to some degree is understandable: it was and remains notable that a fat actress would be cast in a leading role in a Broadway musical, and Holliday became very open about discussing the subject after her 1990 gastric bypass surgery. On the other hand, casting a fat woman as the lead was not necessarily noted either as progressive or for its rarity in 1981, and many opening night critics went out of their way to find metaphors and euphemisms to describe Holliday. Clive Barnes wrote, “Miss Holliday is just tremendous—something like a battleship should be named after her.”<sup>56</sup> Walter Kerr explained, “Miss Holliday -in a rasp of rage called ‘I Am Telling You I’m Not Going’- pumps enough blood and bile and reedy power into her song to make us suspect that once she’s done she’ll finish him off in two bites.”<sup>57</sup> Frank Rich noted Holliday’s “broad

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> cunytv75, “Theater Talk: Jennifer Holliday,” YouTube Video (26:46), uploaded November 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHY4pwx0-Wc>.

<sup>56</sup> Clive Barnes, review of *Dreamgirls*, *New York Post*, December 21, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Kerr, review of *Dreamgirls*, *New York Times*, January 3, 1982.

face” and “ample body” in his rave review of the show, and of Holliday in particular.<sup>58</sup> Stanley Kauffman opined that Holliday “belts her songs like a fullback crossing for a touchdown,”<sup>59</sup> at once portraying Holliday’s body as athletic and un-ladylike.

What is clear is that critics saw the conflict in *Dreamgirls* as being about Effie’s size, perhaps in relation to Holliday’s body. Rich wrote, “Effie no longer fits: she’s fat, and her singing is anything but light. And Curtis’s bad news does not end there. Not only does he have a brand-new, svelte Dream in costume, ready to replace Effie on stage, but he also has chosen another Dream to replace Effie in his bed.”<sup>60</sup> Kerr noted that Effie was being replaced “partly because of a troublesome temperament but mainly because the group’s manager (Ben Harney) wants to replace her with a slimmer look and a tamer sound.”<sup>61</sup> In addition to the reviews quoted here, the critical consensus was that Effie was made to sing backup and then fired because she was fat and getting fatter; she only became truly “difficult” once forced into the background. In the role, Holliday gained a reputation for being difficult and soon began missing performances on Broadway, a problem that would continue to plague her in the role both on Broadway and in Los Angeles. It is important to note here that not only was she still very young, but the demands of performing this role are such that it has since become common for producers to cast one actor to play matinees and one to play evenings. Holliday’s difficulty making it through an eight-show week led the producers to only contract her for six performances a week in the show’s Los Angeles engagement. Ironically, the onstage demands of the show reproduced its conflicts

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<sup>58</sup> Frank Rich, review of *Dreamgirls*, *New York Times*, December 21, 1981.

<sup>59</sup> Stanley Kauffman, review of *Dreamgirls*, *Saturday Review*, February 1982, 50.

<sup>60</sup> Rich, *New York Times*, December 21, 1981.

<sup>61</sup> Kerr, *New York Times*, January 3, 1982.

offstage, with Holliday's reputation becoming solidified as difficult because she was seen as difficult, lazy, and unfit (in multiple senses) for the show.

### **Is Effie Fat? Replacing Holliday and the Problems of Padding**

Although Holliday eventually stopped playing Effie, she continues to be so associated with the role that her performance is mentioned in nearly every review of *Dreamgirls* that has been written since its premiere. She remains the Effie against whom every other Effie is measured: the headline of *Newsweek*'s review of the West End production asks, "Is Amber Riley a Match for Jennifer Holliday?"<sup>62</sup> Holliday's success in the role was a problem for the creative team when it came to replace her. Not only did replacements need the specific talent and ability required to sing and act the role, but they also had to follow one of the truly legendary Broadway performances and somehow make the role their own. It is notable that the replacements were compared not only to Holliday's performance but also to her *body*. Holliday's replacement on Broadway was Vanessa Townsell, an unknown telephone operator from California who was cast from an open call in Los Angeles during a well-publicized nationwide talent search.

Townsell's body was repeatedly juxtaposed with Holliday's in the press. An article in the *New York Times* covering Townsell's debut in the role notes, "Holliday is a larger woman than Miss Townsell, and because girth figured in the plot, Miss Townsell was aiming to be one of the other singers in the trio. Having gained weight eating out of boredom at her phone job, she recalled, 'I put on a black dress for the audition to slim myself.' But apparently she looked

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<sup>62</sup> Tufayel Ahmed, "'Dreamgirls' West End Review: Is Amber Riley a Match for Jennifer Holliday?," *Newsweek*, December 14, 2016, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/dreamgirls-west-end-review-amber-riley-cant-slay-jennifer-holliday-effie-white-531716>.

statuesque enough for Effie.”<sup>63</sup> In the same paper, Rich reviewed the production with its new star, contending, “At the same time, she scales down Effie in a way that serves the show. Both more reserved and less hefty than her predecessor, this actress is more in balance with the other *Dreams*—and more credibly their victim.”<sup>64</sup> None of the men in the production faced anywhere near the same level of scrutiny about their bodies in relation to their character, nor were questions ever posed in the press about their diets or wardrobe choices for their auditions.

Holliday left the Broadway company to headline the Los Angeles company, where she agreed to perform six shows a week, while Lillias White was Effie during the matinees. Soon after winning the Tony Award, Holliday began missing performances due in part to vocal strain, a trend that would continue into her Los Angeles run. The missed performances took a toll on the box office in Los Angeles, where the production closed early due to lost revenue from Holliday’s absences. Producer Bernard B. Jacobs explained that the production “was marketed as starring Jennifer Holliday. As you know, because of illness, Miss Holliday has had to miss many performances.” He goes on to note, “She just didn’t appear with any degree of regularity.” *Dreamgirls* was giving around \$50,000 per week in refunds to disappointed ticket buyers who came to see the absent Holliday.<sup>65</sup> To combat the losses and attract audiences, the production generated a lot of press on White, an unusual move for matinee performers. Remarks at the time by White, Bennett, and others on the production team began a trend of in which Holliday was explicitly denigrated for her weight at the same time they attempted to reframe Effie as *not* fat.

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<sup>63</sup> Eleanor Blow, Broadway, *New York Times*, December 24, 1982.

<sup>64</sup> Frank Rich, review of *Dreamgirls*, *New York Times*, September 23, 1983.

<sup>65</sup> Rick Talcove, “‘Dreamgirls’ Turns into Financial Nightmare, Closes,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, November 20, 1983.

Holliday left the production after Los Angeles and White continued on with the show to San Francisco, where a remarkable amount of press went to lengths to distance the musical from Holliday's body and her behavior.

Distance from Holliday was achieved by casting actors with more conforming bodies, but also partially accomplished through the use of padding in the first act; Effie replacements wore what is frequently called a "fat suit." In an interview on local Los Angeles television in 1983, White acknowledged that she wore the padding "because there are a lot of inferences made to Effie being overweight in the first act and it also makes more sense when she comes back in the second act and when she sings 'I Am Changing' to really have changed and lost the weight and to really have this wonderful look and be glamorous and different from the person that she was seven years before."<sup>66</sup> The once-open acknowledgement of Effie's size would suddenly be up for debate once Holliday left the role. Reframing "I Am Changing" as a song about having lost weight and becoming a new person with a "wonderful look" stigmatizes fat because it reads as though Effie had to lose weight in order to return to her career on the stage and to gain back her voice, the prime instrument of subjectivity as far as musical theatre is concerned.

The casting and reception of the role of Effie is a history of body shame, questionable labor practices, and anti-fat stigma spanning from the early 1980s to today. The original production team went to great lengths to disavow Effie's fatness, and by extension, both Holliday's fatness and her association with the role. Life mirrored art as the producers and creative team replaced Holliday with noticeably thinner actors, further blurring the lines between

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<sup>66</sup> Damien Slattery, "Lillias White – Dreamgirls – 1983," YouTube video (7:58), uploaded March 27, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S79C1Kbainc&t=16s> Lillias.

Holliday and Effie, and replacing a non-conforming body with conforming ones. The producers and creatives surely felt the need to ensure that the show was a viable property without Holliday attached, which, on the one hand, is justifiable given the number of careers and the amount of money involved in a big musical production such as this one. On the other hand, the lengths taken to achieve this end are striking. Violet Welles, a press agent working on the production's opening in San Francisco just after the fiasco in Los Angeles was explicit in slamming Holliday:

People who have worked with [Holliday] feel that at this point it works better without her. Essentially, it's an ensemble show, not a star show, and she was playing it like a star. . . . The others who have played Effie have not been such big women. You could understand why a manager wouldn't want a [sic] ungainly looking woman in a group like the Dreams. The other women's only sin is they do not fit the Barbie doll image that so much of popular entertainment becomes.<sup>67</sup>

Fat, and specifically the fatness of Holliday, was written about as if it alone had the power to disrupt the narrative and the audience's reception of the musical. Critic Jack Viertel wrote a feature on White in the Los Angeles production that encapsulates the turn against Holliday and toward the reception of Effie that the creators and production came to advocate:

In certain ways, this complicated musical is more powerful, more balanced and makes more sense with Lillias White than the hefty powerhouse belter [Holliday].

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<sup>67</sup> Robert Taylor, "A Hot Roadshow Sells Its Sizzle," *Tribune* (Oakland, CA), December 11, 1983.

When Holliday plays the role, the replacement of Effie by the sleeker and prettier Deena Jones (played by Linda Leilani Brown) is a simple one to comprehend: Effie is fat, and she simply can't fit into the homogenized, mechanized dance routines and Vegas-sexy gowns that were typical of rising girl groups in the 60s. Getting rid of her seems like an obvious, if crass, move.

But something essential changes when White plays the role. She's not fat, and she's not especially ungainly either.

She doesn't intimidate us the way Holliday does, and everything about "Dreamgirls" becomes a little less obvious, and a little more human than it was before.<sup>68</sup>

Writing that the role seems more "human" with a thinner actor in the role implies that fat people are less human than thin people and are therefore not deserving of theatrical representation.

Viertel was not alone in reaching the heights of anti-fat stigma in his assessment. An article published in the San Rafael, CA, *Independent Journal* just before the tour starring Lillias White opened in San Francisco invites readers to feel sympathy for White precisely *because* she is *thin*.

Note in particular the ways it refers to Holliday:

Lillias White has an unusual problem: She is slender, but some people want her to be fat.

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<sup>68</sup> Jack Viertel, "Waiting in the Wings," *Herald Examiner* (Los Angeles), May 22, 1983.

White finds herself in this curious situation because she is taking over for chunky Jennifer Holliday in “Dreamgirls,” the Broadway musical that opens Dec. 15 at the Golden Gate Theatre in San Francisco.

Holliday, whose performance as Effie Melody White won a Tony, and whose name has become synonymous with the role, is a massive woman, well over 200 pounds.

White is svelte by comparison. Generally speaking, ‘thin is in’ in our society. But White has run into difficulties because of her lack of bulk.

In Los Angeles, people at first demanded their money back when they discovered that White, and not Holliday, was starring in the weekend matinees. Everybody wanted to see the fat lady. (In addition to all that weight, of course, Holliday has a dynamite voice that rattles the rafters.)

People quickly realized, however, that White was a quality entertainer in her own right. Requests for refunds began slacking off, and attendance at the matinees picked up.

But there was still the problem of image. Effie, it seemed, had to be obese, regardless of who played her. So White was outfitted with a “fat suit,” an old-fashioned bathing suit stuffed with polyester. She’ll wear the suit in San Francisco, but she doesn’t like it. “It gets too hot; I feel like I’m in a sauna,” she says.

White doesn’t care for fat, period. “I believe obesity is a health hazard,” she says. To those misguided individuals who suggest she gain weight to play



Effie, she has a succinct answer: “No way. I don’t ever want to be overweight.”

But does Effie really need to be fat? The script never explicitly refers to obesity. It merely describes an unorthodox singer whose spectacular voice pushes a trio of girl vocalists to stardom. Later the singer is expelled from the group because her sound is not considered commercially slick enough.

“The way the show was put together,” says White, “it was never designed to be about a girl who is replaced because she’s fat. The show was not written about a fat girl. It’s about a girl who can’t change with the times, who can’t conform like everybody else.”<sup>69</sup>

Apart from the misreading of the plot (Deena, not Effie, pushes the group to stardom), this article raises important questions about whether Effie is fat or not, and the politics of fat suits. White is not incorrect that Effie “can’t conform,” but of course Effie’s *body* is non-conforming, as is her unwillingness to “lighten” up her sound. Yet note the marked change in White’s rhetoric from her television appearance, wherein she addressed the numerous references to Effie’s weight in the musical.

The question of whether Effie White is fat or not has continued to vex and provoke since Holliday left the musical. Reviewing the 1983 San Francisco production, Gerald Nachtman wrote that the original production “starred alleged blockbuster Jennifer Holliday, a two-ton shouter who smothered the musical, crushed all plot sense with her bulk and bent the show out of

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<sup>69</sup> Steve Cassal, “Dreamgirl Lands a Hefty Role,” Independent Journal (San Rafael, CA), December 10, 1983.

shape with her presence.” He goes on to call White “more subtle and lifelike” than Holliday.<sup>70</sup>

The vitriolic unwillingness of some critics to see Holliday as human being remains shocking, yet the debate over whether the plot makes more or less sense with a thinner actress will surely flare up again if the West End production makes its planned Broadway transfer. A thread on the BroadwayWorld.com message board entitled “Effie White — Does She Have to Be Heavy?”<sup>71</sup> generated over 170 responses from 2005 to 2007, the period surrounding the film adaptation’s release.<sup>71</sup> The initial poster, with username MargoChanning, shared a detailed history of the casting of the role on Broadway, from Holliday through nearly everyone who played Effie in Bennett’s original production, and argued “that ‘weight’ was the LAST criterion [Bennett] was looking at as far as future Effies were concerned.”<sup>72</sup>

### **“I’m looking for something”: Disavowing Holliday and Recasting Effie**

Throughout the life of the original production on Broadway and on tour in the 1980s, Bennett and others from the creative team publicly disavowed notions that Effie had to be cast with a fat actor while nevertheless frequently casting actors with nonconforming bodies in the role. Just before the San Francisco production opened, Bennett told the San Jose *Mercury News* just before the San Francisco production opened (following much bad press for Holliday from Los Angeles), “I’m very happy that Lillias is here as Effie because the play is much more in proportion with her. As Jennifer put on weight, it became about how they throw the fat girl out. Well, that’s not the story of the play. It’s about how they needed a pop singer to make the white

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<sup>70</sup> Gerald Nachman, review of *Dreamgirls*, San Francisco Examiner, December 21, 1983.

<sup>71</sup> MargoChanning, “Effie White — Does She Have to Be Heavy?”, *Broadway World*, June 15, 2005, accessed September 15, 2017, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/board/readmessage.php?thread=854590>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

charts.”<sup>73</sup> This was the story the surviving members of the creative team would double down on as a scaled-down production of was brought back to Broadway just a week before Bennett’s death from AIDS in 1987. Co-choreographer Michael Peters told the *New York Times*, “There’s a greater focus now on the human element that comes as a result of the change in scale and the fact that without Jennifer, the show becomes more of an ensemble piece.”<sup>74</sup> Librettist/lyricist Tom Eyen was even more direct, telling the *New York Post*, “The essence of Effie is more human now.”<sup>75</sup> Eyen emphasized this line, telling the *Daily News*, “Actually, I had never envisioned Effie as a heavy person. It worked out fine, but that wasn’t the original intention. My idea was of a mentally heavy person, heavy attitudes, a lot of pressures on her.”<sup>76</sup> Note the turn to metaphor and euphemism by all three to detail the supposed effects of casting Holliday and her fat body as Effie.

The major problem with these post factum arguments is that, apart from the willingness to disparage Holliday to the press, evidence exists that the creators *did* envision Effie as at the very least chubby, if not “a real fat girl” when they were casting the original Broadway production. What they ultimately decided was the distinction between “chubby,” a vague euphemism, and “fat” remains unclear. A 1981 casting breakdown from Johnson-Liff Casting, when the show was still called *Big Dreams*, lists the following requirements for Effie (fig. 1):

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<sup>73</sup> David N. Rosenthal, “Visions Dance Out of Dreamboy’s Mind,” *Mercury News* (San Jose, CA), December 18, 1983.

<sup>74</sup> Jeremy Gerard, “‘Dreamgirls,’ Revamped for Tour, Is Returning to Broadway,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1987.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen M. Silverman, “Broadway’s Dream Boy,” *New York Post*, June 27, 1987.

<sup>76</sup> Patricia O’Haire, “Dreamgirls II,” *New York Daily News*, June 21, 1987.

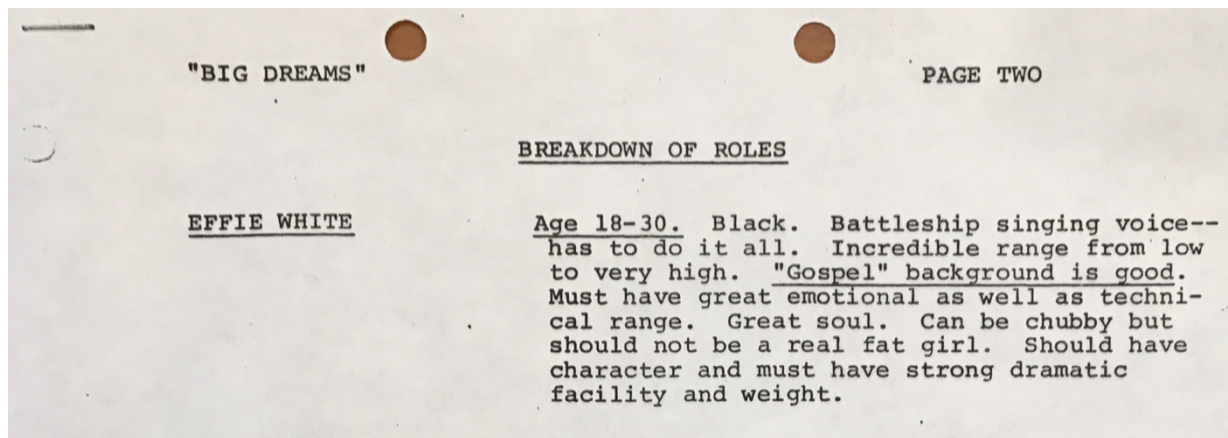


Figure 1: Johnson-Liff Casting, memorandum, 1981, Michael Bennett Papers, YCAL MSS 538, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

This language went on to become the standard breakdown for the role; a 1982 memo sent to Los Angeles agents by Johnson-Liff uses the exact description. In the version below, which was sent to Actors' Equity in May 1981, the description is slightly longer and includes language about glamour and sex appeal that is missing from later versions, in addition to using the euphemism "chunky" to again avoid casting "a real fat girl" (fig. 2):

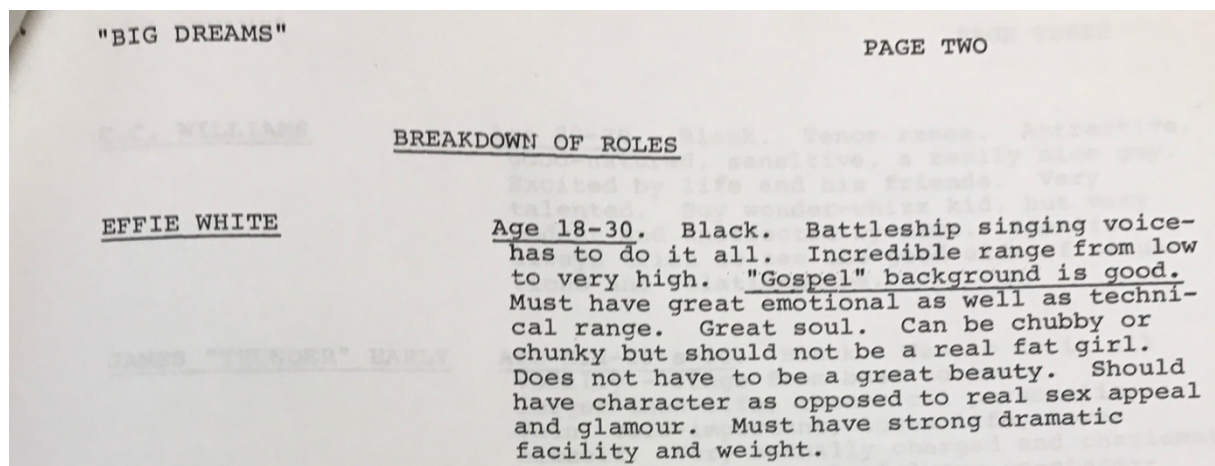


Figure 2: Johnson-Liff Casting, memorandum, 1981, Michael Bennett Papers, YCAL MSS 538, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

These descriptions beg the question of what “a real fat girl” is. The irony, of course, is that Holliday, a “real fat girl,” won the role, and a Tony Award for playing it. A hand-written draft of an early casting breakdown (author and date unknown but presumably also from Johnson-Liff), presumably written during preproduction, states that Effie need not be “foxy and attractive” (fig. 3):

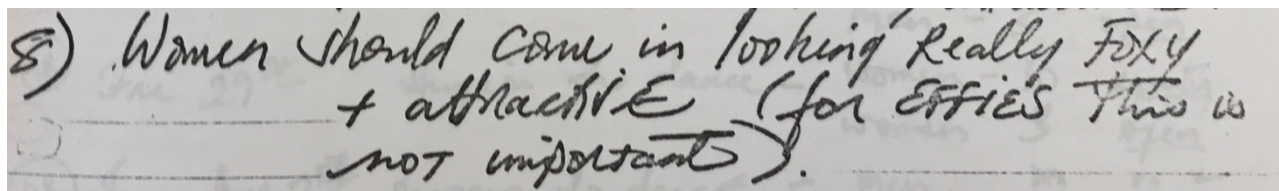
A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "8) Women should come in looking Really Foxy + attractive (for Effie's This is not important)". The note is written on a piece of paper with horizontal lines, and the handwriting is in dark ink.

Figure 3: Johnson-Liff Casting, memorandum, n.d., Michael Bennett Papers, YCAL MSS 538, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Undoubtedly, the character of Effie changed and developed throughout the course of the show’s multiple workshops, but the sustained disavowals of Effie as fat further ring false when one considers the fact that the property was developed with Nell Carter in its first workshop in the late 1970s. In one of the ultimate ironies related to *Dreamgirls* and the issue of Effie being too fat to be on television, Carter did not continue with the show’s workshops because she left to star in a hit television sitcom, *Gimme a Break*. Effie was not played by a thin actress until the mid-1980s, when White took over and unhappily wore the fat suit. Finally, if Effie’s weight is not supposed to matter and is not central to the plot, then why did the creative team approve of Holliday’s replacements wearing fat suits at all?

What, too, of the fact that when Holliday returned to play Effie in a 1994 Atlanta production after her dramatic weight loss, *she* wore a fat suit? In the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, Dan Hulbert wrote, “We should all have the problem Jennifer Holliday faces in the revival of her Tony Award-winning role in ‘Dreamgirls’: she’s too thin.” Holliday said, “I have to wear a ‘fat suit’ for the show! I’m a size 8 now, but Effie’s got to be an 18. So I need some

serious padding.”<sup>77</sup> Holliday returned to the role again in Atlanta in 2007, this time sans padding. Her attitude toward Effie’s body was different this time around: “I am substantially smaller than I was back then. It didn’t change the character, but it did make a change in terms of what I was going to try to do. Wear a fat suit? I opted not to just to see if I had enough acting chops to pull it off, to show the emotions of the woman in love, and her heartache. Heartache is heartache, and shouldn’t be predicated on whether she’s a big woman.”<sup>78</sup> Whether or not Effie is fat does change the character, however—if Effie is visibly thin, it makes no sense when Curtis accuses her of “getting fatter all the time”; the audience, too, is left to assume that she is merely a difficult diva rather than a fat girl with a big voice, pushed aside for her slimmer counterpart.

The use of a fat suit is a deliberate choice on the part of the director and costume designer to ensure that a character looks a certain way, a decision not made lightly given the added expense of creating costumes and padding for each actor in the role. However, the use of fat suits is more complicated than simply falling under the category of artistic license; the fat suit itself reinforces stigma because it can be put on and taken off at will, an act unavailable to the fat person perceived as morally suspect for their inability to take off the weight. The message the fat suit sends is, “No, I’m not actually *that* fat,” which recalls the casting notice explaining that Effie “should not be a real fat girl.” When the actor’s identity does not easily align with the director’s vision of the characters, identity politics become messily intertwined with the politics of theatrical representation.

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<sup>77</sup> Dan Hulbert, “Tony Winner Returns in ‘Dreamgirls,’” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, July 31, 1994.

<sup>78</sup> Jennifer Holliday, interview by David Edwards Hughes, *Talkin’ Broadway*, n.d., accessed September 10, 2017, <https://www.talkinbroadway.com/page/regional/seattle/se387.html>.

Though the debate over whether Effie has to be fat (or non-conforming) or not may never be settled, the fact remains that Effie is one of few leading roles available to fat black women in Broadway musicals but also one whose casting is contested due in part to anti-fat stigma.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps those uncomfortable with seeing Effie rejected because she is fat are more comfortable with seeing her “tossed out because she was unreliable, erratic, a bitch, unprofessional, and, most crucially, was unable to adapt to the demands placed on black musicians and singers who were trying to cross over to the white pop mainstream where the real money and power was — vocally, temperamentally, physically.”<sup>80</sup> Though Effie’s narrative arc does not change, the meaning of the conflict in *Dreamgirls* does if it becomes about whether or not Effie is seen as a “bitch” or whether it is because she is too fat.

### ***Dreamgirls* Post-Bennett**

*Dreamgirls* returned to New York—but not to Broadway—in 2009, in a production at the Apollo Theater produced by John F. Breglio, the executor of Bennett’s estate and his longtime attorney.<sup>81</sup> The production, which toured the U.S. after playing Harlem, received mixed reviews from critics across the country and never made it back to New York. Relative newcomer Moya Angela, who had previously toured in the ensemble of *The Lion King*, was cast as Effie. Like other fat black musical theatre actors, Effie was Angela’s first major leading role in a first-class production. She, too, could not escape critics mentioning her in the same sentence as Holliday—and, by this point, Hudson as well. Once more, critics resorted to metaphor in describing her

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<sup>79</sup> Fat black women have fared better landing leading or featured parts in revues including *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, *Black and Blue*, and *Smokey Joe’s Café*.

<sup>80</sup> Margo Channing, *Broadway World*.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Simonson, “Law is the Law, but Producing is his Life,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2008.

talent. Brantley writes, “Playing the role that made stars of Jennifer Holliday (on Broadway) and Jennifer Hudson (on screen), Ms. Angela deploys pipes of military strength.”<sup>82</sup> Angela hoped that Effie would lead to more opportunities; she told the *New York Times*, “This is definitely a big break for me. Most women in this role really take off after this.”<sup>83</sup> Since playing Effie in the 2009 tour, Angela has appeared in the ensemble of two Broadway musicals and in regional productions. She played Effie again in a 2016 tour, and noted that the role made sense for her:

There’s not millions and millions of [black] leading ladies on the ‘Great White Way.’ They either come from *The Wiz* or they come from *Dreamgirls* or even *The Lion King*, so it was just normal I could’ve said one of my top three roles was to play Millie in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* but I mean, what are the chance that that’s going to really get to happen? . . . It just made sense. Big voice. Big attitude, Effie. Put that on your top three and just let the Universe allow it to come back in your life.<sup>84</sup>

Effie would again be her next chance at a leading role in a major production, but one that did not arrive for eight years and would not be on Broadway but in London’s West End.

In 2017, *Dreamgirls* made its belated West End premiere, starring Amber Riley, who has been outspoken about her weight since rising to fame through television’s *Glee*. Riley spoke to MTV about casting directors telling her to lose weight, noting the multiple ways that opportunities to get cast are restricted because of who she is and how she looks. “Being the

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<sup>82</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Dreamgirls*, *New York Times*, November 23, 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Patricia Cohen, “Showing Them Some Love: ‘Dreamgirls’ at the Apollo,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2009.

<sup>84</sup> Deborah B. Pryor, “Moya Angela: Dreamgirls’ ‘Effie’ Speaks Exclusively to EURWEB,” *Lee Bailey’s Electronic Urban Report*, May 2, 2016, accessed November 28, 2017, <http://www.eurweb.com/2016/05/dreamgirls-effie-character-speaks-exclusively-eurweb/#>.



person I am, you know, the size I am, being a woman, being a black woman, there's not a lot of roles for us", she explained.<sup>85</sup> Riley has been open about deciding not to change her body to conform to unrealistic standards set by the entertainment industry in order to work. On her Instagram page, she posted a video where she asks her followers, "Why does me being fat offend so many people?"<sup>86</sup> She goes on to list the various parts of her body that she appreciates and tells her followers she does not consider it an insult to be called fat: "My ass is fat and the fellas love it. And so do I!"

Marisha Wallace, who was one of two Effie standbys for Riley in the West End production before taking over the role, regularly performed the role and came to the show's rescue when Riley and several company members were felled by pneumonia in early 2017.<sup>87</sup> Wallace keenly feels both the demands of playing Effie and the pressure to have a conforming body in the Broadway industry, even for those cast as Effie: "I feel like it used to be bigger, back in the day when people would cast that show, it was a big black girl. Then they also realized that the bigger, bigger, bigger black girls can't do the dancing. They didn't have the stamina, so they need someone who's in the middle more."<sup>88</sup> She went on to remark that "you have to be big [to play Effie] but you have to be healthy and fit," while clarifying that these are not mutually exclusive as is too often assumed.

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<sup>85</sup> Ryan Gajewski, "Glee's Amber Riley: Casting Directors Told Me to Lose Weight," *Wetpaint.com*, November 22, 2012, accessed September 22, 2017, <http://www.wetpaint.com/glees-amber-riley-casting-directors-told-me-to-lose-weight-738606/>.

<sup>86</sup> msamberpriley, Instagram, May 21, 2016, accessed September 22, 2017, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BFqHejcM\\_8J/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BFqHejcM_8J/).

<sup>87</sup> Georgia Snow, "Amber Riley misses Dreamgirls performances after being diagnosed with pneumonia," *The Stage*, January 4, 2017, accessed October 16, 2017, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2017/amber-riley-misses-dreamgirls-performances-after-being-diagnosed-with-pneumonia/>.

<sup>88</sup> Wallace, in discussion with author, June 2017.

Effie is not only a vocally demanding role, but also an emotionally demanding one, and the pressure to measure up to memories of Holliday's and Hudson's award-winning performances is steady whether you are the standby or the star. In fact, when Riley left the production, producer Sonia Friedman took the unusual step of casting three actors, who shared the role of Effie. In a statement, Friedman explains, "The thrill of *Dreamgirls* is to experience the brilliance of the human voice. Effie White is arguably the biggest sing in musical theatre history, which is why we have cast three extraordinary vocalists to play this iconic role."<sup>89</sup> Given the demands of playing Effie and its historical toll on actors, Friedman's triple-casting of the role seems like a kind of insurance against history repeating itself. One wonders how Holliday's career and reputation might have been perceived differently had she not been initially contracted to play Effie eight times a week. At the same time, Friedman's statement acknowledges that prospective audiences will see one of three "actual" Effies—that is, no understudies. This is canny marketing when the musical is absent a "name" in the leading role. Wallace, Riley's standby, plays the role for between four and six performances per week, while Karen Mav is guaranteed one, and Angela plays between one and three.

Tara Rubin Casting was responsible for the US casting of the West End production, including Wallace, and is casting its anticipated 2018 Broadway transfer. Casting director Eric Woodall spoke at length about the process of casting the production, from what went into writing

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<sup>89</sup> BWW News Desk, "Marisha Wallace, Moya Angela, Karen Mav, and More Join DREAMGIRLS; Extends Through June 2018," *Broadway World*, October 18, 2017, accessed November 27, 2017, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Marisha-Wallace-Moya-Angela-Karen-Mav-and-More-Join-DREAMGIRLS-Extends-Through-June-2018-20171018>.

the breakdown, to fat suits. Casting notices for the production's June 2017 auditions do not mention weight at all, but focus instead on other aspects of Effie:

EFFIE WHITE

18- late 20's. Lead singer of "The Dreamettes." Later she gets fired from the group when Deena gets given the lead. Headstrong, sassy, temperamental, a diva. Powerful gospel singer required with brilliant belt. African American.

Principal role.<sup>90</sup>

Woodall explains that when crafting breakdowns such as the above, "as a casting director, we're dealing with what's written." Casting directors usually turn to the writer if the property is a new one, but if it is a revival, they "can pull from something that already exists." He notes the numerous considerations that go into writing breakdowns:

If we're writing it ourselves, we certainly want to send it to someone else to make sure we're representing the character correctly, what's getting out there. But, then when it comes to not the character per se, but what is needed for the performer to play the role, then many times we are not making it up because we have to ask, but we will. We'll ask the music director and the choreographer to talk about specific needs.<sup>91</sup>

When it came time to cast this *Dreamgirls*, Woodall says the issue of fat suits never came up and that he was not aware of the original production's use until our interview:

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<sup>90</sup> "DREAMGIRLS – Broadway Theatre TBA Auditions," Broadway World, May 2, 2017, accessed September 22, 2017, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/equity-audition/DREAMGIRLS-Broadway-Theatre-TBA-2017-15551>.

<sup>91</sup> Eric Woodall (casting director), in discussion with author, August 2017.

I find it so interesting because we actually explored some ladies for [Effie] that weren't that large, because there are only a few lines in the script that really support that she's large, and you could argue that that's in the point of the story where she's pregnant. You know, the fact is, she's not commercially teeny, tiny model-looking. . . . So, you really don't have to have someone who is obese, you know? It can just be a little bit curvy, and so we have been encouraged to explore ladies like that. To the point of pursuing some actresses who didn't . . . I had to walk a fine line, because they knew the role and they thought, "Why are you calling me? I'm not fat."<sup>92</sup>

This production's creative team, unlike the original, has decided to sidestep debates about Effie's weight. Wallace even remarked that her appearance was never made an issue by the production team, saying, "nobody cares what size I am, nobody cares what I look like."<sup>93</sup> The fact that the production team has apparently left Wallace alone about her body marks progress on the one hand while,. Yet on the other, the surprise expressed by some actors invited to audition who do not consider themselves to be fat reveals the fact that Effie is still often considered a role for a fat person. Additionally, Riley's public body positivity about being fat complicates the debate about whether Effie is fat or not; the production did, after all, cast a fat Effie even though weight is not listed in the breakdown as a requirement or consideration for the role.

Casting directors can only do so much; they are ultimately hired to select and bring actors to the small army of decision makers comprised of members of the creative team and multiple

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Wallace, discussion.

producers. They can bring nontraditional types into auditions and even lobby for certain people to be considered, yet the power remains in the hands of those controlling the money—Woodall acknowledges that this “really is the crux of what we can do.”<sup>94</sup> When asked about possible barriers to casting more diversely, Wallace reframed the problem as one originating with producers rather than artistic personnel, including the casting team: “We’re trying to change diversity from casting. They’re not the ones who make the decisions. It is the producers and the directors and those people. Now, if that side does not say yes, then it doesn’t matter who you bring into the room.”<sup>95</sup>

Woodall notes that he has faced little resistance when bringing in actors who might be considered nontraditional types to audition for roles they might not have typically been considered right for; he feels that producers and creative teams are open to seeing who else is out there even if they do not actually end up casting someone who does not match up with preconceived notions of what a character is “supposed” to look like in terms of body type, ethnicity, gender, or race. He explains, “It feels like everyone is moving towards wanting to be very open to casting. It is a shift and it’s taken a long, long time. I think there’s still a lot of . . . room to grow, but what happens is, although people don’t think they are resisting, one can’t help sometimes but having a complete . . . a set idea of what it is supposed to be.” He concludes by arguing that what casting directors *can* do is plant the seed and wait for it to grow.<sup>96</sup>

As of this writing, it has been more than thirty-six years since *Dreamgirls* opened on Broadway, and, it appears that the next fat female lead in a Broadway musical will be Amber

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<sup>94</sup> Woodall, discussion.

<sup>95</sup> Wallace, discussion.

<sup>96</sup> Woodall, discussion.

Riley in *Dreamgirls*. There have increasingly been supporting roles cast with non-conforming bodies on Broadway, as this chapter will detail later, yet leading roles for fat women remain elusive.<sup>97</sup> The press generally no longer openly scorns fat bodies as they did with Holliday in the 1980s, but the practice of padding persists, while fat women routinely continue to be denied the opportunity to play a range of characters. While the US population itself grew increasingly fatter, an entire generation of actors and theatre-goers came of age in the 1980s and 1990s with Effie as the only fat female lead on Broadway. Then came Tracy Turnblad.

### CASE STUDY: *HAIRSPRAY*

*Hairspray* opened on Broadway on August 15, 2002, nearly twenty-two years after *Dreamgirls* premiered. *Hairspray*'s creative team (music by Marc Shaiman, lyrics by Scott Wittman and Shaiman, book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, direction by Jack O'Brien, choreography by Jerry Mitchell) embraced Tracy Turnblad's fatness in a way those involved in *Dreamgirls* did not with Effie's. Yet this embrace was not without its own complications. Fat, in *Hairspray*, is both specific and universal; its creators explain, "Tenacious Tracy Turnblad, lovable as she is, is fat, and all of us, lovable as we are, are somehow, metaphorically, fat." They go on to note that Tracy's fatness is a metaphor for being "skinny, clumsy, new in town, female, foreign, black, Jewish, gay, naïve, brainy, too short, too tall, overeager, shy, poor, left-handed, over-freckled, pyrokinetic (like *Carrie*), scissor-handed (like *Edward*), or musical-comedy-loving."<sup>98</sup> *Hairspray* takes a different tack than *Dreamgirls* in its

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<sup>97</sup> Off-Broadway musicals have been slightly more welcoming to non-conforming body types both as leads and featured players in shows like *Fat Camp* (2012) and *Heathers* (2014), both of which closed after brief runs.

<sup>98</sup> O'Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 5.

treatment of race and size, by creating a world that is “hot pink and filled with promises of romance, stardom and the righting of social inequalities.”<sup>99</sup>

Notably, this is also very much a working-class world on the brink of fuller racial integration. Whites and blacks attend the same high school in the musical but do not live in the same neighborhoods or yet dance the same dances. And the musical’s villains are white and middle-class. The libretto describes Tracy Turnblad as “a high-spirited, irrepressible, chubby teen girl; she loves to dance and is eager for her life to kick in.”<sup>100</sup>

### **“They Don’t Put People Like Us on T.V.”: *Hairspray* and Fat Representation**

*Hairspray*’s tongue-in-cheek tone is used even when addressing serious social issues, from racial inequality to fat acceptance. The show’s opening moments feature Tracy singing about being “hungry for something that I can’t eat,” calling attention to both her literal and metaphoric appetites.<sup>101</sup> *Hairspray*, which like *Dreamgirls* is set in the 1960s, also addresses social change and body image as mediated by television. When Tracy’s mother, Edna, hears of Tracy’s desire to dance on the local television station’s “Corny Collins Show,” she says, “Girls like Tracy . . . People like us . . . You know what I’m saying. They don’t put people like us on TV—Except to be laughed at.”<sup>102</sup> However, *Hairspray* does put “people like us” on stage as it

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<sup>99</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Hairspray*, *New York Times*, August 16, 2002.

<sup>100</sup> Mark O’Donnell, Thomas Meehan, Marc Shaiman, and Scott Wittman, *Hairspray: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Hit Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause, 2002), xv.

<sup>101</sup> O’Donnell et al., *Ibid.*, 3; Mobley explains, “The opening lyrics call attention right away to Tracy’s size when she describes herself as hungry, but she reverses it immediately by confiding that food is not what she is hungry for. The lyrics play with stereotypes and suggest that her hunger is not a symptom of her emotional maladjustment but could possibly be a harbinger of her rebelliousness.” (Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage*, 107).

<sup>102</sup> O’Donnell, et al., *Hairspray: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Hit Broadway Musical*, 14.

cannily tackles the marginalization of African-Americans and fat people by featuring three fat female characters (Tracy, Edna, and record store owner Motormouth Maybelle).

Though this chapter focuses on Tracy, Edna and Maybelle are complicated and fairly stereotypical fat characters. Edna is a drag role that plays upon cultural tendencies to feminize fat men, and to masculinize and desexualize fat women. Maybelle exemplifies what Dan Dinero identifies as the “big black lady” trope in musicals.<sup>103</sup> Tracy, however, breaks the mold of the fat girl as doormat, victim, and comic sidekick in order to be the musical’s self-possessed, exuberant, romantic leading lady who can “shake and shimmy” with the best of them.

*Hairspray*’s plot centers around Tracy’s drive to dance on the “Corny Collins Show” and win the love of its resident heartthrob, Link Larkin. Like Edna, Tracy is aware of the subjection that fat bodies endure. In “I Can Hear the Bells,” she sings, “Everybody says/That a girl who looks like me/Can’t win his love/Well, just wait and see”; later in the same number, she refers to herself as a “heavyweight champion.”<sup>104</sup> Like *Dreamgirls*, *Hairspray* is a backstage musical that features an unsuccessful audition scene early on. Tracy is fat-shamed by the Collins show’s producer, Velma Von Tussle, for showing up to audition and having the gumption to think that she could dance on television at her size.

Despite Von Tussle’s dismissal, Tracy ends up winning a place on Collins’s show when Collins himself sees her dancing with Maybelle’s son, Seaweed, at the sophomore hop at their school. Tracy’s casting on the show causes Velma to refer to her as “a no-talent Commie,” highlighting the perceived un-Americanness of a fat girl who supports integration and is

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<sup>103</sup> Dan Dinero, “A Big Black Lady Stops the Show: Black Women, Performances of Excess and the Power of Saying No,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 6, no. 1 (2012), 29-41.

<sup>104</sup> O’Donnell, et al., *Hairspray: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Hit Broadway Musical*, 24-25.



unashamed of her size.<sup>105</sup> Once on the show, Tracy is quickly recruited as a spokesmodel for Mr. Pinky's Hefty Hideaway, a plus-size clothing store. This moment is celebratory yet is also serves as a potent reminder that consumption and consumerism are never far removed from this musical, which is, after all, named for a beauty product. Yet at the same time, the inclusion of this moment shines a light on the fact that fashion retailers have ignored fat women.

*Hairspray*'s strategy of using humor nearly undermines its fat-positive stance, since it makes so many fat jokes, often in the same breath that it asks for acceptance. As Edna sings in the show's finale, "You can't stop my happiness/'Cause I like the way I am/And you just can't stop my knife and fork/When I see a Christmas ham."<sup>106</sup> These jokes provoke laughter; while *Hairspray* works hard to be in on the jokes, it also potentially subverts the identities it means to celebrate: *Hairspray* strategically laughs *at* and *with* its characters. Despite this, Tracy is remarkable: she inspires a protest to racially integrate the Corny Collins show, and goes to prison as a result at the end of the first act. In the second act, Link proclaims his love for her as he springs her from jail, and she finally becomes Miss Teenage Hairspray 1962, defeating her nemesis—and a tiny bit of white supremacy—along the way. Tracy never lets dominant cultural views of fatness stop her; she never views herself as somehow less-than, which is a powerful narrative never before given to a fat character on Broadway. Such supreme self-esteem was certainly not represented in Effie's narrative arc; Effie had to admit "I Am Changing" to find success again in a thinner body. Tracy's narrative arc "implodes the myth of the unlovable fat woman" at the same time that, according to JuliaGrace Jester, "it gives unrealistic representations

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 123.

of the ease with which Tracy is both accepted by others and how she accepts herself.”<sup>107</sup>

*Hairspray* is also invested in creating its own myths, in which struggle and injustice are resolved through song and dance, blacks and whites are assimilated into community through dance, and all are linked through the consumption of beauty products.

### **Integrating Bodies and Voices**

Alongside *Hairspray*'s depiction of fatness is its representation of the movement for racial integration. *Hairspray* relies on a classic musical theatre convention that involves a romantic leading couple and two secondary, comedic counterparts. Its twist on this formula is to have both couples in relationships that were stigmatized in 1962: Tracy and Link are a mixed-body size couple, a fat girl and a boy with a conforming body. Meanwhile, Seaweed and Tracy's sidekick, Penny, are an interracial couple. Just as it presents these relationships as succeeding against the odds, *Hairspray* celebrates the inter-mixing of dance and musical styles throughout. After all, Tracy wins her place on “Corny Collins” with a dance she learned from Seaweed and the other black kids while in detention. While the show's depiction of integration is sincere, its presentation of African American people and culture traffics in stereotypes, from Motormouth Maybelle's rhyming language to Seaweed's ability to dance well. Motormouth Maybelle's name itself signals what Mobley calls “fat behaviors”: “her inability to control her mouth, which results not only in her large size but her outspokenness.”<sup>108</sup> Maybelle's songs require a big voice,

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<sup>107</sup> JuliaGrace Jester, “Placing Fat Women Center Stage” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 250.

<sup>108</sup> Jennifer-Scott Mobley, “Staging Fat: Dramaturgy, Female Bodies, and Contemporary American Culture,” (PhD thesis, The Graduate Center, CUNY, 2010), 156.

furthering the association of the voice's size with the body's size. Tracy and Effie also both display this same "fat behavior."

Though the score of *Hairspray*, like that of *Dreamgirls*, is largely a pastiche of popular music styles from the 1950s through the 1970s, the writers rely upon the stereotypical "big black lady" convention to stop the show. Maybelle has the Act One finale, "Big, Blonde, & Beautiful," and the eleven o'clock number, "I Know Where I've Been." Each of Maybelle's songs contains the messages that *Hairspray* works to put across: in the former, she encourages Edna and Tracy to accept themselves and their size as she has learned to do herself, while the latter is a pseudo-spiritual about progress in the fight against racial inequality. This is clearly *Hairspray*'s "big black lady" song, as it both celebrates and calls attention to Motormouth's blackness and big voice. In *Dreamgirls*, "And I Am Telling You" may be the "ultimate big black lady song."<sup>109</sup> In *Hairspray*, Motormouth's songs stand out from the rest of the score due to their different musical styles and the fact that her character, most certainly a supporting role, is given the prime spots that would typically go to the leading lady. This is odd in the structure of a musical, yet perhaps because Tracy has so much dancing, the creators gave the important "message" songs to Maybelle. *Hairspray* gives Tracy just one solo in the second act—a brief reprise of her opening number. Shaiman explains that "almost everybody involved with the show" told him and Wittman, "'Tracy should sing the eleven o'clock number,'" but that they "simply didn't want our show to be yet another show-biz version of a civil rights story where the black characters are just background. And what could be more Tracy Turnblad-like than to give the 'eleven o'clock

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<sup>109</sup> Dinero, "A Big Black Lady Stops the Show," 39.

number' to the black family at the heart of the struggle?"<sup>110</sup> Unfortunately, this formal choice also means that Maybelle is placed in the all-too-familiar position of having to educate the white characters about both themselves and a universalized African-American experience (as written by an all-white, all-male creative team). Shaiman's justification for this choice also admits that the creators were trying to figure out how to deal with the fact that Tracy's narrative contains more than a bit of a white savior tropes.

While music is used to signify difference, dance also contains racialized meaning in *Hairspray*, as the white and African American teens initially dance different dances. When Tracy adopts the dances of the black kids, it is presented as appreciation rather than appropriation.<sup>111</sup> Her fat dancing body has found a welcoming community, one that has historically rejected, to a degree, the body conformity associated with white hegemonic values. It is Tracy's white dancing body that will integrate "The Corny Collins Show" with black dances, challenging the sociocultural standards that prevented her fat body from dancing on television and those norms that enforced segregation. The musical ends on a triumphant note ("You Can't Stop the Beat") as Tracy and company successfully infiltrate and integrate Collins's show. This causes its sponsor to suddenly realize that black women have buying power too, and he announces a line of beauty products for women of color. Julie Guthman explains how "the body is not only a site through which capital circulates as labor power, but it is also a cite through which capital circulates as

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<sup>110</sup> O'Donnell, et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 142.

<sup>111</sup> The musical ignores the power dynamics at play in Tracy's cribbing of Seaweed's dance moves, which she uses to win her place on *Corny Collins*. Brenda Dixon Gottschild theorizes how "APPROPRIATION leads to APPROXIMATION leads to ASSIMILATION" in order to elucidate how white privilege "confers a degree of power upon the most well-intentioned of its carriers." Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 21.

commodities.”<sup>112</sup> This moment reminds us again how all women are subjected to dominant standards of beauty and linked to commerce—much like the Broadway musical itself—and is itself a synecdoche for how being a good consumer is being not just a good woman but a good American.

### Is Tracy Fat or Chubby? Casting and the Turn to Euphemism

Perhaps because *Hairspray* is so explicit in its portrayal of anti-fat stigma, the press felt licensed to write numerous feature stories that commented on the body of the actor playing Tracy in addition to questioning her diet and exercise routine, which echoes what those who played Effie were subjected to in the 1980s, though with important differences. Much of *Hairspray*’s press resorted to metaphor to address its fat heroine, even when not addressing her specifically. *Variety*’s May 19, 2003 headline, for example, read, “‘Hairspray’’s Full-Figured Tony Tally.” To a degree, the production itself encouraged this kind of winking treatment; its advertising tagline was “Broadway’s Big Fat Musical Comedy Hit” (fig. 4):



Figure 4: *Hairspray* (musical) clippings, \*T-CLP (*Hairspray* (Musical: Shaiman)), New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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<sup>112</sup> Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies,” 192.

*Hairspray* was a known commodity before it was developed for Broadway; John Waters' original 1987 film was a surprise hit and his biggest mainstream success. Waters has repeatedly spoken about the importance of Tracy's fatness to the property; as mentioned earlier in the chapter, he wanted the musical adaptation to be a hit so that fat girls would have more opportunities to be cast in lead roles. He told *Newsday* during the musical's initial casting process, "I want to make sure that Tracy will be fat, not just plump. When was the last time you saw two fat girls as stars of a Broadway musical who also get the guy?"<sup>113</sup>

Waters based his film on a local Baltimore television show called *The Buddy Deane Show*, though he noted, "The one thing that was pure fiction in [*Hairspray*] was the idea that a fat girl could have gotten on that show. A fat girl never would have gotten on 'The Buddy Deane Show.' Even in segregated Baltimore, a black girl would have had more chance."<sup>114</sup> *Hairspray* allowed Waters the chance to re-imagine a more inclusive world through more inclusive representation. Before the Broadway opening, Waters described Tracy's importance in terms of what she represented: "There was no real Tracy; she's totally in my imagination and stood for every misfit and underdog—hippies, blacks, gays, fat people—who came to see my movies. She dances on the show, gets the boy and wins the title. That doesn't often happen in real life."<sup>115</sup> For Waters, the fairy tale aspect of the story was precisely why it was empowering: "It's about the teenage white girl who gets a black guy. The fat girl gets a straight guy, and her mother's a man who sings a love song to another man."<sup>116</sup> By coming to Broadway and spawning numerous

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<sup>113</sup> Patrick Pacheco, "Water's 'Hairspray' Is Beginning to Gel," *Newsday*, December 20, 2001.

<sup>114</sup> Chris Jones, "Welcome to the '60s," *Chicago Tribune*, January 18, 2004.

<sup>115</sup> Blake Green, "Good Hair Days," *Newsday* (New York), August 14, 2002.

<sup>116</sup> O'Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 12.

productions, *Hairspray* has created opportunities for the misfit and underdog fat girls who finally get to play a romantic leading lady in a musical. Yet as a historically-specific musical about segregation and integration in 1960s Baltimore, *Hairspray* has generally resisted colorblind casting; this was specified in the character breakdown for the Broadway production.<sup>117</sup>

Because of its unique roles and its structure, *Hairspray* presented casting directors with a few challenges. These began with choosing the language used in the casting breakdowns, especially when it came to how to describe Tracy. Despite Waters' comfort with the word "fat," the term is seen as stigmatizing within the industry. The casting breakdown sent to agents and used in open calls for Tracy thus scrupulously avoided using the word "fat" to describe the character, notwithstanding John Waters' repeated and purposeful use of the term. The casting team decided on "heavysset" instead:

[TRACY TURNBLAD] Female, Caucasian, 5'3" or shorter, to play high school age. Must be heavysset. Outgoing, unstoppable, goodhearted with a vibrant, lovable, spirited personality. Loves to dance. Becomes a teen heroine. Strong pop belt singer and great mover. LEAD.<sup>118</sup>

Casting director Craig Burns, who worked on *Hairspray*'s Broadway, Toronto, and Las Vegas productions, as well as the national tours and regional productions, explained, "[W]e didn't use chubby or fat. I used heavysset because . . . you don't want to offend anybody in a breakdown." He went on to add that initially they knew "you need a fat girl. It's like, 'that's the role.' This is

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<sup>117</sup> A 2017 student production at Princeton featured a bi-racial Tracy and a black Edna was designed to reframe notions about casting and to reframe the narrative about Tracy being able to pass as white. Howard Sherman, "At Princeton, a New Layer for 'Hairspray,'" *Arts Integrity Initiative*, April 4, 2017, accessed September 28, 2017, <http://www.artsintegrity.org/at-princeton-a-new-layer-for-hairspray/>.

<sup>118</sup> Craig Burns, email to author, September 2017.

what it is. . . . But it was definitely set up at the beginning, that on the breakdown, that we would always use ‘heavyset.’”<sup>119</sup>

Casting directors choose their words very carefully when it comes to writing the breakdowns, both out of necessity to attract the “right” actors but also to ensure that the breakdowns are written in culturally-sensitive, appropriate language. In 2002, Burns felt that “fat” was too insensitive to attract actors to play Tracy, though he contends, “Now it’s different. Now it’s like things are a lot freer,”<sup>120</sup> though he probably still would not use “fat” in a breakdown for the show. Though Burns suggests things may be a lot freer behind the scenes in the industry, little has changed in terms of who is actually cast in leading roles on Broadway. Broadway talks the talk but does not yet walk the walk as far as being accepting of fat, both materially and as a linguistic descriptor in casting breakdowns.

Size was, of course, just one element under consideration for potential Tracys and was, of course, not enough to win the role. Broadway actor Kathy Deitch was brought in to audition for Tracy several times over a period of four years, ultimately not getting cast because O’Brien told her she was “too sophisticated” for the role. Yet she had felt external pressure to get the part, observing, “Just because I’m chubby, everyone assumed that I would be Tracy.” She remembered feeling disconsolate about the process before her manager finally told her, “There is an essence about you that isn’t right according to the director. And so it has to go beyond just you’re chubby and you sing and you dance well.”<sup>121</sup> This is where being the right “type” is not enough, as the creative team exercises their license to determine which actors have the specific mix of qualities

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<sup>119</sup> Burns, discussion.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Kathy Deitch (actor), in discussion with author, April 2017.



for the role. Note the height requirement in the breakdown above, which further limited those considered for the role. The creative team wanted Tracy to be short so that she would contrast with the taller “adult” characters in the show.

### **Winning the Role and Weighing In**

Marissa Jared Winokur played Tracy in all of *Hairspray*’s readings and was also the first person to audition for the creative team, which made them wonder who else might be out there. Bernard Telsey Casting launched a national casting search in Baltimore to find unknowns to play Tracy, while Winokur was rehearsing the role for the final reading in New York.<sup>122</sup> Burns notes that this was not, as was reported, about replacing Winokur before the opening, but rather was about finding understudies and future replacements: “We knew we were going to need to start finding these girls, so I think it was about starting early.”<sup>123</sup> Winokur remembers this somewhat differently. In a diary entry published in *Hairspray*’s companion book, she writes of how Margo Lion, the show’s producer, “showed [director Jack O’Brien] a picture of a girl who auditioned for them in Baltimore . . . for my role . . . yesterday...THAT I AM PLAYING TODAY! . . . Wait, I can’t believe they were auditioning people for my role yesterday.”<sup>124</sup> When the production held auditions in New York the month after its Broadway opening, hundreds of hopefuls showed up, including many who saw playing Tracy as their chance to break through. “The role is something that I can play, because I can never be Eponine in *Les Misérables*. I’ve struggled with this for a long time, because on stage it doesn’t matter what you look like, but what you weigh,” related

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<sup>122</sup> “Spotlight: *Hairspray*,” *Variety*, April 21-27, 2003.

<sup>123</sup> Burns, discussion.

<sup>124</sup> O’Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 38.

Tracy-hopeful Lisette Valentine.<sup>125</sup> Casting director Bethany Berg noted, “These girls are real people; they’re what most of America looks like, and we’re looking for those people that are happy and confident.”<sup>126</sup> Note the change in language that acknowledges fat women as “real” people, as opposed to how those casting *Dreamgirls* did not want “a real fat girl,” as well as the explicit acknowledgment of what actual American bodies look like—implicitly also nodding to the composition of the musical’s audience. Yet even when acknowledging the progressive elements of casting a fat female lead, the press still appears unable to resist weight- and size-related puns and metaphors; the title of the article referenced above is “Sizing Them Up.”

Through the performative power of song and dance, musicals have the potential to subvert stigma and celebrate the stigmatized identity. *Hairspray*, of course, stands out for its celebration of size and yet there is a problem that complicates it as completely fat-positive: *Hairspray* not only used fat suits for its actors (including most actors who played Tracy, Edna, and Motormouth) but also had contractual weight clauses for some of the actors who played Tracy. At the same time that the show promoted fat acceptance, it was literally having weigh-ins for cast members. This practice is much more common in the concert dance world, especially in ballet companies; the irony here is that Tracy is essentially a dance lead—the show’s structure bears this out, as she is not even given the traditional leading lady spots for her songs. Dideriksen discovered at her first “weigh-in” as the Tracy standby that she was not alone in having her weight monitored; the actress regularly playing Tracy was also contractually obligated to maintain a certain weight, whereas Diderksen was told to lose 20 pounds. “It was this interesting

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<sup>125</sup> Elena Malykhina, “Sizing Them Up,” *Newsday* (New York), September 23, 2002.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

dichotomy because they were unrealistic goals for both of us, and sending us into panics” over whether their contracts would be terminated if the number on the scale was too high or too low, even though they both wore fat suits.<sup>127</sup> Luckily, a kindly wardrobe team member would sometimes round the number from the scale up or down accordingly.

Burns said that the fat suits were not an issue during the casting process:

It didn’t really come up, because I think everybody just knew. You know, ultimately eventually [the creative team] wanted that shape. They wanted that, you know, you look at the costumes and they just want a certain shape. A girl could be heavy, but they might need padding somewhere else to just give that Tracy-kind-of-shape that they wanted. So it really wasn’t something that we said, ‘Oh, you’re gonna need to be padded,’ it just went with the territory, and girls just accepted that.<sup>128</sup>

Whether or not those cast as Tracy knew about the padding before they signed the contract does not mitigate the complexity of feelings that playing the role brought up, or the ambivalence of the simultaneous burden and privilege of playing Tracy.

Another challenge of casting (and playing) the role, and a possible reason why the production used padding, is that its physicality was so demanding. Tracy is supposed to be an amazing dancer, and she dances so intensely throughout the show that the creative team was afraid that actors who played Tracy would lose too much weight from all the dancing. The *New York Post* reported just before *Hairspray*’s premiere that “Marissa Jared Winokur has lost

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<sup>127</sup> Dideriksen, discussion.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

weight—enough to send a frantic theater crew bringing candy and chocolate shakes to her dressing room. As the chunky star of ‘Hairspray’ . . . the 29-year-old needs to stay plump to play the Ricki Lake role.”<sup>129</sup> The article’s headline is “Worth the Weight,” which raises the question of what is worth the weight—Winokur? The chocolate shakes and candy? Starring on Broadway? The seesaw of being told to maintain your fitness while being “fed”? As the production was trying to “fatten up” its leading lady, it was also pressuring her to exercise, a practice that would continue throughout the run of the show on Broadway and on the road. Anxiety regarding the body of the actor playing Tracy began during the film shoot in the 1980s, Waters remembers: “Ricki started to lose weight, and I remember we would feed her cupcakes and Dove Bars and stuff.”<sup>130</sup>

Weight was always a concern for the actors cast as Tracy and the creative team, who relied to an extent on stereotypes of fat people during the casting process. Employment law scholar and fat activist Sandra Solovay notes, “The stereotypes about what kind of work a fat person cannot or should not do are broad. . . . They are not fit so they should not be in any position that requires strength, speed, stamina, or other significant physical demands.”<sup>131</sup> According to the *New York Times*, “Jack O’Brien, the director of ‘Hairspray,’ said he never doubted that Ms. Winokur was right for the role, only whether she had the stamina for it. ‘Did she have the chops to do eight shows a week?’ Mr. O’Brien said. ‘I don’t think anybody knew. I

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<sup>129</sup> Farrah Weinstein, “Worth the Weight,” *New York Post*, August 8, 2002.

<sup>130</sup> O’Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 9.

<sup>131</sup> Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Social Justice*, 160-161.

don't think she knew.'"<sup>132</sup> Yet Winokur had previously appeared on Broadway in a revival of *Grease* and regularly performed eight shows a week.

Concerns about fat people's stamina and ability to do the job contribute to and are a large part of anti-fat stigma, even when, like O'Brien, those perpetuating well-worn tropes are not necessarily ill-intentioned. Apart from Winokur, one must also take into consideration the fact that *Hairspray* was the first time the young actors playing Tracy were asked to carry a show as leading lady, which comes with a tremendous amount of pressure. Winokur was older and more established in the business when she played Tracy, relative to those who followed her in the part. Tracy replacement Keala Settle explained the toll success at such a young age had on her:

Truth be told, every Tracy had that [pressure]. They went through the same thing. You can interview every single one of them and they'll tell you the same thing. Each of us got shot out of a cannon, expected to become this torch for their company, and for everybody around them, producers, that's what it was. I can't even describe what that feels like or how to even deal with it because I didn't deal with it so great. But if I was asked to live it again, you bet . . . I would do it again.<sup>133</sup>

Settle's experience, as she argues, was not unique, and the issue of the contractual weigh-ins faced by the young women hired to play Tracy added stress to the already intense demands of playing the role (Winokur was told point blank during the show's Seattle tryout that she was

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<sup>132</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Big Hair and Personality to Match; For a Young Actress's Career, A Bouffant Moment in 'Hairspray,'" *New York Times*, August 21, 2002.

<sup>133</sup> "Keala Settle," *Theater People*.

“carrying a ten and a half million dollar show”).<sup>134</sup> Diderksen remembers being excited to play Tracy:

She is the ingénue, she wins the guy, she saves the day, and yes, she’s funny and she’s lovable and all those things, but in this very real-girl way. . . . That was so exciting to me, and . . . it was really this underlying pinch to realize that subconsciously I was being told I was still wrong for it, that there was something I had to fix. . . . In the end, I don’t think they realized how hurtful, and how anti-*Hairspray* it really was for them to be like, “Lose 20 pounds.”<sup>135</sup>

Some successful contenders for Tracy were sent to something known as “Tracy camp,” which was a training program for actors under consideration but who the creative team determined needed some more training to see if they could pull off the role. Burns explains that the impetus behind the practice was that “we show auditions to the creative team, and then they would say, like, ‘oh, this girl is ready to go to the show so we’ll just hire her, but this girl is a more “in-training” kind of a girl. So we need to put her in “Tracy camp” . . . and then let’s see if she’s applicable in the future.’”<sup>136</sup> According to Burns, this was out of necessity as well due to the relative inexperience of those under consideration to play Tracy, many of whom were making their professional débuts in the role and were as young as 18. Diderksen explains how she “started actually learning [the Tracy track] with a Canadian company, just as a Tracy camper” before she was hired to be a standby on the national tour. She remembered that she went to “Tracy camp” with no promise of actually playing the role:

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<sup>134</sup> O’Donnell et al., *Hairspray: The Roots*, 39.

<sup>135</sup> Diderksen, discussion.

<sup>136</sup> Diderksen, discussion.

I know it wasn't spoken about when I was originally a Tracy camper. I got hired with no promise of any other position or any other contract. Simply getting hired just for these five weeks with the Canadian company. . . . We were there for those five weeks, learned everything, and then we were sent home. At that time, there was not a lot of talk about keeping the image or the shape or anything, or what would happen.<sup>137</sup>

*Hairspray* was one of the first musicals to groom potential cast members this way, though others would soon follow, including *Billy Elliott*, *Jersey Boys*, and *Hamilton*, which also have specific casting requirements, both in terms of type and ability.<sup>138</sup> Burns notes that "Tracy camp" was borne out of practical considerations to keep the various productions up and running smoothly, because it was a struggle to find Tracys. He said, "They had to be really special, so we found them all but it wasn't like we had twenty people in our back pocket that we could go to, you know what I mean? We definitely had to go out there and train and find the really special ones."<sup>139</sup> "Tracy camp," therefore, was a way for the creative team and producers to be sure that they had found the right Tracy, given their self-imposed casting constraints but also as a way for the team to test out whether or not certain performers were up to the physical and mental challenges of the role. Diderksen explains what she viewed at the point of "Tracy camp":

It was really this challenge of feeling they needed this extra preparation, also worrying bigger girls weren't as coordinated. . . . That's what it seemed like,

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Burns notes that *Jersey Boys* needed to be sure they had enough Frankie Valli's on hand while *Hamilton*'s choreography requires a stable of dancers who are fluent in the multiple styles in the show. *Billy Elliott* needed to train its young dancers to suit the dance demands of the show. (Burns, discussion)

<sup>139</sup> Burns, discussion with author.

because we had this extra week of dance that was just dance rehearsal, and a lot of talk about getting our stamina up, and how to last. True, Tracy, for a non-big girl, is a heavy role. She's on stage most of the time, and most of that time is doing a lot of dancing. It's a lot of dancing and singing at the same time, it would be a lot for anyone, but they were especially concerned that this was supposed to be a bigger girl on top of it.<sup>140</sup>

Burns backs up Dideriksen's assessment of the particular demands of this role: "I remember Jerry Mitchell saying what the girls would have to . . . be really good at cardio to dance the show, and he was like, 'I need you to do 45 minutes on the bike and then you'll have a milkshake.' They had to keep their weight up, but then they also had to do their cardio. All of that stuff has a lot of challenges."<sup>141</sup> If the creative team and producers were so interested in the weight of the actors playing Tracy, then why bother with fat suits at all? Kathy Brier, the first replacement Tracy on Broadway, told *Newsday*, "It's a weird kind of a thing. You're supposed to be this chubby girl, and yet the show is so active you have to train to be an athlete."<sup>142</sup> Maintaining a certain level of fitness was a prerequisite in addition to remaining a certain size and weight, and in spite of this and the problematic use of fat suits, seeing a fat girl sing and *really* dance the lead in a Broadway musical remains powerful for both those who played Tracy and the audience rooting for the misfit to triumph.

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<sup>140</sup> Dideriksen, discussion.

<sup>141</sup> Burns, discussion.

<sup>142</sup> Kathy Brier, interview with Gordon Cox, *Newsday* (New York), September 28, 2003.



## ***Dreamgirls* Will Never Leave You: Leaving Behind Iconic Roles**

Diderksen, who played Tracy on Broadway and opposite Harvey Fierstein in Las Vegas, feels that playing Tracy was a huge opportunity, but one that came at an unexpected cost. She explained, “There was this stigma of still seeing me having Tracy on my resume. . . . My biggest credit, my only Broadway credit, is Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*. It was a while ago. I look nothing like I did when I did it, but I can’t take that off my resume because then it looks like I have no big credits. . . . You have to have those things on there, because that’s what people take seriously, but then they see that and they go, ‘But you’re not Tracy, so I don’t get it.’”<sup>143</sup> In fact, according to the Internet Broadway Database, with two exceptions (actors either played or understudied Elphaba in *Wicked*), every actor of the dozen who either played or understudied Tracy Turnblad during *Hairspray*’s nearly eight-and-a-half year Broadway run has never again appeared in another leading role on Broadway.<sup>144</sup>

In terms of career longevity, only Settle, who played Tracy on tour for almost three years, has had great success, winning a Tony nomination and four featured Broadway roles, including one in *Waitress*, where she played the comedic sidekick to Jessie Mueller’s lead. Settle dealt with more overt anti-fat stigmatizing when she was up for the Tony for Best Featured Actress in *Hands on a Hard Body* in 2013: not a single fashion designer offered to dress her for the ceremony. She used her unemployment checks to pay for her awards season outfits. One of her former dressers from *Hairspray* sent her \$1,000 in gift cards so she could attend the Tony

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<sup>143</sup> Diderksen, discussion.

<sup>144</sup> The two exceptions were actors who played and/or understudied Elphaba in *Wicked*, Shoshana Bean and Donna Vivino (who does not list her position as a Tracy understudy on her resume). According to the Internet Broadway Database, Vivino understudied several other roles in addition to Tracy.

Awards in style like her fellow nominees.<sup>145</sup> In perhaps one of the strongest indications of anti-fat stigma within the Broadway industry, despite the fact that Tracy is a leading role on Broadway, the two actors who understudied the part and later played Elphaba do not list Tracy among their credits on their websites, which are both full of pictures of their conforming bodies.<sup>146</sup>

Dideriksen is far from being the only actor unable to escape the long shadow of early success and association with a particular iconic role. The two women most associated with *Dreamgirls*, Jennifer Holliday and Jennifer Hudson, are prime examples of actors who have dropped several sizes while becoming emblems of triumphant weight loss narratives. Holliday has been open about her decision to have gastric bypass surgery, which she underwent in order to change both her body image and her career prospects. She explains that it didn't pan out as she hoped, saying, "Nobody wanted me small. They only wanted the old Jennifer Holliday. They were uncomfortable with my new look, my new attitude — everything."<sup>147</sup> Hudson lost so much weight after starring in the *Dreamgirls* film that she became a spokesperson for Weight Watchers, and her weight has been tabloid fodder ever since. *Hairspray*'s very first Tracy Turnblad was then-unknown Ricki Lake, whose cycle of weight gain and loss has attracted more attention than nearly anything she has done in her career. The next person to play Tracy, Winokur, shot to fame in 2002 for her memorable performance in the role that has marked her

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<sup>145</sup> "Keala Settle," *Theater People* podcast.

<sup>146</sup> "About Me," ShoshannaBean.com, accessed October 16, 2017, <https://www.shoshanabean.com/about-me/>; "Home," DonnaVivino.com, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://www.donnativivino.com/>.

<sup>147</sup> Dave Quinn, "How Broadway Icon Jennifer Holliday Overcame Depression, Body Issues and Temporary Blindness to Stage a Comeback in *The Color Purple*," *People*, October 26, 2016, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://people.com/theater/how-broadway-icon-jennifer-holliday-overcame-depression-body-issues-and-temporary-blindness-to-stage-a-comeback-in-the-color-purple/>.

career and that she has returned to twice (during the show's initial Broadway run and again in concert at the Hollywood Bowl). Though Tracy is an ostensibly fat-positive role, Winokur has maintained her celebrity status by becoming associated with weight loss. In between stints as Tracy, Winokur was a contestant on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* and hosted a cable television weight loss competition show called *Dance Your Ass Off*.

In 2009, Winokur wrote a blog series for *People* magazine titled "Calling in Fat," aimed at taking readers along on her "weight loss journey."<sup>148</sup> Winokur's notion that one could "call in fat" to work emphasizes this chapter's focus on the relationship of anti-fat stigma to labor in theatre. Winokur was willing to openly discuss her weight in interviews when *Hairspray* opened, and indeed, it seemed to nearly always be *the* subject that reporters always brought up. A feature on Winokur in the *New York Times*, timed to coincide with her opening night as a lead on Broadway, repeatedly made the point that she was breaking the "conventional wisdom" about how fat women should act and what they should wear; a sample line reads, "Heavysset women are expected to wear their clothes long and loose-fitting. Ms. Winokur likes her skirts short and her T-shirts tight."<sup>149</sup> Winokur noted the significance of her opportunity as Tracy, saying, "Here I am, the young character actress . . . I'm the lead this time." Though Holliday, Hudson, Lake, and Winokur may have shed weight, they never fully shed the association with the roles that made them famous. Weight loss complicates the narratives of these actors' careers, as the entertainment

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<sup>148</sup> People Staff, "Marissa Jaret Winokur: I Had to Call in Fat," *People*, August 25, 2009, accessed October 16, 2017, <http://people.com/bodies/marissa-jaret-winokur-i-had-to-call-in-fat/>.

<sup>149</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Big Hair and Personality to Match; For a Young Actress's Career, A Bouffant Moment in 'Hairspray,'" *New York Times*, August 21, 2002.

industry writ large has not cast these actors in major leading roles again despite now having bodies that are more conforming.

### **“It’s A Type . . .”**

In recent years, other Broadway musicals have made strides toward including bodies beyond a sample size in featured roles and ensembles. As with other kinds of “diversity,” however, this can reek of tokenism when there is only one person onstage whose racial or bodily identity stands apart from a sea of white, conforming bodies. Fat actors, especially fat women, almost never get to play a role beyond the sidekick or best friend. Broadway actor Lisa Howard told the *New York Times* that she’s been told her whole career would be different if she would just lose thirty pounds—that she’d finally be the lead and not the featured player.<sup>150</sup> She finally did win a standout role in the ensemble musical *It Shoulda Been You*, in a role described in the casting breakdown as “overweight and not comfortable with that fact or anything else about herself.”<sup>151</sup> Within the industry, some actors are beginning to speak out. Broadway veteran Kathy Deitch started an internet talk show called *Plus This!* to turn her “outrage into action” after learning that 67 percent of US women wear a size 14 or higher. She told *Playbill*, “We’re way in the majority. We’re like *really* the majority of women, and yet we are invisible, and we aren’t represented anywhere.”<sup>152</sup> Remarkably, the Broadway League reports that the Broadway

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<sup>150</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Lisa Howard on Her Latest Broadway Show, ‘It Shoulda Been You’,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2015, accessed November 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/theater/lisa-howard-on-her-latest-broadway-show-it-shoulda-been-you.html>.

<sup>151</sup> “IT SHOULD BEEN YOU – Broadway Theatre TBA Auditions,” *Broadway World*, August 20, 2014, accessed August 15, 2017, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/equity-audition/IT-SHOULDA-BEEN-YOU-Broadway-Theatre-TBA-2014-9296>.

<sup>152</sup> Michael Gioia, “‘Heavy Character Actresses’ Need Not Apply? Women Get Real on Casting,” *Playbill*, August 25, 2016, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/heavy-character-actresses-need-not-apply-women-get-real-on-casting>.

audience is also 67 percent female (and 77 percent Caucasian).<sup>153</sup> This means that the majority-female Broadway musical audience has seen very few musicals since *A Chorus Line* where their body type has been represented in a leading role in a musical.

Of course, the problem with the lack of representation extends across both sides of the proscenium. Fat actors are stuck in a bind between what LeBesco terms “fat assimilation” and “fat liberation,” with the assimilationists vying for tolerance or acceptance while still perhaps seeing fat as a problem to fix, versus the liberationists, who celebrate fatness and see stigma itself as the problem.<sup>154</sup> Yet when one is trying to work in an industry that hires or fires you because of how you look, what is one to do? Do you conform to or resist socio-cultural imperatives to thinness? And is the choice *only* between changing one’s body or one’s mind? This chapter began by highlighting the strategy of changing one’s body to conform in order to get hired; it will conclude by highlighting those utilizing the strategy of changing one’s mind to resist stigma.

The popular Instagram account Humans of Broadway, which has 64,600 followers, recently turned a spotlight on the issue with their series #BodyPositiveBroadway, which, in just a few posts, cuts right to the complexity of the matter. In her post for the series, Katy Geraghty, an ensemble actor in *Groundhog Day*, reminds her followers, “Don’t forget that typecasting can also be your friend and the reason you have a job. . . . Your self-worth [*sic*] in life or in theatre is not dependent on if you can be a princess in a ballgown.”<sup>155</sup> On the one hand, Geraghty is correct

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<sup>153</sup> This data is for the 2015-2016 season. “Research Reports,” *The Broadway League*, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/research-reports/>.

<sup>154</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 42.

<sup>155</sup> Humansofbroadway, *Instagram*, May 26, 2017, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BUkplHyhoVg/?taken-by=humansofbroadway&hl=en>.

about the employment benefits of typecasting, but on the other, seeing a fat girl play a “princess in a ballgown” would represent a powerful sea change on Broadway because of the multiple messages it would send to audiences, creators, performers, and producers. There is an economic imperative at play as well in the stakes of casting, while on another level, casting is a numbers game for the actor that guides them to find and hone their own niche. Wallace asks, “Why do I want to compete with the 70 other skinny black girls? There’s so many more of them. . . . Then, the bigger black girls, they can’t dance. Then I’m on a different, even echelon than them . . . because they can always find a big black girl who can sing, but they can’t find a big black girl who can dance and sing, so I save people money.”<sup>156</sup>

With so much money at stake on Broadway, performers must figure out who they are in terms of type and where they can fit in order to be someone producers are willing to take a risk on. Yet the economic imperative has material effects on the lives of fat actors, who will not be seen for leading roles, i.e., the highest paying ones. We know already that fat women face an additional economic burden simply from being fat in a society that restricts their earning power—being just thirteen pounds overweight cuts a woman’s earnings by \$9,000.<sup>157</sup> Broadway is competitive, and roles are few even for those with conforming bodies. Having a nonconforming body limits the number of roles for which one will be seen.

Broadway is slowly getting more inclusive in terms of casting, yet the lack of fat actors cast in leading roles belies Broadway’s vision of itself as a fully inclusive institution and the use of fat suits has perpetuated anti-fat stigma. Stated simply, if you are fat, you will rarely if ever be

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<sup>156</sup> Wallace, discussion.

<sup>157</sup> Jennifer Bennett Shinall, “Occupational Characteristics and the Obesity Wage Penalty,” *Vanderbilt Law and Economics Research Paper* 16-12 (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2379575>.

considered for a leading role in a Broadway musical because of how you look. Marilyn Wann writes, “When being thin or fat in our society confers privilege or oppression, the stakes are high.”<sup>158</sup> Deitch explains the direct effect that her size has had on her ability to get cast: “There were things that if I had been thinner, I would have been asked in for. That definitely has happened. No one asked me to lose weight for something ever but it was clear I wasn’t even getting in the door because I wasn’t thin.”<sup>159</sup> The issues raised matter not just to actors and other creative personnel but to audiences as well. In the words of ethnographer D. Soyini Madison, “representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated.”<sup>160</sup> While there are many sides to these representational issues, and while casting remains just one piece of the puzzle, it is the one that can have an immediate, visible impact as actors and audiences await new musicals to be written, produced, and cast that will expand conceptions of which bodies *are* fit for Broadway—and not just as the sidekick. Deitch points out the fact that, in *Waitress*, “we have a character that is the lead . . . who is pregnant for most of the show, and she is not allowed to be a fat girl.”<sup>161</sup>

When asked whether he had been able to cast anyone who played Tracy in another leading role, Craig Burns demurred, “That’s a good question. . . . There have been other opportunities, but I don’t know. I still think it’s definitely a type, and it’s harder to find roles that are right for these girls.”<sup>162</sup> Even as Broadway becomes more inclusive, especially in terms of racial representation (due in part to Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musicals), barriers still remain. Even

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<sup>158</sup> Wann, foreword to Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, xiv.

<sup>159</sup> Deitch, discussion.

<sup>160</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 4.

<sup>161</sup> Deitch, discussion.

<sup>162</sup> Burns, discussion.

though the height requirement for getting cast as Tracy was 5'3" or shorter, height must be ruled out when considering what factors are keeping past Tracys from playing other leading roles on Broadway: many of Broadway's most famous leading ladies (Patti LuPone—5'2", Bette Midler—5'1", Liza Minnelli—5'4", Bernadette Peters—5'3") are short. Winokur has a Best Actress Tony Award, yet only one credit in a leading role on Broadway.

The evidence presented in this chapter raises the following questions: When will a fat woman again be cast in a leading role on Broadway in a musical and will that musical mention fat in the narrative or not? How will the press write about her body or her diet and exercise routine? Will she be replaced by an actor wearing padding? Will the gap between those bodies considered representable onstage and the average American body continue to grow? What would happen if fat women were recognized as deserving of the full range of representation given to women with conforming bodies? It might look something like *Head Over Heels* (2018), where Bonnie Milligan was featured as Princess Pamela. During the show's brief run, Milligan tweeted, "We are serving amazing body positivity at @HOHmusical, where I get to play the most beautiful girl in the land, who has a love story, and nothing about my weight!!"<sup>163</sup> Audience members would wait for Milligan at the stage door to tell her what seeing her onstage meant to them. She explains,

It's been really lovely meeting so many women who are moved and say, "Thank you! You don't know what it means to have a big girl up there being joyful and pretty and

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<sup>163</sup> Bonnie Milligan, Twitter Post, September 6, 2018, 1:18 pm, <https://twitter.com/beltingbonnie/status/1037752011335376896?s=11>.



dancing.” I understand how important and beautiful it is because *I* never saw that, so I’m happy to oblige. I don’t think we talk enough about size diversity in casting.<sup>164</sup>

Unlike *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray*, *Head Over Heels* struggled to find an audience and closed after just 188 performances.

The presence of a show like *Head Over Heels* on Broadway might seem to precipitate casting practices becoming more inclusive, yet Broadway’s recent history indicates that, despite economic imperatives to return investors’ money, the financial success of inclusively cast, albeit conflictedly-so, musicals does not automatically beget more inclusivity. If we recognize the twenty-one-year gap between *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* and the sixteen-year gap from *Hairspray* to *Head Over Heels*, then we must confront the fact that money must not be the sole concern: *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* were both long-running, award-winning, financially lucrative successes that proved stories about fat women starring fat women *are* viable money-makers. While *Head Over Heels* was a financial flop, it nevertheless marks important progress in the representation of fat women on Broadway.

The presence of just these three roles, along with the handful of supporting roles in musicals like *Escape to Margaritaville* (2017) and *Waitress* (2015), demonstrates how fat stigma operates on Broadway from conception to casting. LeBesco explains, “the stigma attached to being fat is a control mechanism which supports a power structure of one group of people over another.”<sup>165</sup> By not casting fat women outside of prescribed roles, Broadway musicals enforce a system of gendered bodily norms policing how *all* women act, consume, and labor in the United

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<sup>164</sup> Raven Snook, “Big, Blonde and Beautiful in Her Broadway Debut,” *TDF Stages* (blog), July 24, 2018, <http://bway.ly/4o61zu/#https://www.tdf.org/stages/article/1960/big-blonde-and-beautiful-in-her-broadway-debut>.

<sup>165</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 63.

States. A few months before *Dreamgirls* opened, Bennett described his view of that musical's central conflict in three questions summing up the lens through which Broadway, and arguably US society itself, continues to understand representation: "[I]t's about, are you marketable? Is it saleable? Will it make money?"<sup>166</sup> Despite the smash hit status of *Dreamgirls* and *Hairspray* and the progress made by *Head Over Heels*, Broadway continues to say no to most fat women.

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<sup>166</sup> Michael Bennett, interview with John Gruen, *After Dark*, (unpublished manuscript, October 2, 1981), MGZMT 3-1038, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

## **“We Are What We Are”: *La Cage aux Folles* and Gay Stigma**

“I thought being gay meant being a bum all the rest of my life.”—Greg, *A Chorus Line*<sup>1</sup>

Just before *La Cage aux Folles* opened on Broadway in 1983, writer Ross Wetzsteon claimed, “Out-of-the-closet pathos has been acceptable to Broadway audiences at least since *A Chorus Line*, but in *La Cage* there’s out-of-the-closet pride.”<sup>2</sup> It may have seemed that pride was out of the closet on Broadway, yet profound ambivalence and disagreement existed offstage about how to produce gay representations while Broadway audiences seemed to have little problem consuming what was served them. Thus, the central issues at stake in *La Cage* are tied to its politics of representation. *La Cage* director Arthur Laurents summed up the controversy, saying, “I don’t know what [critics] wanted. Perhaps they wanted the two men to have sex right on stage. That would have been more daring, and it would have lasted one night.”<sup>3</sup> He agreed to direct the show in order to prove that “most straight American men...could nevertheless be gotten to applaud gays. They and theirs were the target audience, not the converted. If the show was any good, gays and the gay-friendly would provide audible support with laughter and applause. It was the enemy I was after.”<sup>4</sup>

Questions about identity politics have dogged the show—was this just a “gay musical” for straight audiences? *La Cage*’s appearance on Broadway at the moment that gay social

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bennett, James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, Marvin Hamlisch, and Edward Kleban, *A Chorus Line: The Book of the Musical* (New York: Applause, 1995), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, “‘La Cage aux Folles’ Comes to Broadway,” *New York*, August 22, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> David Behrens, interview with Arthur Laurents, *Newsday*, July 24, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Laurents, *On Directing: Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 121.

movements shifted from ideologies of liberation to those of assimilation and equality was auspicious, as the musical's politics of assimilation (and its inversion of "family values") mark a shift in the representation of gays on Broadway while also mirroring the central rift within gay identity politics. A 1979 *Time* magazine cover story defined the then-growing rupture, explaining, "Among the gays, there is a basic split between those who flaunt a defiant lifestyle and the closeted, who grant that 'drag queens' and 'flaming fags' have called attention to the gays' plight by marching in the streets, yet would never dream of emulating them."<sup>5</sup>

Gay liberation "intended to effect profound social change" by rethinking sex and gender roles and eradicating capitalist, heterosexist, patriarchal structures, while assimilationists sought inclusion within the dominant culture through legal protection.<sup>6</sup> The Gay Liberation Front's *Manifesto* explains, "gay liberation does not just mean reforms. It means a revolutionary change in our whole society."<sup>7</sup> These essentially different approaches did agree on the importance of coming out. Because of its anthem of self-proclamation, "I Am What I Am," *La Cage* was misunderstood by critics in 1983 as liberationist rather than assimilationist. Gay liberation's anti-capitalist stance meant that it would necessarily stand in opposition to the commercial aims, and likely the politics too, of any Broadway musical. However, this did not mean that a Broadway musical couldn't try to have it both ways; David Savran explains, "theater's marginality in American culture...guarantees that Broadway and regional theaters (unlike mass culture) are constantly in the process of trying both to undermine and reinforce hegemonic social values."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "How Gay Is Gay? Homosexual Men and Women Are Making Progress Toward Equality," *Time*, April 23, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 197.

<sup>7</sup> Gay Liberation Front *Manifesto*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/glf-london.asp>, accessed April 22, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> David Savran, "Queer Theater and the Disarticulation of Identity," in *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed. Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 155.

Indeed, as John D’Emilio argues, gay liberation itself would not have been possible without capitalism. He explains that capitalism “made possible the emergence of a gay identity and the creation of urban gay communities” at the same time it strengthened heterosexism and homophobia.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, D’Emilio notes the irony of the “bigger, grander, glossier” gay subculture begat by the sexual politics of anti-capitalist gay liberation.<sup>10</sup> *La Cage* thus represented the Broadway-ification of the “bigger, grander, glossier” aesthetic, without the sexual freedom, anti-capitalist stance, or solidarity with other social movements that had marked liberationist ideologies of the early 1970s.

*La Cage* remains remarkable for its appearance on Broadway in 1983 not only because it was the first Broadway musical to feature a gay couple as the romantic leads but because it was also a hit.<sup>11</sup> Writing about the show’s first Broadway revival in 2004, Robert Hofler made note of the fact that “22 years later, Georges and Albin continue to stand alone as the only gay lovers to headline a big Broadway musical.”<sup>12</sup> *La Cage*’s financial success on Broadway and around the world during the early years of AIDS raises intriguing questions about how the musical was received in light of gay stigma in the 1980s, and also how homosexuality was still stigmatized by the time of the musical’s two Broadway revivals in 2004 and 2010. As a “first,” the burden of representation weighed more heavily on *La Cage*’s creators than on those of most musicals,

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<sup>9</sup> John D’Emilio, *Rewriting History: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (London: Routledge, 1992), 11.

<sup>10</sup> John D’Emilio, *The World Turned* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* made the improbable leap from Off-Off-Broadway to Off-Broadway and finally to the Main Stem in 1982; it won the Tony Award for Best Play and ran for 1222 performances, making it the first long-running “gay play.”

<sup>12</sup> Robert Hofler, “What’s in a Kiss?,” *Variety*, November 21, 2004.

which explains pointed debates over of its presentation of identity. The stakes of representation were at once cultural, economic, political, and personal.

As much as the institution of the Broadway musical has been a haven for gays, it also has contributed in various ways to stigmatizing them at the same time it celebrates and welcomes them, most obviously by closeting their stories in favor of normative heterosexual narratives and most visibly by casting heterosexual actors in homosexual roles.<sup>13</sup> As noted by William M. Hoffman in 1978, “There is a myth that gay people can lead openly gay lives in the theater, where everyone is supposed to be accepted on their merits....it is almost obligatory to appear straight in the public eye if you want to survive in the theater.”<sup>14</sup> This chapter probes the paradoxes of gay representation, beginning with a brief history of it in Broadway musicals, followed by a synopsis of *La Cage*. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to exploring how multiple stigmas intersect in and around the original Broadway production of *La Cage*, reading critical responses to the musical in light of stigma, and finally focusing on how stigma was deeply related to casting and staging the musical. *La Cage* has been too easily dismissed as fluff; it is more productive to view it in light of “its ability to do double duty—to promote conservative values and to provide empowering representations . . . sometimes simultaneously.”<sup>15</sup> *La Cage*’s

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<sup>13</sup> In *Culture Clash*, Michael Bronksi notes, “Who can come out and who remains closeted raises the important issues of what and how society allows gay artists to create, how this informs the creations, and how this affects gay sensibility. An interesting measure of social tolerance is the ratio of actual homosexuality portrayed on the stage to the number of gay people involved in the theater, and the appearance of covert aspects of gay sensibility in popular plays.” (111)

<sup>14</sup> William M. Hoffman, introduction to *Gay Plays: The First Collection*, ed. William M. Hoffman (New York: Avon Books, 1979), xix.

<sup>15</sup> Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), viii.

fundamentally conservative values admit its stance on assimilation by using the nuclear family as its organizing principle.

### **Broadway Musicals and Homosexuality: “Do they have to flaunt it?”**

ROY: You see *La Cage*?

JOE: No, I . . .

ROY: Fabulous. Best thing on Broadway. Maybe ever.<sup>16</sup>

In Act 1 Scene 2 of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, *La Cage* is cited by Roy Cohn, the closeted conservative operative, as maybe the best thing ever on Broadway. It’s nearly a throwaway line but is also the audience’s first indication that Cohn is gay—his citation of *La Cage* signals his homosexuality. The phrase “Broadway musical” itself is a signifier for homosexuality; it is common to see plays referred to as “gay plays” but rarer to see musicals labeled “gay musicals,” perhaps because to utter the phrase would admit its (at least partial) redundancy.<sup>17</sup> Scholars note this connection and its dissonance: John Clum writes, “Broadway’s version of a gay musical is always problematic—foregrounding a comforting, stereotypical version of gayness for the bridge-and-tunnel crowd.”<sup>18</sup> Stacy Wolf explains this symbiotic relationship, noting, “Gay male culture is produced in part through engagement with musicals.”<sup>19</sup> For open acknowledgement of this, one need look no further than the opening

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<sup>16</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> In this chapter, I deliberately use “gay” and “homosexual” rather than “queer,” in order to reflect the terminology used during the time of *La Cage*’s initial Broadway run and because they are contextually specific, as opposed to the umbrella term “queer.” However, I have opted to describe Albin/Zaza with “drag” rather than “transvestite,” as their respective meanings are understood differently today than in the 1980s.

<sup>18</sup> John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 10. “Bridge and tunnel crowd” of course is its own stereotype.

<sup>19</sup> Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 12.

number to the 2015 Tony Awards, “Not Just for Gays Anymore,” delivered with a wink by openly gay actor and Broadway star Neil Patrick Harris:

If you feel like someone that this world excludes  
It’s no longer only for dudes who like dudes  
Attention every breeder  
You’re invited to the theater  
It’s not just for gays anymore!<sup>20</sup>

While it is no longer a secret that the Broadway musical was a haven for many LGBTQ people (especially gay white men) since the early 20th century, it remains the exception rather than the rule that Broadway musicals feature LGBTQ characters as protagonists; much more common is the gay character as sidekick or comic relief. Sarah Schulman explains, “Gay people are rarely allowed to be the heroes unless they are tragic heroes, rescued by straight people. Straight audiences must not be expected to universalize to a gay or lesbian protagonist.”<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Wollman concurs, noting that despite there being more gay characters in musicals post-Stonewall, “these characters were often secondary and more often than not they embraced age-old stereotypes—the evil, bitchy queen; the swishing, squealing sidekick.”<sup>22</sup> This kind of representation persists—see the show queen sidekick in *Mean Girls* or Elder McKinley in *The Book of Mormon*, who sings and tap dances about “turning off” his sexuality. These adolescent gay characters in musicals reinforce the connection between gay men, musicals, and performance.

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<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Ryan, “Not Just for Gays Anymore Lyrics-Neil Patrick Harris,” *FIM Fiction* (blog), accessed March 14, 2018, <https://www.fimfiction.net/blog/502511/not-just-for-gays-anymore-lyrics-neil-patrick-harris>.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Stage Struck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 147.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Wollman, *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72.



Broadway musicals might have “gay” written all over them, but they are still overwhelmingly openly heterosexual. *La Cage* librettist Harvey Fierstein asks, “Why do gay writers write about heterosexuals? One [reason] is social, the other is financial.”<sup>23</sup> Reviewing *La Cage*’s original production in the *Village Voice*, Julius Novick also notes this disparity, writing, “After decades during which homosexuals wrote, composed, directed, choreographed, designed, performed, and paid good money to see musicals celebrating heterosexual love, at last there is a musical—a hit musical—celebrating homosexual love.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet *La Cage*’s financial success and long run has not demonstrably made the Broadway marketplace clamor to tell other gay-focused stories. After *La Cage*, the only musicals on Broadway that had LGBTQ protagonists were *Falsettos* (1992), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), *The Boy from Oz* (2003), *The Color Purple* (2005/2015), [title of show] (2008), *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (2011), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2014), and *Fun Home* (2015).<sup>25</sup>

There are, however, a number of musicals containing gay male characters centrally represented in conjunction with performance, either in that the gay characters are performers or associated in some way with performance: *A Chorus Line*; *An American in Paris*; *Applause*; *Billy Elliott*; *The Book of Mormon*; *The Boy from Oz*; *Kiss of the Spider Woman*; *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; *Rent*; *Taboo*; and especially, *La Cage*. With a few exceptions (*Falsettos*, *Fun Home*, *If/Then*), musicals that include gay male characters almost always associate them with

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<sup>23</sup> Hoffer, “What’s in a Kiss?”

<sup>24</sup> Julius Novick, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *Village Voice*, September 6, 1983.

<sup>25</sup> There are several Broadway musicals during this period that featured other LGBTQ characters prominently but arguably not as the protagonist (notably including *Avenue Q*, 2003; *Taboo*, 2003; *A Chorus Line* revival, 2006, *Spring Awakening*, 2006/2015; *An American in Paris*, 2015, *Come from Away*, 2017; *War Paint*, 2017). The split protagonist of the 2011 revival of *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* may not fully count, while others may quibble over who is the protagonist of *Priscilla* . . . as only two of the three leading roles were gay characters.

performance.<sup>26</sup> While non-diegetic performance in a musical is a given, gay male characters in musicals are usually shown to be intimately connected to performance either as a career choice or a survival strategy. When musicals acknowledge gayness, it is generally within narrow boundaries (what might be considered the spectrum from freak to fabulous), contained within performance and, often, the theatrical trope of plays within plays. Musicals typically contain homosexuality within the frame of a backstage musical, perpetuating the association of gay men and musical theatre, drawing a line between theatre and the world.

Though *La Cage* was a first in major ways, it was not nearly the first Broadway play or musical to include gay characters or to address homosexuality. *La Cage* would do it differently though; Laurents explained, “Since it’s always been next to impossible to find a happy homosexual on the Broadway stage who is still happy at the final curtain, the notion of a multi-million dollar Broadway musical with two happy homosexuals on stage at the final curtain seemed completely impossible to me.”<sup>27</sup> This seemed impossible because of Broadway’s checkered history regarding the representation of homosexuality. In 1927, theatres were raided to stop sexual “perversions” from being represented onstage, partially in response to the threat of Mae West’s play *The Drag* coming to Broadway.<sup>28</sup> West was arrested during the raid and the

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<sup>26</sup> *Fun Home*, too, is about performance—Bruce Bechdel’s failed performance of a heterosexual husband and father. His situation is a harrowing reminder of the pervasive effects of gay stigma, which certainly contributed in some measure to his ultimate decision to end his life.

<sup>27</sup> Laurents, *On Directing*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Jordan Schilderout, “Drama and the New Sexualities” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, eds. Jeffrey H. Richards and Heather S. Nathans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 456. Three other plays also precipitated the raid: Parisian import *The Captive*, West’s *Sex*, and *The Virgin Man*, an import from London, all which dealt with subjects that were risqué if not outright taboo

three offending plays were forced to close as a result of the City Hall-sanctioned raid.<sup>29</sup> The raids “are significant because . . . they resulted in legislation known as the Wales Padlock Law, which explicitly prohibited plays ‘depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion.’”<sup>30</sup> This law remained in effect until 1967, though it was not necessarily always strictly adhered to, as plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and musicals like *Lady in the Dark* tested the boundaries of permissibility in the 1940s.

While it became increasingly difficult for representations of homosexuals to appear on the Broadway stage, coding and evasion became the strategies of choice, especially in musicals. Cole Porter’s lyrics in particular exhibit this strategy. “Effeminate men have long been burlesqued on the stage, but the first bona fide homosexual characters in a musical were probably the “Green Carnation” Quartet in Noel Coward’s 1929 *Bitter-Sweet*. The first major homosexual character in a musical appeared 12 years later as Russell, the fashion photographer in *Lady in the Dark*, and a screaming queen,” notes Terry Miller.<sup>31</sup> Between the 1940s and 1967, coded representations were common. While there were gay characters in musicals before the 1969 Stonewall riots, due to a confluence of stigma, homophobia, and the law, the representations were veiled. Bruce Kirle notes how “musicals offered the occasional screaming queen. Gay audiences, however, were used to coding and double entendre in Broadway musicals from the 1930s through the 1950s. Coding gender anxiety was intrinsic to the form before the cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Kaier Curtin, “Stopping the Captive’s Pale Brethren in Their Tracks: The 1927 Broadway Show Raid,” in *“We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians”: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (Boston: Alyson Publications), 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Schilderout, “Drama and the New Sexualities,” 456.

<sup>31</sup> Terry Miller, “Sing Me a Song with Social Significance,” *New York Native*, August 1-14, 1983.

changes brought on by the sexual revolution and Stonewall in 1969.”<sup>32</sup> *La Cage* was not even “the first Broadway musical to focus on a gay male relationship” post-Stonewall; two flops (*Sextet*, 1974; and *Dance a Little Closer*, 1983) had already featured gay couples as part of their narratives.<sup>33</sup> Wollman details how 1970s adult musicals, mostly Off- and Off-Off- Broadway, “were intended to entertain and empower gay men, but also to educate and reassure straight audiences who were new to and unfamiliar with gay culture” while downplaying gay sexuality at the same time.<sup>34</sup>

Off-Broadway audiences, at least, had been primed exactly for the kind of representational politics they would find on Broadway in *La Cage*.<sup>35</sup> Miller explains, “Between 1972 and 1975, homosexuality was featured in several off-Broadway musicals (*Dear Oscar*, *Sextet*, *Boy Meets Boy*) and revues (*The Faggot*, *In Gay Company*, *Lovers*).”<sup>36</sup> Broadway audiences had seen gay characters in 1970s musicals such as *Coco* and *Applause* which, along with *Company*, were the only financially successful musicals of the Broadway season immediately post-Stonewall (1969-1970).<sup>37</sup> The 1973 revival of *Irene* also featured a stereotypical gay character in “Madame Lucy.” In sum, there were numerous theatrical precedents, both recent and not-so-recent, for *La Cage aux Folles* in terms of the representation of gay males. In 1975, *A Chorus Line* shoved the closet door open to depict gay characters who were recognizably real while still adhering to certain stereotypes (they were performers: dancers and a drag performer).

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 178.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Wollman, *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 166.

<sup>34</sup> Wollman, *Hard Times*, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Space limitations force me to omit the history of gay plays on, Off-, and Off-Off-Broadway during the late 1960s/1970s. Fierstein got his start Off-Off-Broadway during these years.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, ““Sing Me a Song with Social Significance.””

<sup>37</sup> Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 179.

*La Cage* also depended upon another Broadway stereotype: the diva. Broadway's biggest stars tend to be women known by their first name: Ethel, Mary, Gwen, Chita, Bernadette, Patti, Audra, et al. *La Cage* solved the problem of not having a leading lady by having its leading man and his drag persona Albin/Zaza fulfill the function of the female lead. "The female performer will always enjoy the advantage of also being thought to *represent* the stage, as its sign, its celebrant, its essence, and its glory; while the male tends to be suffered on condition that, by the inferiority or subjection of his own talents, he assists the enhancement of hers," asserts D.A. Miller.<sup>38</sup> Albin represents not just the stage but "woman" as well—the musical gives him its prime song slots in the first act finale ("I Am What I Am") and the eleven o'clock number ("The Best of Times"), both spots typically reserved for the leading lady. Wolf writes, "gender—the performed, embodied, and envoiced difference between women and men—is foundational to the very genre of musical theatre. Gender is a constitutive element of Broadway musical theatre, fundamental to the musical's architecture."<sup>39</sup> As a musical comedy, *La Cage*, like drag itself, was constructed upon a fantasy of gender. While Albin/Zaza are stand-ins for the leading lady, according stereotypes of homosexuality are also mapped on to him. According to John Clum, "*La Cage* operates on a very old-fashioned notion of homosexuality, but one that is clear to straights. Here is a classic butch-femme couple. It's clear who is on top, particularly when Albin identifies himself as a woman."<sup>40</sup> *La Cage* was old-fashioned, down to its stereotypes.

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<sup>38</sup> D.A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 71.

<sup>39</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>40</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 184.

## Narrative Synopsis

*La Cage aux Folles*'s plot might be charitably referred to as thin. As Fierstein told an interviewer before it opened, "Basically it's the same plot as 'You Can't Take It with You,' 'The Munsters,' 'Mame' - a classic farce plot about a weird family with a normal kid."<sup>41</sup> The musical is based upon the 1973 stage farce by Jean Poiret, not the popular 1978 film of the same title. The libretto simply states that the setting is St. Tropez, France and the time, summer. This is a backstage musical taking place both onstage and off at the titular drag nightclub owned and run by Georges and Albin, a long-term couple. Georges is the club's emcee while Albin is its star in the drag persona of "Zaza."<sup>42</sup> Though its central characters are two gay men, it is notable that the musical is less about that fact than it is about their conflict with their son.

The musical opens as a performance at La Cage aux Folles is about to begin. Georges comes onstage and welcomes La Cage's patrons, who of course are *La Cage*'s actual spectators, making this musical explicitly participatory in its opening moments and echoing *Cabaret*'s opening scene in a performance venue where gender is also destabilized. This move has implications beyond the rhetorical as *La Cage* blurs the lines between performance and "reality" throughout. This purposeful blurring of lines is immediately apparent in the introduction of "Les Cagelles," the musical's drag chorus. They sing, "WE ARE WHAT WE ARE/AND WHAT WE ARE/IS AN ILLUSION."<sup>43</sup> Georges introduces the Cagelles, but Zaza misses her entrance, which then turns the narrative toward the other side of the footlights. The scene shifts to the

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<sup>41</sup> Leslie Bennetts, "Harvey Fierstein's Long Journey to the Tony and Beyond," *New York Times*, June 26, 1983.

<sup>42</sup> To differentiate between Albin and Zaza, I use "he" when referring to Albin and "she" when referring to Zaza.

<sup>43</sup> Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein, *La Cage aux Folles* (London: Samuel French, 2014), 13. All further references will be in-text parenthetical citations referring to this edition of the libretto.

interior of Georges and Albin's apartment, where Albin immediately confronts Georges over whether or not he has had an affair (he hasn't). Albin plays the scene to the hilt: "And so we have it. The beans are at last spilt. The cat is out the baggage. Feeling trapped, my love? Is this what twenty years together adds up to? Where once knelt a prisoner of love, now crouches a caged creature longing to be free" (20). Georges convinces Albin that there's been no affair and hustles him to get dressed for his now very late entrance.

Albin's transformation into Zaza happens on stage before the audience in "A Little More Mascara." He sits at his dressing table and makeup mirror and sings, "ONCE AGAIN IT IS TIME TO BE SOMEONE/WHO'S ANYONE OTHER THAN ME—/WITH A RARE COMBINATION/OF GIRLISH EXCITEMENT AND MANLY RESTRAINT" (22).

Throughout the song, he paints the persona of Zaza on his face, applying the wig just at the final moment backstage as the song transitions into Zaza's number onstage at La Cage aux Folles, backed by the Cagelles. Dramaturgically, the song is Albin's "I Want" song. He sings,

CAUSE WHEN I FEEL GLAMOROUS AND  
ELEGANT AND  
BEAUTIFUL  
THE WORLD THAT I'M LOOKING AT'S BEAUTIFUL TOO!

WHEN MY LITTLE ROAD HAS A FEW BUMPS AGAIN  
AND I NEED SOMETHING LEVEL TO LEAN UPON  
I PUT ON MY SLING PUMPS AGAIN  
AND WHAM—THIS UGLY DUCKLING IS A SWAN! (23)

"Mascara" embodies the idea that the makeup makes the queen but also the man, as Albin himself is who comes into focus with each lash that he applies during this song. If drag is about the illusion and performativity of gender, seeing Albin get into Zaza's drag threatens the illusion promised by the Cagelles in "We Are What We Are."

The musical's conflict begins with the arrival of Jean-Michel, Georges's son from a long ago one-night stand (i.e., before Albin, lest there be any hint of non-monogamy between the gay couple). Albin raised Jean-Michel alongside Georges as his "mother," as the musical terms the relationship. Jean-Michel has arrived to tell his parents that he's getting married to the daughter of the Deputy General of the "Tradition, Family, and Morality Party," which is "the one who's pledged to close down all the transvestite clubs if elected" (28-29). Jean-Michel tells Georges that his fiancée, Anne, and her parents will be coming to dinner tomorrow night and, fatefully, that Albin must be gone. It is telling that Anne's family is named the Dindons, which means *turkey* in French and suggests what might metaphorically be for dinner. Jean-Michel says Albin can be "anything he'd like as long as he isn't here. Papa, you know the way he is. The way he talks and moves and...dresses. You know" (30). Jean-Michel asks Georges to invite his biological mother, who has not been part of his life. Georges knows how much this will hurt Albin, but he agrees in order to make his son happy.

Georges attempts to tell Albin that he is uninvited but delays the inevitable in order to sing a love song to him ("Song on the Sand"). Before Georges can break the news to Albin, the midnight performance call-time approaches and Albin slips off to prepare. A brief scene follows with Jean-Michel "de-gaying" the apartment, i.e., getting rid of the phallic art and Zaza's gowns. The scene shifts to onstage at the nightclub. Georges introduces Zaza, who sings the musical's title song, which again bluntly questions illusion and identity: "JUST WHO IS WHO/AND WHAT IS WHAT/IS QUITE A QUESTION/AT LA CAGE AUX FOLLES" (50). Backstage for a costume change, Albin catches Jean-Michel and Georges carrying his things out of the apartment through the club and is finally told of Jean-Michel's request. Albin is stone-faced and silent upon learning of this betrayal, telling them, "Excuse me. I have a show to finish" (56).



He goes onstage with the Cagelles and sings the chorus of “We Are What We Are” before holding his hands up to stop the number. He dismisses the Cagelles from the stage and launches into “I Am What I Am.” Herman cannily reframes the lyrics from being a first-person plural tease of identity to a first-person singular declaration of identity, albeit an identity that has been carefully constructed—note that he sings that he is *what* he is not *who* he is. Albin:

I AM WHAT I AM  
I AM MY OWN SPECIAL CREATION  
SO COME TAKE A LOOK  
GIVE ME THE HOOK  
OR THE OVATION

IT’S MY WORLD  
THAT I WANT TO HAVE A LITTLE PRIDE IN  
MY WORLD  
AND IT’S NOT A PLACE I HAVE TO HIDE IN  
LIFE’S NOT WORTH A DAMN  
TILL YOU CAN SAY “HEY, WORLD  
I AM WHAT I AM!”<sup>(57)</sup>

The song is at once performed for the nightclub’s audience, *La Cage*’s audience, and Georges, who steps out of the wings toward Albin as the song ends. Albin removes his wig and storms out of the theatre exiting through the house as the curtain falls on Georges alone onstage.

The second act opens the next morning with Georges finding Albin and Jacob, their butler/“maid,” wandering about town after not having come home the prior night. Apologies are made, and Georges and Albin apparently mend their rift in a reprise of “Song on the Sand.” Yet the situation remains unchanged:

ALBIN: The fact remains that I am unwanted.

GEORGES: Albin, you are wanted. It’s all you bring with you that’s questionable. Now, you have certain mannerisms, albeit charming mannerisms, which could shock people who haven’t been forewarned.

ALBIN: *Et tu? (mocking him)* “Which could shock people who haven’t been forewarned!”

GEORGES: My mannerisms can translate as tasteful affectation. While yours are no less than suspicious.

ALBIN: “No less than sssssssssspiciousssssss.” (61)

This exchange sets up the next twist to the farce: the use of costume in the plot of mistaken/performed identity. Georges tells Albin he can come to dinner with the Dindons if he assumes the role of Jean-Michel’s heterosexual “Uncle Al,” noting that passing “as a heterosexual man tonight...will be the greatest acting challenge of his career” (63). This leads right into “Masculinity,” a number in which Georges, café waiter Renaud, and the chorus (the Cagelles now dressed in male drag) try to teach Albin not to be such a queen.

GEORGES: John Wayne. I want you to pick up that toast as if you were John Wayne.

(ALBIN *prepares, does his best gunslinger swagger, then sits back down and lifts the toast, fanning himself with it.*)

I thought I said John Wayne.

ALBIN: It is John Wayne. John Wayne as a little girl!

GEORGES: Let’s try this again.

THINK OF THIS AS...

MASCULINE TOAST

AND MASCULINE BUTTER

READY FOR SPREADING BY A MASCULINE HAND

PICK UP THAT KNIFE AND MAKE BELIEVE IT’S A MACHETE

IT’LL TAKE ALL YOUR STRENGTH AND STEADY NERVES

FOR HACKING YOUR WAY THROUGH THE CHERRY PRESERVES! (64-65)

In *La Cage*, all gender is parody and stereotype but, crucially, also performance. Albin’s way to normative masculinity is to be learned here through the performance of conformity. He must learn to “walk like a man.” This number is jarring coming so soon after “I Am What I Am,” but typical of the show’s conflicted approach to identity. Reviewing the out-of-town tryout in

Boston, *Variety* noted that “Masculinity” “seems surprisingly out of sync with the sensibilities of the rest of the show...It’s disconcerting, then, to see Albin, early in the second act, swallowing his pride by making a painful attempt at emulating Hollywood’s conception of ‘a man.’”<sup>44</sup>

Later, back at the apartment, Georges tells Jean-Michel about the plan to invite “Uncle Al” to dinner. Jean-Michel’s petulant reaction spurs Georges song, “Look Over There,” a paean to Albin’s parenting—“SOMEONE PUTS HIMSELF LAST/SO THAT YOU CAN COME FIRST” (72). Jean-Michel’s birth mother sends a telegram cancelling her attendance at the dinner, setting in motion Albin’s secret plan to appear at dinner in drag as her and not as “Uncle Al.” The Dindons arrive, hilarity ensues as they are served hors d’oeuvres on dishes containing scenes of “Greek” young males “wrestling.” Enter Albin as birth mother Sybill. Jacob has burned dinner, and the party must dine out at Riviera hotspot Chez Jacqueline.

Once at Chez Jacqueline, proprietor Jacqueline announces to the room that a special guest is in the house. Dindon believes she is speaking of him, yet it is Albin/Zaza who she asks to stand and deliver a song (“The Best of Times”). The entire restaurant cannot help but join in to the song’s infectious, repetitive chorus. Albin rips off his wig as is his custom at the close of a performance, revealing that his appearance as “Mother” that night has been its own farce. Dindon is trapped with only one way out: the help of the homosexuals and transvestites he so despises. Albin and George suddenly regain control of the situation.

DINDON: And what sort of family do you think this son of a pervert could make, being brought up as he was by two transvestite homosexuals?

ALBIN: One transvestite.

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<sup>44</sup> Weil, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *Variety*, August 22, 1983.

GEORGES: One plain homosexual. (89-90)

Jean-Michel at last realizes his mistake and apologizes to his Albin for his boorish behavior as he reprises “Look Over There.” A plan is hatched to get Dindon out of the club without being noticed by the press, who have been alerted to his presence by Jacqueline. The blessing for Jean-Michel’s marriage is quickly secured as the scene shifts to onstage at La Cage aux Folles. Georges sings a reprise of the title song as preparation for the drag show’s (and the musical’s) finale. Throughout the finale, the Dindon family are incorporated into the show—in drag—as a way of hiding their identities from the press. In this, *La Cage* flips the typical assimilationist narrative of musicals in that the *insiders*, the Dindons, are assimilated into the *outsider* community via performance. Within the world of *La Cage*, the Dindons are also the real outsiders. The Dindons make it off stage and out of the club to safety as the show ends with Georges and Albin alone onstage together, reprising “Song on the Sand.” The curtain falls. The company sings “The Best of Times” during the bows and the audience is sent on their way.

### **Stigma and *La Cage*: Contexts of Production**

“It is crucial at this point to understand how overt and vulgar the oppression against gay people was at that time. There was not even a basic gay rights anti-discrimination bill in New York until 1986.”—Sarah Schulman<sup>45</sup>

The changing sociopolitical landscape of the United States has meant that *La Cage Aux Folles* has resonated differently at different times even during its initial run; Wolf makes clear that the Broadway musical is “a social event and a commercial product always and necessarily in

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<sup>45</sup> Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 40.

conversation with its context.”<sup>46</sup> Overt gay sexuality was so stigmatized in 1983 that the creative team methodically avoided it. According to Brown, executive producer Allan Carr even had to be talked out of painting the Palace Theatre completely pink for fear of being too gay.<sup>47</sup> “Part of the power of stigmatization lies in the realization that people who are stigmatized or acquire a stigma lose their place in the social hierarchy,” notes Lerita M. Coleman.<sup>48</sup> Prior to the Broadway opening, Laurents told the *New York Times*, “I think gays are at the lowest end of the scale. Everybody looks down on gays.” He went on to claim, “I don’t think theater changes attitudes. I think we would like to think that, but I don’t believe it.”<sup>49</sup> Even within the all-gay creative team, there existed bias against certain types of gays and gay humor; Laurents explained to an interviewer, “We all felt very strongly that there shouldn’t be any camping.”<sup>50</sup> In 1993, he explained:

I was very careful to keep sexuality out of it because...I felt this was an entertainment and that if I could do it right, it would help people see gays and not get turned off . . . I remember I got an award from the Fund for Human Dignity, and typical of me, when I accepted it I castigated them. I said, You people were busy writing how it laid off and so forth. I said, it ran almost five years, and if it had screamed and yelled like Larry Kramer, it wouldn’t have. It’s a musical. [Straights are] not going to go, and in those days, they

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<sup>46</sup> Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> *The Fabulous Allan Carr* directed by Jeffrey Schwarz (2017; Automat Pictures), advance screening copy.

<sup>48</sup> Lerita M. Coleman, “Stigma: An Enigma Demystified,” in *The Dilemma of Difference: A Multidisciplinary View of Stigma*, ed. Stephen C. Ainlay, Gaylene Becker, and Lerita M. Coleman (New York: Plenum Press, 1986), 214.

<sup>49</sup> Leslie Bennetts, “Here Comes the Musical ‘La Cage,’” *New York Times*, August 21, 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, “‘La Cage aux Folles’.”

wouldn't have. Now if you were doing it, you would have to do it differently. I think every one of them should have the AIDS ribbon on. But it would still be hard to do.<sup>51</sup>

This section addresses how multiple kinds of stigma intersect in *La Cage* and how the musical cannot be divorced from its context. In some cases, the stigmas are extrinsic to the musical, such as AIDS stigma, while others are intrinsic, such as the stigma of drag or being a male dancer.

Stigma restricted how *La Cage* could be produced and is complex to address because it exists on many levels at once.<sup>52</sup> Musicals often parade stereotypes, in terms of gender and sexuality, and also race and ethnicity. *La Cage* checks all of these boxes in its depiction of two middle-aged, white, gay men, a chorus of drag queens, and especially in its portrayal of Jacob, the butler/maid who wants to get into the act. Jacob is the only character whose race is specified in the libretto: he is identified as black while the whiteness of the other characters is assumed rather than stated. In the 2010 revival, Jacob was cast with a Latinx actor, which was a break from the practice of casting the role with a black actor but not with making the servant a person of color. If the musical's politics contain blind spots, this surely is a glaring one.

Not all stereotypes stigmatize, and not all stigmas are stereotypes; the central element that makes stereotypes work for musicals is that stereotypes are heightened performances of specific attributes. *La Cage* relies upon these stereotypes at the same time that it subverts them, especially in its adoption of a rhetoric of family values. The fact that every single character is a stereotype might be exactly the point—while the stereotypes were familiar, the musical's depiction of a gay family was not, at least on Broadway in 1983. John Bush Jones disagrees with

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur Laurents, interview by Suki Sandler, December 8, 1993, transcript, Arthur Laurents Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>52</sup> Robert A. Scott and Dale T. Miller, Foreword to *The Dilemma of Difference*, xii-xiii.

the use of stereotypes, contending that the characters “aren’t just drag performers in the club but drag queens off-stage, whose dialogue and mannerisms consistently portray them as homosexual stereotypes. Thanks to this unbalanced portrayal, audiences may have left the theatre entertained, but they left with their prejudices largely intact.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Jones is right, but perhaps audiences also entertained new ideas.

*La Cage* producer Barry Brown remembers being sent pictures from when one of the national tours played Buffalo in the 1980s and “that there were people carrying placards in front of the theater saying, ‘Homos go home, we don’t want your filth in our city.’”<sup>54</sup> This was surprisingly one of few protests that the musical received in its original production. Yet even the assimilationist family-friendly politics of the musical were not enough to stop the show from occasionally being censored. A 1989 Chicago area production was slapped with an “R-rating” because local district officials “believe that the play . . . may offend some with ‘its story line and themes of homosexuality and transvestism.’”<sup>55</sup> Gay stigma has changed since 1983, yet it was still so keenly felt in 2007 that Fierstein wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* detailing the position in which stigma left him. He writes, “Since I’m a second-class citizen — a gay man — my seats for the ballgame of American discourse are way back in the bleachers. . . . Hate speak against homosexuals is as commonplace as spam.”<sup>56</sup> As Fierstein notes, “Society has changed around the show, but not sufficiently to render it any less meaningful than it was.”<sup>57</sup> Public attitudes towards

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<sup>53</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 341.

<sup>54</sup> Barry Brown (producer, *La Cage aux Folles*), in discussion with author, February 2018.

<sup>55</sup> “Our Towns: A Community Notebook”, *Chicago Tribune*, August 27, 1989.

<sup>56</sup> Harvey Fierstein, “Our Prejudices, Ourselves,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> “Who They Are: Michael Coveney in conversation with Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein,” *La Cage aux Folles* program, Playhouse Theatre, London, U.K., 2008.

gays *have* shifted, but during the height of AIDS hysteria in the 1980s a majority of respondents felt that “homosexual relations between consenting adults” should be illegal.

According to a poll by Gallup, it was only in 1985 that responses swung in that direction; when asked this question in 1982, forty-five percent of respondents said that gay sex should be legal, versus thirty-nine percent who were opposed to the idea.<sup>58</sup> While *La Cage* played on Broadway and toured the U.S., public attitudes toward gays shifted for the worse.

The burden of representation faced by *La Cage aux Folles* was steep as it confronted several stigmas, making the work the musical does more complex than it seems—there was substance underneath the sequins. “Moreover, it did so during a time when America was entering a period of neo-conservatism that was determined to reverse what it considered to be a decline in traditional family values,” notes Norman Hart.<sup>59</sup> *La Cage* cannily applied those family values to a middle-aged French gay couple, yet these same family values had been anathema to the ideologies of gay liberation and the growing rhetoric about visibility. Though Erving Goffman contends that stigma is grounded in bodily difference, gay stigma complicates this notion because, unlike fat or racial stigmas, gayness is not necessarily a visible attribute.<sup>60</sup>

Homosexuality has long been viewed by its detractors as a choice that the individual can control but does not, which further contributes to its stigmatization. Sociologist Gerhard Falk suggests that this is therefore a “cultural stigma.”<sup>61</sup> Crucially, Falk notes the performative dimension of

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<sup>58</sup> “Gay and Lesbian Rights,” Gallup, accessed April 5, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx>.

<sup>59</sup> Norman Hart, “The Selling of *La Cage aux Folles*: How Audiences Were Helped to Read Broadway’s First Gay Musical,” *Theatre History Studies* 23 (June 2003), 5. Hart’s article includes a compressed history of *La Cage*’s reception and while there is some overlap between our sources, the thrust of this chapter is quite different.

<sup>60</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 54.

<sup>61</sup> Gerhard Falk, *Stigma: How We Treat Outsiders* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), 79.



gay stigma: “Homosexuals suffer discrimination and rejection because of something they do. It is only in their performance that their stigma becomes an issue.”<sup>62</sup> The association of homosexuality with performance itself may be viewed as its own kind of ontological stigma—if the gay person is always performing an identity, then what lies underneath the performance or the action? *La Cage* consistently complicates the ontology of identity and performance.

*La Cage*’s creative team had to confront this perceived division as they crafted the show. Laurents explains in his memoir that his approach “was rooted in my conviction that a large majority of the audience anywhere in the country (except San Francisco) was not gay-friendly. To tilt the show to play to the converted would be to close in three weeks...Despite all the drag, it was a family show.”<sup>63</sup> The gay men in charge of the show perceived that homophobia would determine the musical’s chances for success, but homophobia also determined their approach.

### **AIDS and Institutional Stigma**

“You couldn’t really be out, certainly not professionally in most professions. Right as we’re gaining a little ground, AIDS comes along, and it just undid so much of the progress. And at the same time, the show happened.”—David Engel, *La Cage aux Folles* original cast member<sup>64</sup>

It was only ten years before *La Cage* opened that the American Psychiatric Association voted in 1973 to remove homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). Though homosexuality was no longer an official medical pathology, it would remain a crime in many states until 2003 for men to have sex with each other due to sodomy laws still on the books

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Laurents, *The Rest of the Story: A Life Completed* (New York: Applause, 2011), 91.

<sup>64</sup> David Engel (cast member, *La Cage Aux Folles*), in discussion with author, January 2018.

across the nation. In fact, during *La Cage*'s original Broadway run in 1986, "[t]he Supreme Court upheld a Georgia law by ruling that consenting adults do not have a constitutional right to engage in homosexual acts in private."<sup>65</sup> By the 1990s, the visibility of the gay rights movement was due in large part to legal and political debates over gays in the military and high-profile Supreme Court cases such as *Romer v. Evans* (which in 1996 overturned Colorado's law denying equal protection/freedom from discrimination to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals) and *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* (in which the Court ruled that the Boy Scouts had the right to ban gays in 2000). Discrimination against LGBTQ citizens still remains state-sanctioned: Congress refuses to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, and it remains legal to deny housing and accommodation to LGBTQ individuals in many states.

At the same time there seemed to be momentum for gay liberation, Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, riding the wave of the so-called "moral majority" into power. Reagan's lack of action on AIDS, essentially state-sanctioned discrimination, contributed to untold deaths and increasing stigmatization of gays and people with HIV/AIDS. AIDS revealed the lack of legal protections for gays and lesbians afforded to heterosexual couples, and in that way determined that the need to fight in the legal as well as the social arena.<sup>66</sup> The Reagan administration openly joked about AIDS: "When asked about AIDS at a 1982 press conference, White House Press Secretary Larry Speaks responded: 'What's AIDS?' He added: 'I don't have it. Do you? There has been no personal experience here.' Reporters at the briefing erupted in

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<sup>65</sup> David Deschamps and Bennett Singer, *LGBTQ Stats: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer People by the Numbers* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 44. This case referred to here is *Bowers v. Hardwick*.

<sup>66</sup> David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Grad, 2006), 307.

laughter.”<sup>67</sup> By the time Reagan gave his first speech on AIDS in 1987, more than 20,000 Americans had died of AIDS-related causes.<sup>68</sup> The *New York Times* did not mention HIV/AIDS in its obituary of Reagan, despite the fact that his inaction is a central part of his legacy.<sup>69</sup> For many LGBTQ people, it remains *the* central part of his legacy.

*La Cage* opened on Broadway on August 21, 1983, against a growing backdrop of plague and death in the gay community. The Broadway community was hit especially hard by AIDS. Such incongruity has precedent in earlier Broadway musicals, especially World War II-era ones like *On the Town* and *Oklahoma!*, which were at once profoundly escapist and deep meditations on timely themes like changing gender roles, national identity, race, and war. As AIDS tore its way through the world, initially most visibly through urban gay men, *La Cage* told a rosier story about gay men and drag queens to Broadway audiences, which countered the images of skeletal young gay men dying too young.

AIDS profoundly changed the trajectory of gay history, which in turn informed the responses to *La Cage*’s depiction of gay men. Given the timing of the musical’s arrival on Broadway and the fact that its three creators were gay men (though Herman was not out in 1983), did it have a responsibility to be more activist than it was? Or was its status as a smash hit on Broadway doing enough work by existing where and when it did? Original cast member David Engel thought “it was just what everybody needed, actually, at the time.”<sup>70</sup> Herman and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 48. A recording of this exchange is available at <https://www.vox.com/2015/12/1/9828348/ronald-reagan-hiv-aids>.

<sup>68</sup> Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 101.

<sup>69</sup> Marilyn Berger, “Ronald Reagan Dies at 93; Fostered Cold-War Might and Curbs on Government,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2004.

<sup>70</sup> Engel, discussion.

Fierstein were clearly not activists-cum-Cassandras à la Larry Kramer, whose play *The Normal Heart* opened Off-Broadway in 1985 and was a direct response to AIDS.

When the creative team began working on *La Cage*, they couldn't have foreseen how what was then called "gay cancer" would become AIDS, yet they were still blamed for not responding to the contemporary political moment in which the musical opened. Brown remembered that during the time they were putting *La Cage* together, they "never thought about it, never talked about it. It was a non-issue."<sup>71</sup> Laurents explained his attitude at the time: "Just about the time we went into production, something called GRID infected the gay community. Even when GRID turned into AIDS, it was largely ignored, even by the population hardest hit."<sup>72</sup> Fierstein has been a vocal defender of the work that he saw *La Cage* doing ever since it first faced those critiques. In 2008, he squarely addressed the issue:

The characters in *La Cage* are living their lives out loud and having a wonderful time. They are respected in their community. That is still not the case for many people today, and there are still politicians and religious leaders who make a living out of preaching hellfire on this, and as long as that is the case, *La Cage* has a role to play in the world. This show is very special to me. We lost half the cast of the first production to AIDS.<sup>73</sup>

He also spoke about how AIDS-stigma made its way to the original company of *La Cage*:

Gene [Barry] wouldn't get on an elevator with the chorus boys in *La Cage*. These are people he's been rehearsing with for months. . . . All of a sudden, he didn't want to get on the elevator with them. That kind of stupidity at the beginning of the AIDS crisis was

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<sup>71</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>72</sup> Laurents, *The Rest of the Story*, 91.

<sup>73</sup> *La Cage aux Folles* program, Playhouse Theatre, 2008.

everywhere, so if it was in our community and people that should have known better, why could it not have been in the general population?<sup>74</sup>

Barry's fears were not confined just to AIDS, and "the show's publicist, Shirley Herz felt that Barry's concern went beyond the disease. 'He kept asking me if people would think he was a homosexual because he was in *La Cage aux Folles*.'" <sup>75</sup>

Writing in the midst of these years, Stephen C. Ainlay, Lerita M. Coleman, and Gaylene Becker predicted that "the AIDS epidemic . . . may well be short-circuiting the gay liberation movement's attempts to destigmatize homosexuality. Consequently, homosexuality today may be once again as stigmatized as in the past."<sup>76</sup> Indeed, people with AIDS were blamed both for spreading the syndrome and for contracting it in the first place as a result of their behavior, which was viewed as immoral and uncontrollable. *La Cage* was directly and repeatedly affected by AIDS. The show's co-producer, George W. "Fritz" Holt, died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1987. As was typical of the time, his obituary listed his cause of death as "complications from pneumonia" and included no mention of HIV/AIDS, or of his ex-partner and co-producer on *La Cage*, Brown.<sup>77</sup> Holt was not the first *La Cage* company member to die. Laurents recounts the backstage atmosphere at the time:

As one year, then another jazzed by at the theatre—cocaine was as prevalent as dance belts backstage—the company began to sweat out who would be the first to be struck

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<sup>74</sup> *Broadway: The American Musical*, episode 8 "Putting It Together: 1980-Present," directed by Michel Kantor, PBS, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Hofler, *Party Animals: A Hollywood Tale of Sex, Drugs, and Rock'n'Roll, Starring the Fabulous Allan Carr* (Boston: DaCapo Press, 2010), 175.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen C. Ainlay, Lerita M. Coleman, and Gaylene Becker, "Stigma Reconsidered," in *The Dilemma of Difference*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Obituary of George W. Holt 3rd, Producer and Director, *New York Times*, July 15, 1987.

down. It was even cliché ironic that the unlucky soul was a closet case. Nobody had believed he wasn't gay, but when he went, and he went unfairly fast, everyone wished it had been true. He had been so obviously unhappy in his life.

He wasn't the last. A touring company was hit more than once while *La Cage* continued in New York to packed houses that were largely straight by then and, like much of the straight population, were either ignorant, in denial, or unconcerned.<sup>78</sup>

Theatre owner James Nederlander, Jr. said that he thought "it was a groundbreaking show" that "would have been more successful had there not been the AIDS scare at that time."<sup>79</sup> Fierstein would later remark, "We were losing people right from the beginning. . . . I couldn't even tell you how many people from *Torch Song* or *La Cage* passed but the majority of the cast is gone."<sup>80</sup>

AIDS stigma trailed the musical when it opened in London in 1986. It was one of the few countries where the musical flopped (Australia was another) and *Variety* went so far as to suggest that there was "some speculation that the AIDS scare may have been a factor" in slow ticket sales.<sup>81</sup> Producer Brown agrees that the timing was unfortunate: "I do suspect that [AIDS] had something to do with a shortened run when we got to London, because AIDS had just gotten there, and it was on everybody's minds and everybody's lips, and I think a story about two men was not as well received as it might have been at another time."<sup>82</sup> In the program for the 2008 West End revival of the show, Michael Coveney posited that the 1986 production failed because

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<sup>78</sup> Laurents, *The Rest of the Story*, 91-92.

<sup>79</sup> *Broadway: The American Musical*, episode 8 "Putting It Together: 1980-Present," directed by Michel Kantor, PBS, 2004.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "London Critics Pan West End 'La Cage,'" *Variety*, May 14, 1986.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, discussion.

“perhaps we were all AIDS-ed out by then.”<sup>83</sup> The show failed to garner any nominations for the Laurence Olivier Awards, which prompted a reader, A.J. Tunstall, to write a letter to *The Stage* offering their opinion as to why:

SIR, -Regarding the exclusion of La Cage Aux Folles from the Laurence Olivier Award nominations (Stage, Nov 13), may I be permitted to spell out the reason for this?

La Cage takes as its theme a blithesome look at a homosexual relationship, and for this won six awards in the USA. Since then however the public awareness of the growing peril of AIDS has brought to an abrupt end any idea of homosexuality being a suitable subject for a musical—however highly it is treated.

The philosophy: ‘Life’s not worth a damn till you can say hey world, I am what I am’, has wrought upon this planet a self-inflicted pestilence in which the innocent will perish with the guilty.

It is fortunate that the vast majority of the British public remain normal, sold and orthodox and regard sexual deviation as abhorrent.

The Olivier panel has obviously reflected this view and deserves every praise for having the guts to reject La Cage from its nominations.

La Cage is based on a totally unsavory premise and the sooner it ends, the better.<sup>84</sup>

Readers responded vociferously to Tunstall’s letter, prompting the *Stage* to print a full page devoted to their missives in support of the musical. Dennis Quilley, who was playing Georges in the West End, responded in kind:

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<sup>83</sup> *La Cage aux Folles* program, Playhouse Theatre, 2008.

<sup>84</sup> A J Tunstall, letter to the editor, *The Stage and Television Today*, November 20, 1986. Punctuation in original.

SIR, Your correspondent Mr Tunstall, who praises the Laurence Olivier Awards panel for excluding *La Cage* from their nominations because of its homosexual themes (November 20) has allowed his very natural fear of AIDS to lead him into paranoia and bigotry.

Firstly, it is now surely common knowledge that AIDS is not exclusively a homosexual disease. . . . We are all in this together.

Secondly, nowhere does *La Cage* condone promiscuity—on the contrary it strongly advocates fidelity and monogamy and the tolerant, loving acceptance of people of differing lifestyles from one’s own—precisely the human qualities needed at this time or indeed at any time.

Lastly, though it would not be surprising to read a letter of this crude and vindictive nature in certain areas of the daily press, it is sad to see it given such prominence in a paper with some pretensions to being the “House Journal” of a profession which could scarcely exist without the contribution of the gifted homosexuals who have always been—and hopefully always will be—among its most brilliant members.<sup>85</sup>

By 1986, AIDS was inevitably linked to anything portraying gay men, whether it was part of the work or not. As it became increasingly clear that sex was a primary transmission vehicle for HIV/AIDS, the promise of sexual freedom offered by gay liberation was at odds with the new reality.

The original production of *La Cage* closed on November 15, 1987, eight months after ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded. ACT UP’s tactics of direct actions and

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<sup>85</sup> Dennis Quilley, letter to the editor, *The Stage and Television Today*, n.d. (n.b., this letter to the editor presumably appeared in the issue following the issue of November 20, 1986).



performative protest contrasted with the gentler depiction of gays in *La Cage*; the activists were fighting for their lives against a government that betrayed them, while *La Cage*'s creators' "entertainment" was now at odds with the tenor of not just the country but the theatre. Michael Bennett's 1987 death from AIDS made him Broadway's biggest celebrity to die of complications from the syndrome to date. In this same year, the US barred people with HIV from immigrating or traveling to the country; this ban remained in place until President Obama canceled it in 2009.<sup>86</sup> The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had been legally able to bar gay foreigners from entering the US since 1967 due to the Supreme Court's decision in *Boutilier v. INS*.<sup>87</sup> Homosexuality was something that the U.S. had worked hard to contain even before AIDS.

### **Gay Liberation and Drag**

The anti-capitalist, sexually-free ideologies of 1970s gay liberation faded into the background in the early 1980s as a corporatized gay rights movement organized to respond to AIDS (e.g., Gay Men's Health Crisis, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, et al.) and to advance gay rights in general (e.g., the lobbying group Human Rights Campaign). Gay liberation of the early 1970s saw itself as part of an often-uneasy coalition with other social movements, from Black Power to feminism. The movement wanted to free everyone, not just homosexuals, from the tyrannies of patriarchal heterosexism upheld by capitalism. Gay liberationists saw economic issues and sociocultural issues as parts of the same struggle; Lisa Duggan notes how

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<sup>86</sup> Julia Preston, "Obama Lifts a Ban on Entry into U.S. by H.I.V.-Positive People," *New York Times*, October 30, 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Deschamps and Singer, *LGBTQ Stats*, 44.

1980s neoliberalism separated these issues as the 1970s social movements splintered, making way for assimilation.<sup>88</sup> As assimilationist politics gained more power, radical politics had a resurgence in the late 1980s and early 1990s with ACT UP, which was founded as a response to the failure of established groups like GMHC to effectively get treatment for people with HIV/AIDS. Like the earlier Gay Liberation Front, ACT UP eventually splintered into different factions by the 1990s. Queer Nation was one such group, famous for its chant, “We’re here! We’re Queer! Get used to it!” These groups and others like them were grounded in the politics of direct action and protest, where power rests with the people; they were decidedly anti-capitalist like the earlier gay liberationists. Though these more radical groups made crucial impacts like getting the federal government to make drug treatments available to people with HIV/AIDS, they were overtaken by corporate lobbying groups advocating for equality rather than liberation. Schulman explains how “eventually, the grassroots voices were drowned out completely, as gentrification co-opted the gay media, and the gay liberation movement, dialogically, was demobilized.”<sup>89</sup> *La Cage* itself gentrified homosexuality and drag for Broadway audiences through its de-sexing of homosexuality, its insistence on family values, and its casting.

Gay liberation left little doubt as to drag’s place in the gay community: onstage. Laurence Senelick explains, “Drag performers were held in low esteem as a disgrace to a newly conspicuous gay community: apolitical, anti-feminist, unmacho, carnival jesters districting from the serious concentration with which clones pursued sex on piers, in back-rooms and empty

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<sup>88</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xvii.

<sup>89</sup> Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 116.

trucks.”<sup>90</sup> The monogamous middle-aged gay couple of *La Cage* clearly disavowed the heightened, newly-free sexuality that was a large part of gay liberation; that the musical’s supposed anthem of liberation, “I Am What I Am,” was sung by a drag queen further marked the ideological separation in addition to the fact that the song was about Albin as a drag queen rather as homosexual. Laurents himself admitted “liberation never had meaning for me” until gay marriage was legal—ironically, he found liberation meaningful in the most assimilationist institution of them all: marriage.<sup>91</sup> Later in his life, he came to see what he had missed earlier, namely “drag queens of the gay revolution...ranting against ‘straight’ gays, who, they claimed, were ashamed of them and trying to push them out of the Gay Liberation picture. They were right; they still are.”<sup>92</sup>

The creative team’s ambivalence about the drag elements of *La Cage* complicates the show’s message of acceptance. Laurents initially did not want to direct the show because, as he put it, “drag turned me off.”<sup>93</sup> He never believed that the producers would find enough investors to finance the show due to its subject matter and both the political and theatrical climate of the early 1980s, which he described as “a time when the battle between gay liberation and political homophobia was intensifying, and the longer-and-longer-running box-office queens were syrupy sung-through spectacles from London.”<sup>94</sup> Herman, too, was uncomfortable with drag. In his memoir, he explained, “I certainly don’t want to spend *my* life in drag. I am a homosexual man

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<sup>90</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge 2000), 433. Senelick’s description appears to apply to those who benefited from gay liberation without actually participating in the movement itself.

<sup>91</sup> Laurents, *The Rest of the Story*, 7-8.

<sup>92</sup> Laurents, *On Directing*, 116.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

who has never made any bones about his sexuality, but I would be mortified if somebody put a dress on me. . . . I like masculine clothes and masculine homes and masculine furnishings.”<sup>95</sup>

Costume designer Theoni V. Aldredge told the *San Francisco Chronicle* about her hesitance: “It just didn’t appeal to me to be doing a drag show. I have nothing against them. I just don’t do drag.”<sup>96</sup> Aldredge took the show but did not adhere to drag traditions in her approach. Unlike the later Broadway productions, the original production did not require the male Cagelles to shave their bodies for their roles. Aldredge said, “They have their own lives after the show. They go out at night. It’s enough trouble to have to shave their face very close.” This meant that they wore more layers to conceal their gender identity. It also had the effect of drawing a line between the chorus dancers and “real” drag queens. *La Cage* is unusual in the amount of care put into making sure that the actors were not to be confused with their roles. This was particularly problematic when it came to casting Georges and Albin, which will be discussed at length below.

Drag has become increasingly visible thanks to television (and RuPaul), and hence, Senelick argues that drag itself has become assimilated: “The drag queen has become so assimilated that such acts are now drawn largely for mainstream heterosexual audiences. Whether or not they really get it is beside the point: they flock to these performances as they once poured into sideshow tents.”<sup>97</sup> David Román describes what this re-contextualization of drag performance means for a mainstream audience: “Mainstream spectators, some with no sense of gay and lesbian history, may leave with impressions that see gay men as entertainments. The success of drag on Broadway in the 1980s, in such commercial hits as *Torch Song Trilogy*,

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<sup>95</sup> Jerry Herman with Marilyn Stasio, *Showtune* (New York: Donald I. Fine Books, 1996), 233.

<sup>96</sup> Ruthie Stein, “Tony Winner Aldredge Talks Tricks of the Trade,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 5, 1984.

<sup>97</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 501.

*La Cage aux Folles*, and even *M. Butterfly*, demonstrated the demand for this type of gay performance.”<sup>98</sup> In *La Cage*, Fierstein saw the potential of theatrical representation to grant dignity to drag and the opportunity to do so for a mainstream audience was itself the lure. He notes, “A drag queen’s life is not a long life. . . . There should be an easier way to be yourself. Drag is obviously an extreme example . . . A few years ago those people were looked at as freaks. What makes me cry in ‘La Cage Aux Folles’ is the attitude those drag queens have. They are not making fun of themselves.”<sup>99</sup> Fierstein was up against gays claiming the drag and gay stereotypes of the musical were retrograde, but he was also up against the prejudices of straight audiences in 1983. He found his way through by emphasizing what the creators saw as universal experiences. Fierstein noted, “Everyone says I’m old-fashioned, that I’m trying to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals, but I believe that love and marriage and family and commitment do not belong to heterosexuals. They belong to the human experience, and gays should have those options.”<sup>100</sup> Selling this to audiences in a country that disapproved of homosexuality was a challenge.

### **Stigma in Revival**

“Because the religious, social, and legal prohibitions against homosexual acts did not disappear, homosexual identity retained its stigma.”—Michael Bronski<sup>101</sup>

As times changed, so too did the meanings of *La Cage*, which had to mean something different now that nearly an entire generation of gay men had been lost to AIDS, making its

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<sup>98</sup> David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1998), 99-100.

<sup>99</sup> Bennetts, “Harvey Fierstein’s Long Journey.”

<sup>100</sup> Leslie Bennetts, “Here Comes.”

<sup>101</sup> Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 9.

representation of a monogamous central couple seem not just quaint but perhaps like a prescient, life-saving choice. What changed between 1987 and 2004, and what did not? *La Cage*'s return to Broadway twice in the early 2000s allowed it to resonate anew after what was called a new "Gay 90s." Television became more inclusive in the 1990s thanks to shows like *Will and Grace* and stars like Ellen DeGeneres. Popular music stars like Melissa Etheridge, k.d. lang, and George Michael came out, often in response to threats of being outed. Yet it was common for presidential candidates to be vocally opposed to gay marriage; in 2000, "every state in the country prohibited marriage between two men or two women."<sup>102</sup> Progress for gay people under President Clinton was thus limited to representation in entertainment.

The 1990s saw gay visibility reach a peak in ways both positive and negative. The positives were due in part to activists who took direct action and saved the lives of many living with HIV and AIDS, and to queer theorists in the academy who theorized identity in new directions. At the same time, deaths from AIDS rose precipitously until the introduction of a new life-prolonging "cocktail" of medications in 1995. In the early 1990s, vigorous debates erupted over "gays in the military," as President Clinton signed "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" into law. The right for same-sex marriage was increasingly the new goal for the gay equality movement alongside open-inclusion in the military; these goals were not just those of centrist and assimilation gays but were espoused as well by conservative gay writers like Andrew Sullivan. Duggan terms this (after Michael Warner) "*the new homonormativity* . . . a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them,

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<sup>102</sup> Deschamps and Singer, *LGBTQ Stats*, 108.

while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>103</sup> By the end of the decade, visibility had increased to the point that the 1998 murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard was national news and sparked debate about stigma and hate crimes. Under the second Bush administration, as in the 1980s, *La Cage* served as a rebuke to the moralizing, homophobic attitudes of conservative politicians.

December 9, 2004 was the opening of the musical’s first Broadway revival in a country whose Supreme Court had struck down sodomy laws the previous year in the landmark *Lawrence v. Texas* case, but whose citizens had also just narrowly re-elected George W. Bush the previous month. The context of *La Cage*’s revival during the Bush presidency was in some ways similar to that in the 1980s; in July 2004, a Gallup poll revealed that 62 percent of respondents felt that same-sex marriage should not be recognized by the law as valid, compared with only 32 percent in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage.<sup>104</sup> Yet Herman told *Broadway.com* on opening night of the revival, “I felt instinctively that this was a great time for it because in the twenty-one years what was surprising and maybe a little shocking to some people is no longer. *Will and Grace* has done a lot and all the gay characters on television. So, I didn’t feel that that was a barrier.”<sup>105</sup> Herman explicitly acknowledged the power of representation in his remarks. On Broadway, things had changed during the 1990s as well, due to the success of plays grappling

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<sup>103</sup> Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 50.

<sup>104</sup> Gallup, “Gay and Lesbian Rights,” accessed April 20, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx>.

<sup>105</sup> Broadwaycom, “Opening Night of the 2004 Tony Award-Winning Broadway Revival of ‘La Cage aux Folles,’” YouTube video (05:23), uploaded January 9, 2015, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Glybc6gMjQ>.

with AIDS, like Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993) and Terrence McNally's *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1995). In terms of musicals, William Finn and James Lapine's *Falsettos* opened in 1992 and had a successful run of over a year; like Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, it was the combination of three separate earlier Off-Broadway plays repackaged and developed into an evening-length work. Like Kushner and McNally's plays, Finn and Lapine's work directly addressed the impact of AIDS. Rare is the Broadway play or musical that includes gay characters where the work is not about sexuality or a dead homosexual at the conclusion. David Savran noted in 2003 another significant shift in the professional theatre: "Although long a sanctuary for closeted lesbians and gay men, the U.S. theater is now out in a way it has never been before, populated by writers and artists who are now joyously, proudly—and matter-of-factly—queer."<sup>106</sup> Yet Savran cautioned against "falling into a triumphalist swoon. The new American queer theater is also a sign that lesbian and gay politics have become increasingly assimilationist and increasingly oriented toward the conspicuous consumption of images."<sup>107</sup> Savran's statement would only become truer as the decade progressed.

Broadway's second revival of *La Cage* opened April 18, 2010, as the US Senate debated ending "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Though the Obama era was remarkably friendly to LGBTQ people and causes, "on the same date that Obama was elected, four state ballot measures passed banning gay marriage."<sup>108</sup> During his 2008 campaign, Obama publicly stated that he did not

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<sup>106</sup> Savran, "Queer Theater," 153.

<sup>107</sup> David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 76.

<sup>108</sup> Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 111.



believe in same-sex marriage, though he would later publicly shift his position on the issue. In what seemed particularly tone-deaf, he invited a well-known homophobic evangelical to offer a prayer at his first inauguration, signaling that mixed messages from the top would allow those who stigmatized homosexuality to have a platform.<sup>109</sup> The right to equal marriage would not be granted by the Supreme Court until 2015. It was not until 2009 that moral attitudes towards “gay and lesbian relations” began to shift toward being viewed as “morally acceptable,” and only then with a differential of two points (49 percent to 47 percent.)<sup>110</sup> By the following year, a stronger movement toward viewing gay and lesbian relations as morally acceptable was clear, with the split being 52 percent in favor to 43 percent opposed.

In 2011, Fierstein explained how *La Cage* responded to the historical contexts of its productions:

In 1983, attitudes were different. To paint a picture: When AIDS hit, people said things like, “I’m not going to a restaurant in New York because they all have gay waiters and I’ll get AIDS.” So because of the times, the original [*La Cage*] was done in, shall we say, a softer way. It was a little whitewashed. We’re no longer glossing over the story. A gay couple that’s married isn’t a joke anymore. But neither is it a reality.<sup>111</sup>

For many spectators (especially tourist audiences for Broadway musicals), *La Cage* was the first time that they had seen a love story between two men onstage, let alone in a musical. When polled by Gallup in 1985, 75 percent of respondents said that they did not know any gays or lesbians; it would take pollsters until 2012 for 75 percent of respondents to answer that they

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<sup>109</sup> Schulman, *Ties That Bind*, 31.

<sup>110</sup> Gallup, “Gay and Lesbian Rights.”

<sup>111</sup> Melissa Rose Bernardo, “Reign of Fierstein,” *Playbill*, February 2011, 36.

knew a gay person.<sup>112</sup> The fact that it was a clichéd depiction of gay relationships might be considered a kind of Trojan Horse on Broadway, but it also took gay representation “[t]o a place where homosexuality loses its own transformative potential and strives instead to be banal.”<sup>113</sup> Despite the debates related to its representation of identity, it is clear that *La Cage* made many audience members “see things from a different angle.” Laurents notes, “This play has an audience crying and cheering for several things that if you took a Gallup poll they would be against. Drag queens? A boy accepting a man as his mother? The love of two men, onstage in an American musical comedy, singing a love song to each other and meaning it?”<sup>114</sup>

The way that *La Cage* was sold to audiences changed as well. The musical’s logo initially featured a somewhat androgynous performer, in a clear nod to the logo for Herman’s *Mame* (1966). Hart details some of the iterations of the show’s advertising and finds that in successive versions it becomes clear that the publicity team hoped to disorient potential ticket buyers into misrecognizing the musical’s subject matter; he also notes that the production used the image described by the *Advocate* to safely sell the show on tour.<sup>115</sup> The 2004 revival featured a graphic of a Cagelle with a tattoo on her shoulder. The image used for 2004’s revival of *La Cage* also reads very much as a woman covered by a hot pink boa. The advertising images for the 2010 revival advertised the actual bodies of the Cagelles, seen in silhouette against the musical’s title in neon hot pink. Its tagline was “The musical with something extra.” In 2011, *La Cage* no

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<sup>112</sup> Gallup, “Gay and Lesbian Rights.”

<sup>113</sup> Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 114.

<sup>114</sup> Bennetts, “Here Comes.”

<sup>115</sup> Hart, “The Selling of *La Cage aux Folles*,” 10-14.

longer had to closet itself—it sent it up instead with the intimation that the something extra was tucked away between the Cagelles’ legs.

### **How to Spot the Homosexual: Stigma in/and Theatrical Criticism**

Theatrical criticism often displays contemporary attitudes toward stigmatized groups. How critics wrote about *La Cage* in 1983 versus 2010 reveals how language evolves alongside sociopolitical changes. The *New York Times* has an especially checkered past when it comes to writing about gay issues; its coverage (and lack thereof) reflected but also determined the stigma directed at gays and lesbians during the 20th century in that the paper provided critical and social context that helped shape how homosexuality was discussed. In the 1960s, two critics at the *Times* attempted to openly, if also occasionally obliquely, address homosexuality in the theatre. Critic Howard Taubman’s 1961 essay, “Not What It Seems: Homosexual Motif Gets Heterosexual Guise,” was published (the headline now reads both as prescient prediction of the criticism *La Cage* would receive twenty-two years later as well as its inverse). Taubman opens his essay with what at first reads like a plea for tolerance: “It is time to speak openly and candidly of the increasing incidence and influence of homosexuality on New York’s stage—and, indeed, in the other arts as well.” Homosexuality is described as “a difficult, delicate problem” that was problematically presented “in the guise of normality.” Taubman notes that although “[h]omosexuality is not a forbidden topic,” it must be acknowledged “that heterosexual audiences feel uncomfortable in the presence of truth-telling about sexual deviation” because “even such a theatre must face up to the rules of commerce.” Taubman’s essay evinces a certain ambivalence about homosexuality: on the one hand, he does not outright argue that it should be banished from the stage; on the other, he concludes that indirect or coded representations “have

contaminated some of our arts.”<sup>116</sup> The attitude that homosexuality could contaminate the arts stigmatizes homosexuals because it makes them the agents of contamination.

Almost two years later, Taubman felt compelled to write a primer for heterosexual audiences containing “helpful hints on how to scan the intimations and symbols of homosexuality in our theater.” He lists a few “obvious” examples, e.g., the character Charles Marsden in Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*, and identifies several strategies for the heterosexual spectator to recognize the homosexual. A typical one reads, “Beware the husband who hasn’t touched his wife for years.” He concludes, “If only we could recover our lost innocence and could believe that people on the stage are what they are supposed to be! Would such a miracle oblige playwrights obsessed by homosexuality and its problems to define their themes clearly and honestly?”<sup>117</sup>

Taubman’s colleague Stanley Kauffmann also couched his conflicted views on homosexuality via pleas for more honest representation. His 1966 essay “Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises” became a landmark in theatre criticism for the way he critiqued “the homosexual dramatist” for a lack of openness in an essay in which he himself resorted to innuendo and shied away from naming outright the three playwrights who were the object of his affliction: Edward Albee, William Inge, and Tennessee Williams. Kauffmann refers to “normal” playwrights throughout his essay, though always in scare quotes. Kauffman, unlike Taubman, notably blames society for the problem: “If he is to write of his own experience, he must invent a

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<sup>116</sup> Howard Taubman, “Not What It Seems: Homosexual Motif Gets Heterosexual Guise,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1961.

<sup>117</sup> Howard Taubman, “Modern Primer: Helpful Hints to Tell Appearances vs. Truth,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1963.

two-sex version of the one-sex experience that he really knows. It is we who insist on it, not he.” He concludes, “The conditions that force the dissembling must change. The homosexual dramatist must be free to write truthfully of what he knows, rather than try to transform it to a life he does not know, to the detriment of his truth and ours.” Kauffman’s formulation insists gay writers write what only they know. He reduces homosexual artists to creators of camp as he essentializes their creations as those that “exalt style, manner, surface.”<sup>118</sup> Kauffman’s message that society itself is the problem would echo the message of later gay liberationists, yet he was unable to view representations written by gays as anything but vindictive responses to an oppressive society.

The essay drew so many responses from readers that Kauffmann wrote a response addressing their concerns and laying out his positions more clearly: “The homosexual dramatist ought to have the same freedom that the heterosexual has. While we deny him that freedom, we have no grounds for complaint when he uses disguises in order to write.”<sup>119</sup> Kauffman and Taubman’s articles, despite their difference in intent, became notorious. Historian Kaier Curtin notes, “Had any of the playwrights heeded Taubman and Kauffmann’s advice and written about gay lifestyles in the 1960s, the subject matter would have hung about their necks like an albatross.”<sup>120</sup> What is curiously absent from Kauffmann and Taubman’s pieces is nearly any mention at all of musical theatre, apart from one swipe by Taubman at the “male designer [who] dresses the girls in a musical to make them unappealing and disrobes the boys so that more male

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<sup>118</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, “Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1966.

<sup>119</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, “On the Acceptability of the Homosexual,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1966.

<sup>120</sup> Curtin, “*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*,” 326.

skin is visible than art or illusion require.”<sup>121</sup> Was musical theatre’s association with male homosexuality already that much of an open secret, or were its gay creators simply able to hide behind the heterosexual visibility of giants like Rodgers and Hammerstein, Bob Fosse, and Harold Prince? There were no comparable think pieces in the *Times* speculating about how the sexuality of Cole Porter or Michael Bennett “contaminated” their work.

These articles inextricably are part the legacy of the *Times* and its treatment of gays in print. Journalist Joshua Keating explains that Kauffmann’s “article caused controversy not for what it had to say about homosexuality, but for mentioning it at all.”<sup>122</sup> Kauffmann’s article incensed the publisher of the *Times*’s mother, Iphigene Sulzberger, and Kauffmann was no longer in his role six months later. Sulzberger intervened in the family business again in 1975 after “another article that highlighted lesbians and gays,” resulting in the explicit ban of the word “gay” from the *Times* until 1987, ensured that the more-pathological sounding “homosexual” would be the word of choice for the paper throughout the final years of the gay liberation movement and the early years of AIDS.<sup>123</sup> The larger issue is one of visibility; political scientists Daniel Chomsky and Scott Barclay studied the coverage of lesbians and gays in the *Times* and concluded that “the *New York Times* paid virtually no attention to lesbians and gays at all,” despite social changes since the late 1960s. In fact, “the few articles that mentioned gays in this period were strikingly hostile.”<sup>124</sup> Notably absent from the front page of the *Times* was the

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<sup>121</sup> Taubman, “Not What It Seems.”

<sup>122</sup> Joshua Keating, “1987: The Year The *New York Times* Discovered Gay People,” *Slate*, October 11, 2013, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2013/10/11/the\\_new\\_york\\_times\\_discovered\\_gay\\_people\\_in\\_1987.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2013/10/11/the_new_york_times_discovered_gay_people_in_1987.html), Accessed March 21, 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Daniel Chomsky and Scott Barclay, “The Editor, the Publisher, and His Mother: The Representation of Lesbians and Gays in the *New York Times*,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 60 (2013), 1392.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 1393-94.

founding event of the gay liberation movement: the six-night long series of Stonewall riots.<sup>125</sup>

The American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality from the DSM-IV also did not make the front page.

Most damningly, the authors demonstrate “that the *Times* downplayed the rapid and devastating spread of AIDS through the gay community in the early 1980s.”<sup>126</sup> Larry Gross details how a two-month long outbreak of Legionnaire's disease led to sixty-two stories (eleven on the front page) in the *Times*, while “in dramatic contrast, from July 1981 through the end of 1982, the *New York Times* ran a total of ten stories about AIDS, and none of them reached the front page. The television networks did not even mention AIDS on their nightly newscasts until 1982.”<sup>127</sup> Sulzberger clearly felt that to cover lesbians and gays on the front pages, or in the paper at all, would lead to endorsement of their growing visibility. The near-exclusion of gays and lesbians from the *Times* was the result of familial homophobia that became expressed as institutional homophobia; gays were not seen as fit to the publisher's mother, so they appeared rarely in print. *La Cage* forced the issue, as there was no way to write about it without discussing homosexuality and representation.

### **Mainstream Critical Responses: “Too Gay for You, Too Hetero for Me”**

*La Cage* has consistently received contradictory responses, with mainstream critics faulting it for not going far enough in its depiction of gays—especially Fierstein's libretto—while the gay press has been more grateful for crumbs. In his *New York Times* review, Rich

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 1394. The authors also detail internal censorship at the *Times* over stories that covering lesbians and gays favorably in the 1980s, as well as the absence of AIDS from the front page until 1983.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 1400.

<sup>127</sup> Gross, *Up from Invisibility*, 96.

referred to Georges and Albin as “homogenized homosexuals” and called the show “the schmaltziest, most old-fashioned major musical Broadway has seen since *Annie*.”<sup>128</sup> He cautioned audiences not to “go expecting an earthquake,” noting that “in its eagerness to please all comers, this musical is sometimes as shamelessly calculating as a candidate for public office.” Rich, who went on to become an advocate for gay equality during his years as an op-ed columnist for the *Times*, found *La Cage* so disappointing that he wrote another article six days later in which he explains his qualms at length. Rich’s major critique is that the creators did not have the courage of their convictions and were afraid of offending the audience with more honest depictions of homosexuality. He notes that the musical’s “bigoted heterosexual villains of the piece . . . are so overdrawn that they seem calculated to make even the audience’s homophobes go home congratulating themselves on how tolerant they are by comparison.”<sup>129</sup> Ironically, it appears as if *La Cage* was not *gay enough* for the *Times* in 1983, which is notable given how the paper had methodically avoided covering gay and lesbian issues in prior decades.

Like Rich, other critics picked up on what they interpreted as the self-congratulatory tendencies of “liberal” straight audience members. Notoriously venomous critic John Simon argued, “[f]or the affluent, middle-class, middle-aged theatergoer there is a chance to feel wonderfully tolerant toward homosexuals, and tolerance is, of course, a good thing, though in this simplistic presentation it becomes really blindly patronizing smugness. . . . I fully expect straight couples to wear the ticket stubs of *Cage* as goody-goody-conduct medals.”<sup>130</sup> He noted further that the musical was “beyond criticism” because audiences were so responsive to its

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<sup>128</sup> Frank Rich, review of *La Cage Aux Folles*, *New York Times*, August 22, 1983.

<sup>129</sup> Frank Rich, “Stage View: ‘La Cage’ Has That Old-Time Appeal,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1983.

<sup>130</sup> John Simon, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York*, September 5, 1983.



charms. In the *New York Tribune*, Sy Syna went so far as to argue that, despite the message of “I Am What I Am,” “homosexuals should repudiate this work because it reeks of homosexual self-loathing” and that “a sense of shame pervades much of this show.” Syna, too, condemns both the politics of the show and its audiences: “But most of all, straights will adore this show as they do ‘Torch Song Trilogy’ because it allows them to sit back and laugh at the queers. Fags are figures of fun here. Never once are any of the issues concerning homosexuality seriously addressed.”<sup>131</sup> Kauffmann, from his new perch at *Variety*, wrote, “the audience cheers as if they all deserved Medals of Honor for social bravery.”<sup>132</sup> Even Kauffmann faulted the musical for the universalizing logic of Fierstein’s libretto, which he argued collapsed the vital differences of “homosexual life” into “mush.” Curtin contends, “Kauffmann’s distortion of the musical does not really deserve serious consideration, except as another telling clue to the rationale behind the gay witch-hunt he helped foster.”<sup>133</sup> Clive Barnes felt that *La Cage* was “too apologetic for its homosexuality.”<sup>134</sup>

Stigmatizing responses were often couched in reviews feigning disappointment at the clichéd depiction of the gay couple. U.P.I. wire critic Glenne Currie posited that *La Cage* “was supposed to bring humanity to the gay scene, [but] is the most expensive piece of de-humanized camp ever to reach Broadway.”<sup>135</sup> Currie’s statement reveals that he views the “gay scene” as already lacking humanity, but also that camp and humanity are at odds with each other. He

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<sup>131</sup> Sy Syna, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Tribune*, August 22, 1983.

<sup>132</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *Saturday Review*, Nov-Dec 1983 (49-50); Robert Hofler, “Straight Talk about Gay Plays,” *Variety*, July 23, 2001.

<sup>133</sup> Curtin, “*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*,” 331.

<sup>134</sup> Clive Barnes, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Post*, August 22, 1983.

<sup>135</sup> Glenne Currie, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, U.P.I., August 21, 1983.

continues, “Much of the evening is devoted to depicting the sort of stereotyped homosexual queen the show was supposed to eliminate from the theater forever.” Yet how was *La Cage* (or any musical) supposed to do that? *New Yorker* critic Brendan Gill complained about *La Cage*’s “silly, constantly reiterated message to the effect that the family love practiced by homosexuals is somehow superior to the family love practiced by heterosexuals.”<sup>136</sup> Gill ignored Fierstein’s message that family love should be available to homosexuals as well as heterosexuals.

Robert Brustein’s review in *The New Republic*, entitled “Musicalized Propaganda,” sums up the contradictory reactions of many mainstream critics who did not quite know what to make of the show or how to understand the terms of its politics. Typical of critics at this time, Brustein positions gays as either over-sexed or de-sexed through “flamboyance.” To his credit, Brustein found a compelling parallel between his alienation watching *La Cage* and that of gay people in the US:

I began this review by saying I felt alienated in the presence of this musical. I realize that this is nothing compared to the alienation experienced by most homosexuals in our society. Anything that reduces feelings of marginality and loneliness is by definition a positive accomplishment, and by that measure, I suppose, *La Cage aux Folles* is an effective piece of propaganda. Like most propaganda, however, it seriously misrepresents the cause it is advancing, and it is the homosexual community who will ultimately have to determine whether it is better served by ‘positive’ and pretty evasions or by the unadorned and possibly ‘bleak’ truth.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Brendan Gill, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *The New Yorker*, September 5, 1983.

<sup>137</sup> Robert Brustein, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *The New Republic*, September 19, 1983.

Liz Smith used her platform to champion the show (from the closet, it must be noted). She cajoles, “Nertz to the carpers who wanted ‘La Cage’ to be more radical and innovative—what did they expect? A gay activist parade or a large sociological protest? ‘La Cage’ is a fabulous entertainment...and it would be wrenching things out of context to lob revolutionary grenades into the audience.”<sup>138</sup> Despite Brustein, Smith, et al.’s misunderstanding of the musical’s politics, their reviews all admit the fact that the musical was political.

*La Cage* itself, if not Jerry Zaks’s production, was reviewed with more fondness when it was revived in 2004. Even Simon noted the despite the flaws of the 2004 revival, “none of this means that the show, endearingly old-fashioned as it is, can be dismissed as jerry-built or, worse yet, geriatric.”<sup>139</sup> David Rooney, in *Variety*, situated the 2004 production in terms of its relevance, writing, “In post-election 2004 America, musicals don’t come with more built-in topicality than Jerry Herman’s ‘La Cage aux Folles,’ which deals with homophobia and a political platform constructed on moral and family values.”<sup>140</sup> Rooney otherwise panned the production. Brantley’s review focused on the sex appeal of the Cagelles, whom he found to be the most enticing aspect of the show. The 2010 revival had a somewhat opposite reception, in that the production was praised for, as Brantley put it, “transforming a less-than-great musical into greatly affecting entertainment.”<sup>141</sup> Despite their mixed receptions, both revivals won the Tony Award for Best Musical Revival, indicating fondness for the musical within the industry

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<sup>138</sup> Liz Smith, *Liz Smith*, *New York Daily News*, August 23, 1983.

<sup>139</sup> John Simon, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York*, December 20, 2004.

<sup>140</sup> David Rooney, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *Variety*, December 9, 2004.

<sup>141</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Times*, April 18, 2010.

itself. Though still viewed as flawed and quaint, *La Cage* seemed more relevant in revival as the social position of gays had changed only by degree and not by kind.

### **“Look Over There”: Alternative Critical Responses**

In the alternative and gay press (admittedly a much smaller sample) responses to the original production of the musical were supportive, with a few notable exceptions that seem emblematic of the criticism from the gay public that upset the creative team. After the *SoHo News* and *After Dark* both shuttered (in 1982 and early 1983 respectively), the *New York Native* and the *Village Voice* were the major remaining alternative downtown New York newspapers (*The Amsterdam News* was an uptown paper). The responses from the gay press indicate a range of how the stigmatized group portrayed in the musical responded to its representation; gay men themselves would have been familiar with the performance of their sexuality for straight people. *Village Voice* critic Julius Novick, rather than argue that *La Cage* missed the mark in its treatment of gays, cannily recognized the balancing act that the musical performed in order to achieve Broadway success: “Homosexual theater characteristically rejects ordinary middle-class values; *La Cage aux Folles* embraces those values. That is what enables it to achieve its mission of making the idea of homosexuality acceptable to the ordinary middle-class audience.”<sup>142</sup> The *Native* published several critical perspectives on *La Cage*. Most effusive of all was Terry Miller’s review of the show, entitled “Mascara Power.” He writes, “For weeks you wondered: is *La Cage aux Folles* as good as you have heard? No. It’s better. A lot of talented people worked very hard to create a fun ‘50s musical with a contemporary gay sensibility. The finished product is cause

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<sup>142</sup> Novick, review, *Village Voice*.

for celebration.”<sup>143</sup> Unlike critics in the mainstream press, Miller vividly appreciates the new theme placed into an old structure and wonders “why it wasn’t tried thirty years ago.” Miller also notes the creative team’s strategy of dealing with sexuality, explaining, “points validating homosexuality are scored along the way in the best possible way: without straining to do so.”

Michael Grumley reviewed the production in the following issue of the *Native*. He explicitly called attention to the fact that this musical is about a couple: “In the twoness of *La Cage* is its magic: to see two men walking off into the sunset together, beneath the gilded arches of the Palace Theatre, is extremely satisfying.”<sup>144</sup> Grumley acknowledged that show contained numerous stereotypes but argued that it worked “not in spite of the clichés that abound, but rather because of them.” These critics are notable for their generosity toward what the mainstream press viewed as the central weakness of the show: its stereotypical depiction of gays in Fierstein’s libretto. In national gay newsmagazine *The Advocate*, critic Tish Dace wrote, “If *La Cage*’s glitter and whimsy are capable of sending audiences off into fantasy realms, the show also possesses a real power to turn trepidations about gay people into tolerance.”<sup>145</sup>

Not all of the critical responses from the alternative and gay press were as favorable or accepting of the musical. Richard Hall dissented from the gay orthodox view of the show in his scathing indictment of both the musical and its audience, though for very different reasons than mainstream critics. He writes, “The fact is, *La Cage* isn’t a gay play at all, as it has presently evolved (with *Torch Song* a prime exemplar), and trying to fit it into some schema of gay theater or politics or contemporary gay behavior is utterly useless.” He goes on to note that he began to

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<sup>143</sup> Terry Miller, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Native*, September 12, 1983.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Grumley, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Native*, September 26, 1983.

<sup>145</sup> Tish Dace, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *The Advocate*, August 18, 1983.

hear “strange sounds” from the women around him in the audience: gasps, sighs, and sniffles. He initially assumed that

the deep and powerful message of gay liberation, the universal dream of justice, has finally reached the mainstream middle-class heteros among whom I have been condemned to live my life. During intermission, the notion occurred to me that the audience’s warm reaction was really their way of telling us they understood and sympathized with the AIDS crisis. Pass the hankie, please...And then a small, skeptical voice whispered that they were moved not because we were dying of a sex-related disease but because they felt sorry for themselves.

It was only a small step from there to the realization that *La Cage* appeals so broadly and deeply not because of its rather rudimentary message of gay liberation but because it is a profoundly redemptionist feminist allegory. It is a play in which woman-as-faggot comes to stand for the second-rate status of women, for all the injustices they have suffered at male hands. And who can represent women better than a drag queen—the metaphor *in extremis*—derided, mocked, persecuted, powerless?<sup>146</sup>

Hall concludes that this metaphor, not the musical’s “message” or canny casting, is the real reason for its success. Hall’s identification of *La Cage* as feminist allegory somewhat misses the mark—it is faggot-as-woman, to invert his formulation, that confirmed stereotypes about gays to the mainstream. There’s little that is feminist about a musical in which women are accessories to the men in the plot or simply identities in which gay men dress up.

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<sup>146</sup> Richard Hall, “The Psychometrics of ‘La Cage,’” *New York Native*, October 10, 1983.

*Village Voice* columnist Arthur Bell was “the only openly gay person who wrote a weekly column in a widely circulated Gotham newspaper [and] he held sway over other homosexuals when it came to what they saw or didn’t see on Broadway.”<sup>147</sup> Bell wrote of *La Cage*, “Expectations were too great. There was no way *La Cage Aux Folles* could have lived up to word of mouth.” He, too, found the show’s politics dated: “The politics of *Cage* are gay and proud, the message is very ‘60s-movement, but the male lovers never kiss. It’s a lesson in tolerance, not brazenness, and should please all audiences—and that’s a shame.” Bell snuck into the opening night party and asked the musical’s then-closeted composer-lyricist Jerry Herman whether he was “planning a pronouncement” in light of “I Am What I Am.” Herman reportedly replied that the musical was not autobiographical.<sup>148</sup>

*La Cage* had become part of the standard repertory by the time of its revivals, due in part to the strength of the best numbers in the score and its anthem, “I Am What I Am.” Its reception changed accordingly, and the gay press began to write about the show with fondness. A 2004 article from gay newspaper *The New York Blade* declared, “The subject is still as timely and urgent as it ever was—perhaps even more so now. The show arrives with an impeccable gay pedigree.”<sup>149</sup> Writing about the 2010 revival, Hilton Als felt director “[Terry] Johnson strips the Broadway from “La Cage aux Folles” and gives the text, and the actors, a new dimension. His production is not the heterosexual’s fantasia of gay life; it’s something real, felt, and deep.”<sup>150</sup> *La Cage*’s status was thus recuperated in the gay press and by prominent gay critics in its revivals as

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<sup>147</sup> Hofler, *Party Animals*, 174.

<sup>148</sup> Arthur Bell, “Bell Tells” column, *Village Voice*, August 30, 1983.

<sup>149</sup> Steve Weinstein, “Just in Time: ‘La Cage’ Returns,” *New York Blade*, December 10, 2004.

<sup>150</sup> Hilton Als, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *The New Yorker*, May 3, 2010.

few meaningful advances had been truly made in terms of gay rights by 2010. *La Cage* cannot be divorced from AIDS, ever-present in its absence from the musical. Understanding its reception in revival is also bound to this history: *La Cage*, now warmly greeted like an old friend, returns again and again while so many old friends lost to AIDS cannot.

### **Not Far Enough? The Creative Team Responds**

“All we wanted to do was make a happy musical.”—Barry Brown.<sup>151</sup>

The creative team of *La Cage aux Folles* was comprised of three white gay men at varying points in their careers: Herman and Laurents were old pros while Fierstein was fresh off his Broadway debut as playwright and star of *Torch Song Trilogy*. The generation gap between the three was clear in their approach to the material and how they felt about politics. As Fierstein told *Newsweek* when the show opened, “I accept the world, my world, as being homosexual. Arthur and Jerry see the world as definitely *not* homosexual.”<sup>152</sup> According to Laurents in 1983, “Harvey has street smarts but he doesn’t know the world. Everybody doesn’t think it’s so terrific to be gay.”<sup>153</sup> Fierstein was the most outspoken member of the team. Barbara Walters interviewed Fierstein just as *La Cage* came to Broadway and the majority of the interview placed Fierstein in the position of having to answer for homosexuals at large.

BARBARA WALTERS. A few years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to do an interview like this probably and put it on the air. It would have been, ‘This is not the subject one talks about.’

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<sup>151</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>152</sup> Jack Kroll, “Broadway Glitters and Is Oh So Gay,” *Newsweek*, August 29, 1983.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



HARVEY FIERSTEIN. *You* could have done it, you would have had to fight your censors and all that, but you could have done it and you should have done it. You know I am not the first gay star of a Broadway show. You know I am not the first gay writer of a Broadway show. It is such a ridiculous position.

BW. You're the first openly gay.

HF. Yeah, but isn't that ridiculous?<sup>154</sup>

Walters was far from the only one to challenge Fierstein on the subject of gay representation; often the challenge came from other gay writers like Edmund White, who attacked Fierstein in the early 1980s for what they perceived to be his heteronormative presentation of gay life.<sup>155</sup>

According to Brown, the original production received "a lot of mail and what have you, mostly from the gay community saying, 'How could you whitewash this?' and 'You're sending them off into a metaphorical sunset with their arms around each other and wrapping it up in a nice pretty package with a bow on top.'"<sup>156</sup> It is clear that the creators were wounded by the responses of those who felt the musical's politics were a capitulation to heteronormativity. In his memoirs, Herman responded to critics at some length:

If we *had* written a stronger, tougher political message into the material, the New York *Times* might have loved us more. But that would have given our show too narrow an appeal and it would never have found the huge universal audience that it did.

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<sup>154</sup> Clippety, "Harvey Fierstein with Barbara Walters on 20/20 (1983)," YouTube video (11:53), uploaded October 22, 2011, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://youtu.be/wffy5QC40io>.

<sup>155</sup> Harvey Fierstein, interview by Gordon Cox, *Variety*, July 1, 2015.

<sup>156</sup> Brown, discussion.

That has always been my answer to those Act Up! Gays and other militants who criticized the show because it wasn't 'strong enough' and didn't go 'far enough.' The reason that *La Cage* has been embraced by people all over the world is precisely because it *doesn't* preach. That show has done more good for gays and for the whole gay cause because it shows people that someone's sexuality doesn't determine what makes them a good or a bad person.

That's why that show works in South Africa and Mexico and Brazil and Germany and other countries where you'd think people would be hostile to it. You could have knocked me over when they even played "The Best of Times" at the Republican National Convention. When I watched George and Barbara Bush come out, waving and smiling, I was appalled. But then I thought, "Well, that's the answer to the whole thing, isn't it? It really is one world after all, and like it or not, we're all joined at the hip because we're human."<sup>157</sup>

Herman consciously chooses to believe in the universalizing approach that the musical took (and ignore the fact that ACT UP was not founded until March 1987—about eight months before *La Cage* closed on Broadway). Brown supports Herman's statements, stating, "We never thought about it as a message."<sup>158</sup> They set out to make an entertainment; that it happened to be about two men was central yet also incidental. Brown's feeling was, "We set out to do a Broadway musical. It happens to be about two men."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Herman, *Showtune*, 228-229.

<sup>158</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

Laurents was quite open about his sexuality (and his sex life) when he wrote his memoirs late in life, but his comments and caution in 1983 admit that he was concerned about gay stigma and homophobia impeding any chances of the show's success. He told an interviewer in 1984, "Certain members of the gay community wanted us to be more militant. But how? The most maligned minority in this country is still the gay community. And people had to be gotten over the idea that this is a gay show."<sup>160</sup> That it became a sell-out hit made it seem to the activists that the creators themselves had sold out when they were just on the opposite side of the growing divide between liberationist and assimilationist politics, and of an earlier generation.

This tension is what spurred Herman et al. to use words like "militant" as a slur. ACT UP member Schulman describes how this actually works against conflict resolution, perceiving that "when we insist on inclusion, full recognition, and access to process, we can get internally pathologized as 'militants,' 'activists,' and 'stalkers,' even by each other. The dangerous exclusion is naturalized as benign and the desire for accountability is falsely seen as a threat when it is really life enhancing."<sup>161</sup> These debates cannot be divorced from their sociopolitical contexts nor from the cultural context of Broadway. Broadway's ultimate imperative is to return a profit to its investors, not to move the culture forward. Though its creators and performers may hope for their work to have that impact, this is not ultimately why Broadway exists as commercial theater. If the musical does serve a social function or offer a message on its way to making money, that is a bonus. Little remembered in the debates over *La Cage* is the fact that, despite the financial imperative of Broadway, the producers "insisted that the last two rows in the

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<sup>160</sup> Paul Rosenfield, "Arthur Laurents, Uncaged," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1984.

<sup>161</sup> Schulman, *Ties that Bind*, 33.

theater remained at \$10 a ticket, so that . . . anybody who wanted to see the show could come see the show.”<sup>162</sup> This practice continued throughout the initial Broadway run, demonstrating the fact that the producers at least saw the importance of inclusion at the same time they were raking it in.

### **“Try to Imitate My Walk”: Casting, Playing Gay, and Identity**

“So, like I said, we ended up with two heterosexuals. But what are you going to do? They have to work too.”—Harvey Fierstein<sup>163</sup>

The casting of straight actors as the first leading gay couple of *La Cage* and the copious volume of publicity around their heterosexuality further strengthened the association between homosexuality and theatricality, especially in regard to musical theatre. When asked whether casting two heterosexuals as the stars of the original production was strategic, Brown responded, “No, the conscious choice that we made at the beginning was to be very careful so that an audience would understand that these two men loved each other deeply, but never saw them as going to bed together. Because it was 1983. And it had little to do with AIDS.”<sup>164</sup> This casting marked another disavowal of the gayness inherent in the musical itself at the same time that the stars’ attitudes about playing gay revealed the anxiety that the un-closeting of gays produced in 1983. Indeed, the casting of straight men in gay roles written by gay men actually flaunted the open secret of musical theatre’s homosexuality.<sup>165</sup> The public closeting of Herman’s and

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<sup>162</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>163</sup> Joe Windish, “Harvey Fierstein 1983: Torch Song, Letterman & La Cage,” YouTube video (5:51), uploaded April 13, 2007, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyW88v5I3Sw>.

<sup>164</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>165</sup> D.A. Miller theorizes that the closet hides the open secret that everyone already knows more than it closets homosexuality. D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Laurents's sexuality, especially relative to the volume of press about the show's stars' heterosexuality, provided cover for the open secret to continue. While Fierstein was out, other gay actors could not yet act in Broadway musicals and be publicly out, whether the characters were gay or not. Fierstein's turn in *Torch Song Trilogy* was a notable exception (and it was a play, not a musical), and of course he was the only member of *La Cage*'s team to be out in the press.

Given its history in the closeting of news stories about homosexuality, it is thus not surprising that the *New York Times* was the preferred venue for proclaiming the heterosexuality of *La Cage*'s leading men. Hearn told reporter Leslie Bennetts about his anxiety as a result of playing Albin, including waking in the middle of the night in a panic. He said, "I'd bolt upright and think, 'I'm going to do what? I couldn't believe I was going to do that in front of God and everyone - in Times Square, no less.'"<sup>166</sup> For Hearn, the anxiety was not produced by playing a homosexual but playing a homosexual in drag: "I didn't have any trepidation about playing a homosexual. Major actors do, because major actors are image conscious but I'm not a major actor and I had no particular image to tarnish. But playing a transvestite - I didn't know if I could handle it. It's exposing yourself to the possibility of ridicule; you worry about looking foolish, and about exposing the female side of your nature."<sup>167</sup> Drag, then, was the threat to Hearn's masculinity more than homosexuality. *People* magazine did a feature on Hearn with a photo captioned, "What identity crisis?" alongside photos of Hearn and his then-girlfriend.<sup>168</sup> During rehearsals, Hearn was taught by Cagelle Linda Haberman how to walk in heels and he developed

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<sup>166</sup> Leslie Bennetts, "How Stars of 'La Cage' Grew into Their Roles," *New York Times*, August 24, 1983.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted in Hart, "The Selling of *La Cage aux Folles*," 15.

different strides for Albin, Zaza, and Sybil.<sup>169</sup> Ironically, this was the inverse of Albin's coaching to perform "Masculinity" within the musical.

In 1983, as Hearn rightly points out, few major actors had yet played gay roles or won awards for doing so.<sup>170</sup> Arguably, Hearn was one of the first on Broadway with his Tony-winning turn as Albin (and in the 2010 revival, heterosexual Douglas Hodge would win for the same role). Yet straight actors winning roles for playing gay "is actually a reflection of how oppression operates, not the reverse as is sometimes claimed or thought," contends Schulman.<sup>171</sup> The visibility of a straight actor winning a high-profile award for playing gay arguably makes it that much more difficult for a gay actor to be considered for the role because it would no longer be an opportunity for the straight actor to demonstrate both his virtuosity as well as his liberalism for playing gay. Playing gay is perceived as somehow more difficult than playing other roles, which itself admits the ongoing stigmatization of homosexuality.

Gene Barry was vocally uncomfortable playing the gay "straight man" to Hearn's drag queen. According to the *New York Times*, "[t]he possibility of being stigmatized" almost kept Barry from taking the role.<sup>172</sup> Barry's role, Georges, was less showy than Albin. Though he did not have to appear in drag, he did have to sing Broadway's first gay love song, "Song on the Sand." Acting gay proved a challenge for Barry. He told *Time* magazine, "You really do become the part you play. In rehearsal, George and I didn't look at each other as a man or woman, but as

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<sup>169</sup> Gary Stern, "The Real Gals in 'La Cage aux Folles' Admit That It Ain't Such a Drag!," *Backstage*, May 11, 1984.

<sup>170</sup> This problem persists with greater frequency in film and on television. There are at least ten straight actors who have won Academy Awards for playing LGBTQ characters versus zero LGBTQ actors winning for a comparable role.

<sup>171</sup> Schulman, *Ties That Bind*, 22.

<sup>172</sup> Bennetts, "How Stars."

someone we dearly loved. If I ever had a problem, I'd just think of my own wife."<sup>173</sup> The logic of the actor was to invert their scene partner's gender in order to solve the "problem" of gayness.

More problematic, however, was the outright denial of the sexuality of the couple by Barry. "We determined in rehearsals that my role of Georges would be played pretty straight. It's not really a homosexual part in the sense that we are playing two people who love each other who are involved in a family relationship," said Barry.<sup>174</sup> The universalizing logic of "love" and "family" was a weapon used to blunt the stigmatization of playing gay but also to mitigate the musical's political potential. Barry even used his own family as a shield against the character and homosexuality, revealing, "I asked my sons and daughter and my wife about playing this role. I didn't want to be put in a position that would embarrass them."<sup>175</sup> The *New York Times* further explained,

Mr. Barry chooses to view his role in specifically nonsexual terms. "I'm not playing a homosexual – I'm playing a person who cares deeply about another person," he said.

"The role is loving another person onstage. It doesn't matter whether it's a man, a woman or a giraffe; it has nothing to do with sexuality, as far as I'm concerned. I play the dignity of the man, his concern for his lover and his concern and love for his son."<sup>176</sup>

The odious comparison to a giraffe notwithstanding, Barry's consistent refusal to admit that he was playing a gay man represents the degree of gay panic and homophobia he felt as well as the perceived threat to his heterosexual masculinity, which had been shored up in his previous hyper-

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<sup>173</sup> Gerald Clarke, "Broadway Out of the Closet," *Time*, August 29, 1983, 64-65.

<sup>174</sup> Don Nelsen, "A First Peek Inside 'La Cage aux Folles'...the Musical Comedy with a Difference," *New York Daily News*, July 10, 1983.

<sup>175</sup> Martin Burden, "Gene Barry Takes Roles in Good Stride," *New York Post*, August 18, 1983.

<sup>176</sup> Bennetts, "How Stars."

masculine roles like a US marshal in television's *Bat Masterson*. Where is the dignity in denial? Barry was unable to avoid bringing this up in numerous interviews before the Broadway opening; he told another reporter, "But the important thing to understand is that I don't play the homosexual part of Georges; I play the love he feels for Albin."<sup>177</sup> In 1987, Peter Marshall was interviewed about playing Georges on Broadway. When asked if, like Barry, he sought his family's advice first, he said, "Oh God, no, not at all! I never thought twice about it. If I got my family together to ask them they would have laughed so hard, they'd say 'Get outta here, are you crazy? Grab it!'"<sup>178</sup> Barry, however, consistently made his feelings about gays quite clear, telling *People*, "I don't want to be part of [Fierstein's] platform. I'm just playing a role."<sup>179</sup> When the original production opened in the West End starring Hearn as Albin, his co-star Dennis Quilley's logic was strikingly similar to Barry's. He is quoted as saying, "heterosexuals make the very best gays on stage. . . . If you're gay you must be tempted either to stand back and not commit yourself or to go too far and indulge yourself. But I could play it objectively, just as I would, say, a murderer."<sup>180</sup> The first two actors to play Georges in major productions compared playing a gay character to a wild animal and a murderer in their attempts to find a way into the role—as opposed to seeing Georges as a human.

Once the show opened, critics made specific note of this type of publicity and took the production to task for it. In the *New Yorker*, Brendan Gill exclaimed, "How tiresome it must be for these admired actors to be praised in the press for the feat of successfully impersonating

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<sup>177</sup> Wetzsteon, "'La Cage aux Folles.'"

<sup>178</sup> Martin Burden, "Marshall's No Square," *New York Post*, August 19, 1987.

<sup>179</sup> Andrea Chambers, "Gene Barry Sings His Love Songs to a Man in Broadway's *La Cage* and His Family Cheers Him on," *People*, December 5, 1983.

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 502.



homosexuals!”<sup>181</sup> Robert Brustein perceptively identified how the casting was emblematic of the musical’s approach to identity in the first place, writing, “It was a shrewd move to cast heterosexual actors in these central roles, because it was a way to help the audience more readily accept the homosexual characters they play. But this is precisely the kind of evasion that makes *La Cage aux Folles* often seem so crudely manipulative, so dishonest and so crass.”<sup>182</sup> The common perception in 1983 was that the show hedged its bets by casting heterosexual actors as its leads rather than an openly gay actor or a drag queen. Senelick notes, “The professional drag community was outraged: why hadn’t any of the experienced cross-dressers who had auditioned (like Lynne Carter) been cast. . . . These complaints missed the point: if the musical were to lure the general public, it had to be sanitized of any whiff of deviance.”<sup>183</sup> The casting provided fuel for publicity but was also another very visible point of contention for critics of the show.

Brown was in the room for *La Cage*’s Broadway auditions and his experience counters the narrative that the stars were cast *because* of their heterosexuality. His response when asked about the casting was, “There’s a really perfectly simple answer: because they were the best ones to audition. They came in, they auditioned with lots of other people and they were the two best ones. That’s why.”<sup>184</sup> In other words, the creative team and the producers kept their focus on making the best, most successful musical they could and argue that they did not focus on things extrinsic to that even as they were intrinsic to *La Cage*. The “best actor for the role” justification is so common in casting discourse that Brian Eugenio Herrera terms it the “mythos of casting,”

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<sup>181</sup> Brendan Gill, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *The New Yorker*, September 5, 1983.

<sup>182</sup> Brustein, review, *The New Republic*.

<sup>183</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 502.

<sup>184</sup> Brown, discussion.

which he argues “simultaneously provides ideological rationale for the acknowledged inequities in the allocation of the paid and unpaid labor of actors while also sustaining faith that the apparatus of casting can (and sometimes actually does) work to identify the ‘best’ actor for a given role.”<sup>185</sup> That was the case according to Brown, and yet this is why they were blind-sided by the criticism. Brown insists, “We never thought about it as a message.” Whether a message was intended or not, one was received. The advance publicity certainly pulled no punches in sending a message.

Fierstein “felt strongly that only a fellow homosexual could bring the required pathos to the roles of Georges and Albin,” and he remembered, ‘I insisted on openly gay leads for the show, and Laurents called me a bigot. He called me a lot of things.’”<sup>186</sup> As director, Laurents had the ultimate decision and he was not that concerned with the sexuality of the actors. Fierstein countered, “Most gay actors have been beaten all their lives on some level, economically, politically, emotionally,” making them primed to understand the characters more than a straight actor could.<sup>187</sup> Fierstein lost that battle, at least initially. Hofler reports, “Later, when the show had run on Broadway for over a year, Laurents cast a gay actor in one of the lead roles. According to Fierstein, ‘I’m probably one of the three people in the world, living or dead, who Arthur apologized to. He called me to say, ‘You are so right. What a difference it makes!’”<sup>188</sup> Brown notes that the original production actually did eventually cast openly gay actors,

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<sup>185</sup> Brian Eugenio Herrera, “The Best Actor for the Role, or the Mythos of Casting in American Popular Performance,” *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 27:2 (2015), accessed October 12, 2018, <http://jadtjournal.org/2015/04/24/the-best-actor-for-the-role-or-the-mythos-of-casting-in-american-popular-performance/>.

<sup>186</sup> Hofler, *Party Animals*, 157.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

“Interestingly, the last tour we did, both leads were gay, openly gay. Harvey Evans and Larry Kert.”<sup>189</sup>

When the first national tour opened in San Francisco, its stars also spoke candidly about their approach to playing Albin and Georges. The tour’s Albin, Walter Charles, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “I didn’t study gays. . . . I try to play the situation. I let the music and the costumes do most of the work. I go for the emotion, I make that real, make it beautiful. . . . This is what Arthur [Laurents] harps on all the time, the humanity—don’t lose that. Otherwise it gets into caricature, then it slips into camp.”<sup>190</sup> Again, a similar strategy was employed for dealing with the role and the fear of camp, which is consistently viewed as de-humanizing. Keith Michell played Georges, and *Chronicle* writer Marian Zailan detailed how “Michell said he looks at his role in non-sexual terms, feeling he is playing a person who cares deeply about another person. . . . Certainly, neither mince on stage. In his role Michell does not dress in drag, nor is he effeminate. He is debonair.”<sup>191</sup> Given the de-sexed nature of the roles themselves, it is striking that these actors felt the need to disavow any whiff of desire as well.

Curiously, replacing Georges has proved to be most difficult for each Broadway production. In all three Broadway productions, minor scandals erupted with replacements. When producer Allan Carr cast television star Robert Stack as Georges in 1986, recriminations soon flowed. Laurents later wrote, “To rehearse the role of a piss-elegant middle-aged queen who was the emcee/owner of a transvestite night club on the French Riviera, Stack had chosen to wear jeans, sneakers, and a monogrammed polo shirt. The outfit was dead right for the way he played

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<sup>189</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>190</sup> Marian Zailan, “‘La Cage’ Stars Play It Straight,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 10, 1984.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

the part.”<sup>192</sup> Laurents felt that Stack would have embarrassed himself in the role and talked Stack into quitting to save face. This left the production in a bind and deepened a rift among the creative team and producers.<sup>193</sup>

The situation with Stack’s casting was emblematic of the need to cast stars in Broadway shows in order to sustain long runs. Casting associate JV Mercanti relates that the biggest challenge he faced in working on the 2004 revival was “Keeping it open. Finding an appropriate star. I don’t know that we were successful in that.”<sup>194</sup> In 2004, Daniel Davis played Georges when the production opened, yet he was gone by the next spring, as reports of erratic behavior backstage made their way to the *New York Post*.<sup>195</sup> Davis was replaced by Broadway legend Robert Goulet, who proved not to be a big enough draw to keep the show running for very long as it closed about two months after he stepped in. In the 2010 production, television star Jeffrey Tambor was announced as Kelsey Grammer’s replacement. Unlike Stack, Tambor made it out of rehearsal and into performances despite his evident discomfort in the role.<sup>196</sup> Tambor quit the production the same week the *New York Post* reported on his troubles.

By the time the musical was revived in 2004, the social position of gays was notably different than it had been in the 1980s. Social psychologists John F. Dovidio, Brenda Major, and Jennifer Crocker explain, “Because stigma is largely a social construction, a characteristic may be stigmatizing at one historical moment but not at another, or in one given situation but not in

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<sup>192</sup> Laurents, *On Directing*, 37.

<sup>193</sup> For more detail, see the Arthur Laurents Papers at the Library of Congress, Box 96, folder 4.

<sup>194</sup> JV Mercanti (casting director), interview with author, February 2018.

<sup>195</sup> Michael Riedel, On Broadway, *New York Post*, April 1, 2005.

<sup>196</sup> Michael Riedel, On Broadway, *New York Post*, February 25, 2011.

another within the same period. Context is also a critical determinant.”<sup>197</sup> Given the great lengths that *La Cage*’s original stars went to in order to proclaim their heterosexuality, it is extraordinary that the press for the 2004 production did not mention that both Beach and Davis are gay; stigma clearly persisted despite the greater visibility of gays. The production’s silence on this issue said more than intended. In a *New York* magazine preview of the 2010 revival, Adam Sternberg asked “Hodge (who is straight) and Grammer (also straight) whether there’s anything problematic, artistically or otherwise, in playing a gay couple. ‘Most people just say to me, “You are gay,” says Hodge. ‘And I say, “I’m not.” And they say, “No, you are.” [Sir Ian] McKellen said that to me. He came over and sat on my lap.’”<sup>198</sup>

This exchange is more press than Beach and Davis ever received about being gay men in these historic roles. The press’s silence on two gay men playing these roles on Broadway for the first time effectively closeted the actors at a time when gay visibility was particularly important; it also denied the opportunity for the production, which after all is about a same-sex marriage, to assert its relevancy to then-current political debates. Even Herman was openly gay by this point, and perhaps the production’s publicity team decided not to push identity politics. Yet given Fierstein’s preference for casting gay actors in these roles, it is surprising that the fact that both leads were played by gay men was not a part of the production’s publicity. In 2010, when both roles were again played by heterosexuals, their sexuality was fair game for press. Gay was still something *to play* rather than *to be* on Broadway, publicly at least. In other words, audiences

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<sup>197</sup> John F. Dovidio, Brenda Major, and Jennifer Crocker, “Stigma: Introduction and Overview” in *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, ed. Todd F. Heatherton, Robert E. Kleck, Michelle R. Hebl, and Jay G. Hull (New York: The Guildford Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>198</sup> Adam Sternbergh, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Your Next Republican President,” *New York*, March 21, 2010.

were seen to be more accepting of the *performance* of homosexuality as opposed to the reality. The fact that the musical's creators are gay was immaterial—they are offstage, after all.

Fierstein replaced Douglas Hodge as Albin on Broadway in 2011, making him at least the fourth openly gay actor to essay Albin on Broadway (after Keane Curtis, Lee Roy Reams, and Gary Beach). He held steadfast to his conviction that “I Am What I Am” meant more when sung by a gay actor. He explained:

I never wrote down to the audience, even if Arthur may have directed down to them. I fought to cast homosexuals in the roles—if you stand up and sing ‘I Am What I Am’ without feeling your sexuality and your persecution right down to your painted toenails it’s never going to be quite the same thing—and I got my way eventually when Keane Curtis took over as Albin in New York.<sup>199</sup>

He forgave the amount of publicity devoted to Barry and Hearn’s sexuality, arguing, “even gay people did it back then. . . . They can say whatever they’d like but Arthur and Jerry brought women as dates to the opening night of *La Cage*.”<sup>200</sup>

Casting Albin and Georges has proven tough for each Broadway production, from finding actors willing to play the roles to ensuring that those actors could sell enough tickets to keep the show running. Even Fierstein was only able to keep the show open for two and a half months when he took over as Albin. Casting has been central to how stigma and *La Cage* have been in dialogue and is intimately tied to how its Broadway productions dealt with any hint of sexuality between Albin and Georges. The casting of Georges and Albin is important when considering *La*

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<sup>199</sup> *La Cage aux Folles* program, Playhouse Theatre, 2008.

<sup>200</sup> theatertalk, “Harvey Fierstein discusses ‘La Cage aux Folles,’” YouTube video (26:44), uploaded April 19, 2016, accessed April 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAElqKusf3Y>.

*Cage* in terms of gay politics as well: a musical that wanted to partake in liberationist ideology in 1983 would never have cast heterosexual men as a gay couple, let alone lasted on Broadway in the first place. Lingered over each production was the simple question of whether they be allowed even a simple kiss.

### **To Kiss or Not to Kiss?**

While the creative team fretted over whether the show's subject matter would be acceptable to heterosexual audiences, they made the conscious decision to de-sex the leading romantic couple. Laurents felt that Georges and Albin couldn't kiss on the lips in 1983 for "risk of losing the audience we had worked so carefully to get."<sup>201</sup> The creative team disagreed about the issue, with Herman and Laurents feeling that the show was taking enough risk and Fierstein wanting it to go a little further. Laurents later recalled, "The [note] from Harvey was, 'The men should kiss at the end'" while others felt "the two men shouldn't even touch."<sup>202</sup> In his lengthy preview article-cum-paeon to the show in *New York* magazine, Wetzsteon explained, "Not passion, not yet—Broadway is still a long way from its first gay kiss, and the fact that the two men are middle-aged makes their relationship more palatable to theater audiences."<sup>203</sup> In the *New York Native*, Richard Hall set the record straight about two men kissing on Broadway: "Actually, there have been a few male-male kisses on the Great White Way without imploding the theaters involved—most notably at the start of Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*. The creators of *La Cage* were savvy enough to know that the show depends for its power on a lack of sexual

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<sup>201</sup> Laurents, *On Directing*, 121.

<sup>202</sup> Hofler, "What's in a Kiss?"

<sup>203</sup> Wetzsteon, "'La Cage aux Folles.'"

explicitness.”<sup>204</sup> So, while playgoers were able to see a same-sex kiss, musical theatre audiences were determined to be less ready to see the act.

The issue of whether or not producers felt Broadway’s musical theater audiences were ready to see two men kiss reared its head again when the show was revived in 2004. Michael Riedel framed the problem as a political one, writing, “There’s a red state-blue state battle going on at the revival of ‘La Cage aux Folles.’”<sup>205</sup> Producers felt that the kiss should be cut for fear of making “comb-overs from the red states—Broadway’s real bread-and-butter audience”—uncomfortable. The kiss was staged in the musical’s final moments as Georges and Albin walk off into the sunset. Riedel suggests that in 2004, “the real danger for ‘La Cage’ is not that audiences are going to be offended by the sight of two men kissing” but whether “they may find its gentle portrayal of homosexuality too quaint.” Fierstein told Riedel that *La Cage* was about the validity of gay relationships, a relevant topic given the Defense of Marriage Act and the debates about same-sex marriage at the time in response to Massachusetts becoming the first state to legalize it. This time around, Fierstein had the clout to insist that the kiss remain in the show. In 1984, Laurents predicted this, saying, “Attitudes in America have changed, but it takes a generation for behavior to catch up with attitude.”<sup>206</sup>

*Variety* covered the kiss in 2004 and also situated it as political. “The country appears to be entering a new era of conservatism, at least judging by the stand in 11 states against gay marriage in the recent election,” explains Hofler. “Now just in time for George W. Bush to amend the U.S.

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<sup>204</sup> Hall, “Psychometrics.”

<sup>205</sup> Michael Riedel, On Broadway, *New York Post*, November 19, 2004.

<sup>206</sup> Rosenfield, “Laurents, Uncaged.”



Constitution” to outlaw same-sex marriage, the leads actually kiss.<sup>207</sup> Herman supported the kiss in the 2004 revival, and at least twice compared it in the press unfavorably to Liza Minnelli’s then-notorious kiss with David Gest at their wedding in order to make the point that the gay kiss would be tasteful (as opposed to gay icon Minnelli’s sloppy kiss). Herman felt that the country was ready for the kiss and noted that “an elderly woman sitting next to me cheered when they kissed.”<sup>208</sup>

Typical of the reception of *La Cage*, the fact that Georges and Albin *did* kiss in 2004 was not enough to please everyone. In his review of the production, David Finkle opens writing, “The hardliners of the *La Cage aux Folles* revival have successfully held their ground on the kiss issue.” Yet he viewed the staging of the kiss as a cop-out: “However, they indulge only as the final curtain begins to fall and they are walking upstage into the St. Tropez sunset—a shadowy sunset...In other words, Davis and Beach execute this potentially shocking maneuver at a point when anyone disgusted enough to storm out of the theater would only seem to be in a hurry to beat other patrons to a taxi.” By the time of the 2010 revival, the kiss between Albin and Georges was a given. This time around, *New York’s* preview of the musical quoted Hodge on kissing Grammer, “He’s one of the best I’ve ever had. It’s like kissing John Wayne.”<sup>209</sup> The kiss came (or didn’t, for that matter) at the end of the second act, but it is the song sung at the end of the first act has had a more important and lasting impact.

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<sup>207</sup> Hofler, “What’s in a Kiss?”

<sup>208</sup> Hofler, “What’s in a Kiss?”

<sup>209</sup> Sternbergh, “Ladies and Gentlemen.”

## I Am What I Am? Identity, Denial, and Drag

“The song had to be sung in drag; that would mean sung in the nightclub where the play took place, but not as a number, because then it would merely be a message sung by a performer, not a character; and not without motivation, because then it would merely be a number in a show. It had to be an emotional outburst, but what did it burst out of?”—Arthur Laurents<sup>210</sup>

“I Am What I Am” is one of those first act closers that, like *Gypsy*’s “Everything’s Coming Up Roses” and *Dreamgirls*’s “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going,” is reliably a showstopper. Each song is also in some way about identity and denial. “I Am What I Am” is about breaking through denial to accept one’s identity, which has been carefully constructed (“I am my own special creation”). And in context of the musical, this is complicated by the fact that the song changes function from when it first is heard as the opening number, “We Are What We Are,” sung by the Cagelles as a tease about identity (“And what we are is an illusion”). Repurposed for the first act finale into the first person singular, the song functions at once diegetically and non-diegetically. As Albin tears off Zaza’s wig as the song ends, the identity underneath the wig is exposed to the audience (at both the nightclub of *La Cage aux Folles* the night and *La Cage aux Folles*, the musical), but also to Albin himself.

The song’s message of self-acceptance almost pre-determined it as a gay anthem. Herman explained, “I never thought it would take its place as an anthem; I wrote it for a character at a specific moment.”<sup>211</sup> The timing of the musical was canny here as the major gay movement shifted from liberation to pride (“And it’s my world I want to have a little pride in”). In New York City, the Christopher Street Liberation Day, which began in 1970 to mark the first anniversary of the Stonewall riots, was replaced by Gay Pride in 1984—the first June that *La*

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<sup>210</sup> Laurents, *On Directing*, 120.

<sup>211</sup> *La Cage aux Folles* program, Playhouse Theatre, 2008.

*Cage* played on Broadway.<sup>212</sup> The replacement of liberation with pride marked the shift toward a more corporatized gay equality movement as pride became a commodity and liberation a relic of a hedonistic past. “I Am What I Am” became a commodity too—a hit single. It is notable that the most famous versions of the show, and arguably the ones that made it a gay anthem, were sung by black women who are gay icons: disco diva Gloria Gaynor scored the first hit with the song in 1983, followed a year later by Shirley Bassey’s over-the-top belted performance. Removed from its musical theatre context, the song became a staple of gay clubs across the world and has become a staple of gay pride parades the world over.

“I Am What I Am” was also the number of choice for awards show performances, which seems straightforward enough yet, typical of this musical, became complicated. *La Cage*’s cast recording was nominated for Best Show Cast Album at the 26<sup>th</sup> annual Grammy Awards on February 28, 1984, in Los Angeles. The broadcast’s producers invited the production to perform on the telecast. Hearn, not wanting to miss performances to travel to Los Angeles, declined to perform, which meant that Walter Charles, his understudy, was given the opportunity to perform “I Am What I Am” on the broadcast.<sup>213</sup> Jamie Ross, Barry’s standby, appeared as Georges alongside Charles.<sup>214</sup> Charles, it should be noted, performed the number in full drag on national television in 1984. He earned a rousing ovation from the audience. *La Cage* did not win the award that night, but it is notable that it was offered a spot on the broadcast alongside

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<sup>212</sup> “Our Timeline,” NYC Pride, accessed April 6, 2018, <https://www.nycpride.org/about/>. The Gay Liberation Front’s *Manifesto* did call for gay pride in the 1970s, but this should not be understood to be the same as the Gay Pride that emerged in the 1980s.

<sup>213</sup> Hofler, *Party Animals*, 179.

<sup>214</sup> Theatergeek1122, “Walter Charles ‘I Am What I Am,’” YouTube video (6:02), uploaded February 1, 2012, accessed April 6, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kih\\_pV6ohPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kih_pV6ohPQ).

contemporary pop stars like Donna Summer and Eurythmics, not only because it was a musical, but because it was a musical about a drag queen.

The following June, *La Cage aux Folles* headed into the Tony Awards in tight competition with Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George*, which was widely considered the front-runner. *La Cage* was nominated for nine Tony Awards that night, including two nominations for Best Actor. Hearn was slated to perform "I Am What I Am," which he did. The performance begins with Barry as Georges introducing the musical's opening number, "We Are What We Are." The Cagelles performed the number in full drag, wearing Aldredge's extravagant costumes, including a quick change onstage before the song's tap section. They finished the number to applause and removed their wigs as the camera zoomed in for a medium shot of their faces to give viewers a better shot at the gender identity guessing game. A cutout of Al Hirschfeld's line-drawing of Hearn as Zaza floated into view as Hearn walked onstage *wearing a tuxedo* to sing "I Am What I Am." David Engel, who played Hanna from Hamburg in the original cast, felt "the words he's singing went against the fact that [Hearn] did have some kind of shame about appearing on national television in drag. He wanted to just be him."<sup>215</sup>

Instead of the song as a declaration of the character's identity, it thus read here as another chance for Hearn to claim his heterosexuality ("It's not a place I have to hide in"). There was no wig to remove at the song's conclusion, no identity to reveal underneath the drag. To have the song performed as a celebration of Hearn's own identity was a stunning betrayal of its message

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<sup>215</sup> Engel, discussion.

yet was also typical of the ambivalence about drag evinced by the production and the actors.

Hearn won the Tony. He opened his speech jokingly stating, “What some people won’t do!”<sup>216</sup>

### **“You Gotta Get A Gimmick”: Casting the Cagelles and ‘Real’ Girls**

“In the history of Broadway chorus lines, rarely have two women stood out as much as Haberman and Phelan in the previously anonymous chorus.”<sup>217</sup>

Dancing men were central to *La Cage*’s appeal, yet also presented an opportunity for the original production to complicate its relationship to gender, performance, and sexuality. The musical opens with the Cagelles proclaiming, “We are what we are, and what we are is an illusion,” explicitly inviting scrutiny over their identities. This scrutiny affects the male dancer as well. Whether he is gay or not, the male dancer is habitually received as such in the United States and is thus stigmatized. This stigma often attaches itself to the individual when the desire to dance is first pronounced and is most keenly felt once dance training begins. Dance education scholar Douglas Risner explains, “Recent research on male youth in dance highlights various kinds of prevailing social stigma, including narrow definitions of masculinity, heterosexist justifications for males in dance, and internalized homophobia in the field.”<sup>218</sup>

Theatrical dance has been associated with homosexuality in the U.S. for over a hundred years, at least since Vaslav Nijinsky’s 1916 tour with the Ballets Russes. Dance historian Ramsay Burt traces the stigmatization of male dancing to Western Europe in the nineteenth century,

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<sup>216</sup> MrPoochsmooch, “La Cage aux Folles 1984 Tony Awards,” YouTube video (15:15), uploaded January 20, 2014, accessed April 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4SGTEv1164>.

<sup>217</sup> Stern, “The Real Gals.”

<sup>218</sup> Doug Risner, “What We Know about Boys Who Dance: The Limitations of Contemporary Masculinity and Dance Education,” in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57.

noting that it began at the height of the Romantic ballet in the decades before 1850: “That it was the spectacle and not the activity of dancing which underlay the prejudice against the male dancer becomes clear when one compares ballet and social dance at this time.”<sup>219</sup> This “spectacle” would not come to be associated with homosexuality until the early twentieth century, and was likely due in part to the fact that ballet was made a sensation by gay men like Serge Diaghilev and Lincoln Kirstein—both of whom were prominent offstage figures, i.e., not dancers themselves. Male dancers are not stigmatized solely on the basis of suspected homosexuality but also because “dancing’s decorous display of the body and its interest in emotional and spiritual life aligned it too strongly with the feminine ever to be considered man’s work.”<sup>220</sup> The stigmatization of male dancing, then, must be considered a labor issue as well as a sociocultural one.

Stigma materializes itself in the power relations between a dominant individual or group and a marginalized one. This dynamic can often be found in audition and rehearsal rooms. Engel, for example, remembers being told by a gay choreographer, “‘Will you butch it up?’ He goes, ‘You are totally gay.’”<sup>221</sup> Engel notes that this comment was offered in the spirit of helping him—one had to be able to act or dance “straight” in order to work regularly. He took the advice to heart, “So I realized, and I saw exactly what he was talking about. I could see it. . . . I appreciated it.” Despite the fact that gay men could be out about their sexuality as dancers, they needed to remain closeted onstage, even in an entertainment that codes as gay as a musical. Of

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<sup>219</sup> Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995), 13.

<sup>220</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Closets Full of Dances: Modern Dance’s Performance of Masculinity and Sexuality,” *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 169, 160.

<sup>221</sup> Engel, discussion.

course, some individuals are able to turn their stigmatizing feature into a vehicle of upward mobility; for example, successful drag performers (like *La Cage*'s Albin) were and are able to achieve a level of recognition by directly combating stigma—but again, through performance.

The twelve Cagelles in the original Broadway production were infamously cast with ten men and two women, who were meant to be ringers. The casting of two women was the result of some quick thinking on Laurents's part during backer's auditions while raising money for the show. According to Carr biographer Hofler, "At one such [backer's] reading, a potential investor asked the director, 'Why aren't there any girls in the chorus line?' This money person wanted girls in the Broadway chorus line, since it hadn't occurred to him that *La Cage aux Folles* was set in a male drag club in Saint-Tropez."<sup>222</sup> The financial imperative again drove a major decision impacting the musical. Fierstein was against casting women as Cagelles, noting, "It was a silly cop-out. They were so scared of the material. I was openly gay. I didn't ever consider making apologies for what we were doing."<sup>223</sup> The casting of women as male drag performers was yet another nod toward making Broadway musical audiences comfortable with the show's subject matter. This casting was also an attempt to distract them with a guessing game about who was "real" and who was "fake." As Wetzsteon wrote, "If the audience knew they were all men, it could relax. Yet, since the program indicates that two of them are women, the audiences is forced to make choices."<sup>224</sup>

This guessing game meant that the Cagelles' bodies had to have a certain kind of uniformity so that audiences could not immediately solve the puzzle of the performers' gender.

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<sup>222</sup> Hofler, *Party Animals*, 149-150.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>224</sup> Wetzsteon, "'La Cage aux Folles.'"

*La Cage*'s two Broadway revivals both eschewed the guessing game; in a sense this single-gender casting reflected single-sex segregation within LGBT social spaces as well as the growing prevalence of the hyper-muscular body as the ideal homonormative male body. The 2004 revival cast dancers with such muscular definition that there was no mistaking that these were all chorus boys, and indeed, Brantley made a point of singling out "the all-male ensemble . . . with . . . an athletic verve that should make Arnold Schwarzenegger think twice about using 'girly men' as a pejorative term."<sup>225</sup> The paradox of casting the show this way was that the parodic hyper-femininity of its approach to drag was undercut by the hyper-masculine appearing bodies of the dancers. The 2010 revival landed somewhat in between, with varied races and body types represented among the Cagelles. In his review of that production, Brantley first referred to them as "the ladies of the chorus" while going on to note that "even the most myopic club patron isn't going to mistake them for real girls."<sup>226</sup> After all, part of the show's major appeal to audiences today is precisely the fact that the Cagelles *are* chorus boys in drag who dance spectacularly. The casting of the Cagelles serves as a counterpoint to the middle-aged, de-sexed, softening-around-the-middle, non-conforming bodies of the leading couple. The hyper-conforming bodies of the dancers are the outlet for the musical's often-latent (homo)sexuality, albeit underneath a lot of sequins and mascara. Because Albin and Georges are a middle-aged couple in a long-term relationship and the show is not about them falling in love, it otherwise skirts sex or sexual tension.

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<sup>225</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Times*, December 10, 2004.

<sup>226</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *La Cage aux Folles*, *New York Times*, April 18, 2010.



The very naming of the chorus dancers as “Cagelles” admits their importance to the musical. The chorus dancers became celebrated in their own right, and Laurents allowed them to take their bows just before Albin and Georges in the original production; original Cagelle Deborah Phelan describes how the Cagelles “play a key role in the play. Les Cagelles tie the whole play together. They’re the show within the show. They get the energy going.”<sup>227</sup> Because of their function in the play, casting the Cagelles has different demands than casting the typical chorus of a musical. A 1984 casting call for replacements listed some of the requirements (but was not explicit about drag):

“**La Cage aux Folles**” (M). Starring Peter Marshall. Equity chorus auditions being held Sept. 24: femme dancers who sing well at 10 a.m. (last name A thru K), 5’7” or taller, strong jazz, tap and possible acrobatics; male dancers who sing well at 2 p.m. (last name A thru K), strong jazz, tap, and possible acrobatics, since choreography requires use of high heels, suggest you bring a pair to audition, although not a requirement.<sup>228</sup>

Brown sat in on all of the original auditions for the show and remembers, “The casting of those twelve Cagelles was a monumental job. First of all, everybody in the city auditioned for it. Everybody you could think of auditioned for it. So, it took days of auditions to whittle it down.”<sup>229</sup> According to a press release, more than 2,000 dancers were seen for the twelve spots. Choreographer Scott Salmon explained that “no real drag queens were engaged” for the show because “the demands are too great for any but professional dancers.” The casting process also revealed the intimate relationship of stigma to casting and the musical’s approach to identity

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<sup>227</sup> Stern, “Real Gals.”

<sup>228</sup> “La Cage aux Folles” casting notice, *Variety*, September 12, 1984.

<sup>229</sup> Brown, discussion.

politics. Salmon detailed the different factors the creative team weighed in casting the Cagelles, noting “We needed that strength, but we weren’t looking for the outer feminine mannerisms. We didn’t want dancers who walked like they thought a girl walked, but dancers who were able to feel like they thought a girl feels.”<sup>230</sup> If the dancers were playing male drag performers at a drag club, then what was the focus on “feeling” about? After all, the dancers are playing an identity twice removed in the show-within-the-show of *La Cage*; for example, Engel played the unnamed performer whose stage name was “Hanna from Hamburg,” thus during the backstage scenes he played the unnamed performer, while onstage at La Cage aux Folles he played this performer *as* Hanna.

Casting was thus necessarily complicated, and as Salmon notes, playing a Cagelle required a certain type of identity on the part of the dancer as well. He detailed the production’s unique casting process to an interviewer:

The hiring of the people was very interesting. The tension you see in *Chorus Line* in two hours, these kids undergo over a period of weeks—the men are very vulnerable. We have to see people who have some sense of an androgynous quality. At the same time they must be technically very good dancers, they need to have a freedom to express some individuality, and they have to look good, their legs must be great. When they get down to the very final day of the audition, they undergo a two-hour makeup. They are dressed in heels, hose and a leotard, and then they are asked to do the combinations they had done before. And that’s where you would find those people who would want to show me ‘I’m

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<sup>230</sup> Shirley Herz & Associates, Press Release for national tour of *La Cage Aux Folles*, n.d., Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

not really a performer like this. I'm really very masculine.' They'd come out in high heels and walk stomp, stomp, stomp. I could tell which people would make jokes by stumbling on purpose, and which people were very secure within themselves and would just do it.

The men have bare legs quite often in the show but they wear three sets of support stockings, which not only firm the legs and lift them up, but also cover any need to shave. We thought, 'If we have them shave their legs and do a lot of that stuff, it makes them feel in another world. We want them to feel like actors playing a role, not like people who live their entire lives from the androgynous aspect of being drag performers.' Nor are we trying to put anyone down. They do a number called 'Masculinity', so they have to be equally as masculine as they are feminine.<sup>231</sup>

The casting process for Broadway played out just like the fictional audition depicted in *A Chorus Line*, according to Phelan. She notes that even the nine women at the final callback had to show up in "drag."<sup>232</sup> Phelan was also asked by casting director Stuart Howard whether she "minded performing in drag." Engel's audition experience in Los Angeles was decidedly different. He relates that Carr asked him to perform a striptease in the audition room, unbeknownst to the others behind the audition table.<sup>233</sup> Engel was down to his underwear before he was told to stop. Though the Cagelles did show some of their bodies, it was mostly just legs covered in three sets of pantyhose in the original production, nothing that would make Carr's request anything other than inappropriate. Engel booked the job.

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<sup>231</sup> Barbara Newman, "Speaking of Dance: Scott Salmon," *Dancing Times* London. May 1986, 703.

<sup>232</sup> Stern, "Real Gals."

<sup>233</sup> Engel, discussion.

Senelick relates how “the men of the chorus of Cagelles were told by the choreographer, ‘You’re not here because you’re screaming faggots or because you look or move like women.’”<sup>234</sup> The messages sent about how the musical and the production would deal with identity were contradictory and complicated, understandably so given the sociocultural position of gays at the time. Dan O’Grady, who played “Odette” in the original cast, explained, “There was never any game-playing where we were expected to try and be ‘butch’ or overtly feminine . . . there was never any tampering with our identity. . . . Under other circumstances, I don’t know if we would have been able to come up with our interpretations without messing up our lives.”<sup>235</sup> O’Grady’s comments from 1984 indicate how drag was viewed as a force that could destabilize one’s identity more than “acting” could. David Scala, another original Cagelle, remembered, “The first time in costume I looked at myself in the mirror, and the wig was all teased the way mom used to wear her hair. Something came over me and I had to turn away. I felt the character of the role coming through, but then realized that no matter the makeup and wig I was a man first.”<sup>236</sup> Despite the potential pitfalls, many of the original Cagelles stayed with the production for its entire Broadway run. Brown explains, “Everybody wanted to stay. We gave them raises every six months. Nobody asked for it, but our feeling was we were making money, they should be making money.”<sup>237</sup> That was coupled with the fact that the cast was like a family according to several of their recollections. Engel concurs, “[W]e all stayed. They treated us really well there from the beginning. We all stayed for the entire four and a half years.”<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 502.

<sup>235</sup> Ellis Nassour, “An Intimate Chat with the Chorus ‘Girls,’” *Broadway Bill of Fare*, July 26, 1984, 14-16.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Brown, discussion.

<sup>238</sup> Engel, discussion.

Though the 2004 revival only lasted six months, it had an impact on the careers of its dancers. Jerry Mitchell's choreography was much more athletic and demanding than Salmon's. It was an entirely different vision of the Cagelles, lacking the two female dancers. Its casting notice was explicit about what was sought:

Seeking—**Les Cagelles:** 18-40s, male dancers who are the female drag performers for the La Cage Aux Folles nightclub. Seeking excellent male dancers who sing between 5'6" and 6'5". Interested in seeing all ethnicities and physical types. Acrobatic skills are a plus, but not necessary.<sup>239</sup>

The Cagelles opened the show wearing next to nothing, apart from heels and strategically placed fur throws. Charlie Sutton, who played a Cagelle in that revival, explained how they "were a completely different type of drag" than the original.<sup>240</sup> Whereas the original production had what might be called a Liberace-meets-Louis XVI aesthetic, this production amped up the sexuality of the Cagelles, highlighting their bodies throughout. Gone were the multiple layers of tights; this production went for drag "realness." Sutton remembers Mitchell saying, "I want them to look like they could walk down the street." Since the gender guessing game was no longer a part of the musical in the 2004 revival, there was no need to shy away from the inherent sensuality of the chorus boy's bodies.

Clum's explanation of how chorus boys are the male object of desire in musicals applies to the 2004 revival: "[T]he chorus boy . . . is allowed a freedom of expression and an overt sexiness denied the male star. The chorus boy carries the erotic charge of the show."<sup>241</sup> The 2010 revival,

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<sup>239</sup> *La Cage aux Folles* casting notice, *Backstage*, February 20, 2004.

<sup>240</sup> Charlie Sutton (actor), in discussion with author, January 2018.

<sup>241</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 8.

a slimmed-down West End transfer, also did not cast women as any of the only six Cagelles. However, that production did cast a female Cagelle in the West End. Its casting notice indicated the different approach this production would take:

Especially seeking—”**Les Cagelles**”: six males, early-late 20s, any ethnicity, not your ordinary drag queens, these male/female creatures are otherworldly and birdlike, notorious and dangerous, masculine, athletic, flexible, muscular, including **Chantal**, Songbird of Avignon, **Hanna**, from Hamburg, S&M diva with a whip, **Phaedra**, The Enigma, **Mercedes**, The Magnificent, **Angelique**, and **Bitelle**.<sup>242</sup>

Getting cast in *La Cage* on Broadway has been a mixed bag for dancers. Some were concerned over the risk of getting pigeonholed into only being considered for drag roles after the show closes, effectively stigmatizing them for doing drag. Interviews with various parties involved in *La Cage* revealed conflicting points of view about the role that the show plays on one’s résumé when auditioning for other jobs. Sutton recalls, “what I do remember the most...from *La Cage*, once we got our notice...my agent saying, ‘This is going to be tough. We’re glad you booked this, but you’re going to have a really hard time. Getting out of drag is hard.’ They were like, ‘You have to book the next show and the next show has to be über-masculine.’”<sup>243</sup> There was at the very least the perception that the male dancer who has played a Cagelle would be stigmatized. Sutton booked another Broadway show (*Cry Baby*) within two weeks. He went into the audition for *Cry Baby* in straight drag; he said, “I had my cargo shorts on. I didn’t even wear dance clothes because I was like, ‘I don’t even want you to think I’m a

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<sup>242</sup> *La Cage aux Folles* casting notice, *Backstage*, August 27, 2009.

<sup>243</sup> Sutton, discussion.

dancer. I want you to think of me as just this straight guy that walked in.” Mercanti, who worked on casting the 2004 revival, framed the issue of getting cast post-*La Cage* as being about the dancer’s ability to act. He notes, “If you’re auditioning for the chorus of *Oklahoma!*, you audition for it differently than you audition for the chorus of *La Cage aux Folles*, but that’s about acting and character. And if you’re not thinking about that, then there’s something wrong with the way you’re thinking about auditioning for the show.”<sup>244</sup> Engel, from the original cast, feels that “it had no impact” on his getting cast afterwards. “No one looked at me like a drag queen. I was just a dancer.”<sup>245</sup> Ultimately, everyone interviewed concurred that what matters most is what happens in the audition room, as opposed to what is on your resumé.

And yet, Sutton’s agent’s warning about booking an “über-masculine” show so he would not get pegged as only being able to do drag implies that, behind the scenes, gay and drag stigma had not left the industry. Today, it certainly still exists though generally in the form of euphemism. Whereas it used to be common practice for choreographers to tell male dancers to “butch it up” or not to be “so light,” Mercanti notes, “I think you probably can’t say that anymore.”<sup>246</sup>

The problem of leaving a drag chorus behind persists today, as the cast of *Kinky Boots* has found out. Sutton has been in and out of the production since it opened, and he related the experience of his fellow “Angels” (the drag chorus in that show): “A couple of them are trying to leave and it’s proving difficult and it’s because it’s hard for casting to look at them and still say (*he trails off*) . . . You know what I mean?” Though Sutton is openly gay, he, too, has found

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<sup>244</sup> Mercanti, discussion.

<sup>245</sup> Engel, discussion.

<sup>246</sup> Mercanti, discussion.

himself assuming the role his agent played for him in 2004, in telling his fellow chorus dancers, “‘They’re a little light’...[this] has been my warning to . . . the younger people in this group.”<sup>247</sup>

The perception that the dancers would still be perceived as too stereotypically gay to be considered for many roles reflects the degree to which dance and perceived homosexuality are still intertwined within the industry. It also points toward deeper questions of identity and the tension between *being* and *doing*: is identity something one *is* or *does*? Can Broadway separate the dancer from the dance?

### **“A Real Plus”: The Impact of *La Cage***

As long as gay stigma exists somewhere, *La Cage* will retain part of its relevance. Notwithstanding the initial debates over its politics, this is a musical that means something to people. Even the most scathing responses to it admit an attachment to the difference between what it *might* have represented and what it *did*. D.A. Miller was among those let down by it, and yet he too found the musical hard to entirely dismiss: “We would gladly put this disappointing show behind us, but as it also happens to be the goal we thought we were seeking, we hardly know to where we must move on.”<sup>248</sup> Bearing the burden of representation inevitably produces failure for some. Despite its perceived (and real) failures, *La Cage* touched many lives, beginning with the original cast. Laurents recalled how the musical first affected the original company of the musical while it was still in rehearsal:

One day in rehearsal, as I finished staging the love song that Gene Barry sings to George Hearn, I had Gene take George’s hand. As I looked around that rehearsal studio,

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<sup>247</sup> Sutton, discussion.

<sup>248</sup> Miller, *Place for Us*, 131.



with the company sitting around, I saw half of them crying. They were gay and never thought this would be done on a Broadway stage in their lifetime. Now, some people said that musical didn't go far enough. To me, that made an important point. When we did the show, the kids in drag told me that, at the beginning of the show, they could see the men hardening their faces and, at the end of the show, those men were standing up applauding. So, I thought the show accomplished something.<sup>249</sup>

Herman also ended up proud of the musical's impact, noting, "I didn't write [it] as a militant piece. . . . But the fact that it has changed some people's ideas about gays, some prejudices about homosexuality is a real plus."<sup>250</sup>

While the assimilationist politics of the musical were too conservative for some, they proved to be a hit with many straight audiences. Laurents noted, "I've been in the theater a long time but I have never seen an audience respond as they do with this show. It's not the greatest story, or the greatest music, or the greatest direction. But something, when all this is put together, is at work that can't be analyzed logically."<sup>251</sup> Brown and Mercanti each related that their favorite part of working on their respective productions of *La Cage* was standing at the back of the auditorium every night and watching audiences watch the show. Mercanti also described the impact that *La Cage* had on his family, including helping his parents accept his sexuality. He said, "That show helped my family embrace what it meant to be gay and to love another man in a non-judgmental way. And I think that's really powerful. And I think that's why that show means

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<sup>249</sup> Arthur Laurents, interview by N. Graham Nesmith, *The Dramatist: The Journal of The Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.*, May/June 2003, 7-16.

<sup>250</sup> Jerry Herman, interview, *Playbill* 121, no. 2 (Feb 2005).

<sup>251</sup> Jack Kroll, "Broadway Glitters."

so much to me. So, when people attack it, I'm like, 'Well, you're not seeing it for what it is, then. You're seeing what you want it to be.'"<sup>252</sup>

Mercanti recounted another way that *La Cage* impacted his family. In the 1980s, his extended family began taking bus trips en masse to see a Broadway show, and *La Cage* was the first one they saw as a family. The trips were organized by Mercanti's cousin Vinny (Mercanti is from New Jersey) and Vinny's husband Gene. "I started going on these tours . . . and whenever I saw [the Statue of Liberty], the whole bus would start singing 'The Best of Times is Now.'"<sup>253</sup> In the 1980s, seeing *La Cage* also solidified Engel's acceptance within his own family. He remembers, "It completely turned [my mother] around, because it presented a family and love."<sup>254</sup> The positive impacts of *La Cage*, while hard to quantitatively measure, are best illuminated in individual stories like these. The musical allowed straight audiences to identify with gay characters, the inverse of what historically happened in Broadway musicals. Its creators repeatedly made the point that it was a musical about love, first and foremost. Fierstein claimed, "When...that many people see what you're doing and embrace it and scream and tear the seats out and love it, you're changing the world...Anybody who saw *La Cage* live on stage left the theatre as a different person."<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Mercanti, discussion.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Engel, discussion.

<sup>255</sup> Harvey Fierstein interview, August 8, 2003, VHS (NCOX 2163), Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

## Not So Easily Assimilated

*La Cage* has been faulted for being too assimilationist, too universalizing, too comforting for Broadway audiences. But we might also consider *La Cage* not as liberationist, as pertains to gay liberation, but rather as liberating for straight audiences. As Albin asks the audience, “Why not see things from a different angle?” Simply seeing a love song sung between two men in a long-term relationship on Broadway from 1983 to 1987 surely held some radical possibility when the images of gays inundating the media at the time were those of people with AIDS. Broadway was saying “Look Over There” while the president refused to say the word AIDS, perpetuating stigma with his silence. While the musical has been criticized for its assimilationist stance, audiences may have found a liberating escapism in the theatre, where they could pretend that “The Best of Times [Was] Now” while knowing that in reality, they were far from it.

Understanding *La Cage aux Folles* and its complex, often-contradictory relationship with stigma articulates how Broadway musicals are products of their historical context, at once determined by it but also sometimes blazing the way forward. This musical’s reception, in particular, illustrates how the stakes of representation are heightened because of *La Cage*’s highly visible status as an unlikely hit Broadway musical that reflected the friction with its corresponding social liberation movement. *La Cage*’s success exemplifies Bronski’s description of assimilation, in which “[t]he dominant culture tries to absorb any group or idea it finds threatening, and that a capitalist economy is flexible enough to transform many unlikely things into money.”<sup>256</sup> As those involved in its creation never tired of saying, *La Cage* was intended as

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<sup>256</sup> Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 200.

an entertainment for Broadway (read: largely heterosexual, white, middle-class, tourist) audiences; any messages received by its spectators were secondary to the creators' intent.

To read the musical as assimilationist is not to suggest that it is somehow less worthy because it is not liberationist; most social movements need agitation from both sides in order for any meaningful change to occur. Yet *La Cage*'s assimilationist politics determine its stance on representing gays as universal subjects, and this can be traced in part through Fierstein's politics in his later works as well. In his 2014 Broadway play *Casa Valentina* and 2013 musical *Kinky Boots*, Fierstein write transvestite and drag characters, respectively, who were heterosexual. Speaking about *Kinky Boots*, Fierstein went so far as to claim, "No one's gay in this!"<sup>257</sup> *Kinky Boots*, in particular, has been seen as somehow gay despite Fierstein's protestations, because it is a musical in the first place *and* because it is a musical about drag queens. Like *La Cage* (and *Torch Song Trilogy*, for that matter), it hinges upon the relationship between parents and children—which is Fierstein's true theme, and where his assimilationist ideology is most visible. He seems mostly interested in the assimilation of the gay person, the drag queen, and the transvestite into the nuclear family system, which is squarely at odds with the aims of gay liberation and its stance on the destructive nature of the traditional family system.<sup>258</sup> Fierstein explained to the UK's *Gay Times* in 2016, "Everyone thinks the heart of the show is about the drag queen because she, Albin, has her big act one closer. Albin sings I Am What I Am to prove

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<sup>257</sup> Michaelangelo Signorile, "Harvey Fierstein on 'Kinky Boots,' Working with Cyndi Lauper and His Show's Big Surprise," *Huffington Post*, May 17, 2013 (updated February 2, 2016), accessed April 16, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/17/harvey-fierstein-kinky-boots\\_n\\_3292504.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/17/harvey-fierstein-kinky-boots_n_3292504.html).

<sup>258</sup> The Gay Liberation Front *Manifesto* notes, "We are already outside the family and we have already, in part at least, rejected the 'masculine' or 'feminine' roles society has designed for us. In a society dominated by the sexist culture it is very difficult, if not impossible, for heterosexual men and women to escape their rigid gender-role structuring and the roles of oppressor and oppressed." Gay Liberation Front, *Manifesto*, 1971 (revised 1978), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/glf-london.asp>.

she doesn't need to learn anything. But actually, it's Albin's partner Georges and his son that have to figure it all out. When it comes down to it, it's their story and their honesty that's at the core of it all."<sup>259</sup> On Broadway at least, "it seems as if we have to claim 'sameness' in order to advocate for equality."<sup>260</sup> In 1983, Fierstein explained his approach to the politics of representation, saying, "We're showing that marriage, commitment, family, don't have to belong to heterosexuals. We decided early on that our greatest enemy would be the tendency to hide, to avoid being honest. If a gay show is a hit and doesn't make a statement, what's the point?"<sup>261</sup>

*La Cage* made visible in Broadway musicals that which had been hiding in plain sight for decades, namely, an inherent if latent gayness. Visibility was part of what the gay liberationists had sought; now that it was being achieved in a Broadway musical, at what cost and to what end? To have representation turn gay stories into commodities for Broadway producers' profit? Schulman argues that representation and visibility, though important, are not enough: "This twist, calling a constant state of injustice 'progress,' gets played out in a number of distorting ways. Most Americans now know that homosexuals exist. Simply representing us is falsely coded as 'progress.'"<sup>262</sup> Laurents was well aware of this kind of sentiment, and he countered that "some did not want gays to be seen as having the same problems as all other human beings."<sup>263</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters explains, "visibility does not erase stereotypes nor guarantee liberation."<sup>264</sup> Indeed, on Broadway what are most often visible are stereotypes.

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<sup>259</sup> William Connolly, "The Sex Is in the Heel," *Gay Times*, December 2016. Punctuation in original.

<sup>260</sup> Walters, *All the Rage*, 37.

<sup>261</sup> Clarke, "Broadway."

<sup>262</sup> Schulman, *Ties That Bind*, 5.

<sup>263</sup> Arthur Laurents, interview by David Behrens, *Newsday*, July 24, 1984.

<sup>264</sup> Walters, *All the Rage*, 13.

Broadway is generally not the venue primed for the politics of liberation, due to many factors—its status as a commercial theater designed to make money above all. How money should be distributed was a critical site where the assimilation and liberation movements diverged. Advancing the politics of assimilation on Broadway is ultimately a financial decision that more often comes down to buying in than selling out. But the debate over assimilation among this particular disenfranchised group was also about sex. As AIDS spread, gays were told to stop having sex. Writer Edmund White remembers, “We were incensed: Like most gays (and many straights), to us political liberation meant the freedom to be promiscuous.”<sup>265</sup> The de-sexed couple in *La Cage* demonstrates perfectly the political and personal shift from liberation to assimilation/Pride—as gays were told to stop having sex, here came *La Cage* where they could barely touch each other let alone kiss.

If we consider that the narratives of so many musicals are fundamentally about the outsider being assimilated into the community and how *La Cage* flips that narrative, then *La Cage*’s status as a financial hit on Broadway marks a moment when “gay” became recognized for its potential as cultural and economic capital. This represents more than just a windfall for the stakeholders, it speaks to seeing gay people as part of America—capitalist America. As Fierstein notes, “America is about money. It’s a capitalistic country. If you make money, *that* makes you American.”<sup>266</sup> Despite this gay musical making money on Broadway during the early years of AIDS, gays have not necessarily been so easily assimilated into all walks of American life. As of

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<sup>265</sup> Edmund White, “Four Geniuses, Gone to AIDS, As They Might Be Today,” *T Magazine*, April 19, 2018, accessed April 20, 2018, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/t-magazine/keith-haring-tina-chow-aids-resurrected.html>.

<sup>266</sup> Hofler, *Party Animals*, 164.

2018, in twenty-eight states it remains entirely legal to fire someone for being gay or transgender. Rather than the federal government, it is Fortune 500 corporations that have offered LGBTQ workers employment protection.<sup>267</sup> Perhaps Fierstein was right about money making you American, whereas being represented on Broadway just makes you presentable.

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<sup>267</sup> Rich Bellis, “Here’s Everywhere in the U.S. You Can Still Get Fired for Being Gay or Trans,” *Fast Company*, August 28, 2017, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40456937/heres-everywhere-in-the-u-s-you-can-still-get-fired-for-being-gay-or-trans>.

## **“The Word of Your Body”: Deaf West Theatre and Deaf and Disability Stigma**

“See, I couldn’t really sing. I could never really sing.”—Kristine, *A Chorus Line*<sup>1</sup>

As he was writing *The Music Man* in the early 1950s, Meredith Willson had a novel idea: “a subplot . . . involv[ing] a spastic boy—helpless in a wheel chair—not exactly a character you would normally select for a musical comedy.”<sup>2</sup> Willson kept this character in multiple drafts of the musical, despite trepidation on the part of the show’s producer; he explains, “But then you don’t know how glued I was to the spastic-boy subplot—how badly I wanted to tell on a stage that spastics are muscularly retarded not mentally.”<sup>3</sup> Morton DaCosta, the show’s director, was also against the character, saying, “I would think the spastic boy should go.”<sup>4</sup> Willson notes that he, too, eventually decided to give up the subplot, yet wanted to “see him replaced if I could find any kind of related element to replace him with.”<sup>5</sup> The solution was to replace a motor impairment with a speech impediment: a lisp for the character now named Winthrop. “A lisping kid instead of a spastic boy!”<sup>6</sup> Raymond Knapp describes how the substitution of spasticity with a speech impediment had multiple implications, including giving Winthrop’s impairment a musical dimension and allowing his lisp to function as a metaphor. Most crucially, Knapp points out how “the lingering effect of the discarded ‘spastic boy’ is that the lisp itself is implicitly

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bennett, James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, Marvin Hamlisch, and Edward Kleban, *A Chorus Line: The Book of the Musical* (New York: Applause, 1995), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Meredith Willson, *But He Doesn’t Know the Territory* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959; Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



regarded as an irreversible condition (as most cases of upper motor neuron syndrome are), in order to focus on the inhibiting and stigmatizing effects of disability, instead.”<sup>7</sup> The “spastic boy” was out, Winthrop Paroo was in—and though for many years after *The Music Man* ran on Broadway, the occasional wheelchair –using character would appear, Broadway would not cast an actor who actually uses a wheelchair, Ali Stroker, until Deaf West Theatre’s 2015 revival of *Spring Awakening*—almost sixty-five years since Willson had the idea to create a wheelchair-using character.

Musicals privilege the aural and the visual for actors and spectators alike—they are as much about *hearing* the score as *seeing* the staging, making the form often inaccessible and unaccommodating to audience members and actors with disabilities and impairments. Knapp points out that the musical’s “mainstream has also always been understood to be *able*: ‘sound’ in body and mind, and especially proficient regarding vocality and movement.”<sup>8</sup> The perception of musical theatre performance as a style of hyper-ability embodied by the triple-threat performer contributes to the exclusion of performers with disabilities and Deaf and hard-of-hearing actors.<sup>9</sup> Deaf West Theatre Company’s two musical revivals on Broadway have reframed conceptions of ability within arguably the most ableist of theatrical forms: the musical. Ability is the defining creed of the triple-threat performer, a performer equally adept at acting, dancing, and singing. It is time for a more capacious understanding of the kinds of abilities that can be included in

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Knapp, “Waitin’ for the Light to Shine”: Musicals and Disability” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, eds. Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 818.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 815.

<sup>9</sup> A note about terminology: throughout the chapter I use Deaf (with a capitalized ‘D’) to refer to people/communities who identify as Deaf or hard-of-hearing; deaf (lower-case ‘d’) refers to the physical condition of deafness.

musicals and not just in the narrative; Deaf West Theatre's Broadway revivals of *Big River* (2002) and *Spring Awakening* (2015) push musicals in new directions, challenging dominant conceptions of what constitutes ability. Following Disability Studies scholar Lennard J. Davis, who notes that "the term 'ables' describes everyone—not just those with physical limitations—and the term 'ability' includes but does not stigmatize 'disability,'" this chapter argues that Deaf West's Broadway revival of *Spring Awakening* provides one model of accessibility and inclusion as embodied in its casting practices, and that the production pedagogically stages Deaf and disability identities in a contact zone (after Mary Louise Pratt) designed to actually accommodate hearing and/or non-disabled audiences rather than those historically denied access to and accommodation at the theatre.<sup>10</sup> *Spring Awakening* is the focus of this research, rather than *Big River*, because the way that Deafness was made intrinsic to the musical in this production.

Deaf West's Broadway musical revivals stand out next to the swarm of traditionally cast productions, begging questions of how, what, and whom musicals enable. Recent scholarship in Deaf Studies asks how we might understand Deafness not as hearing *loss* but as Deaf *gain*: "Deaf-gain . . . is the notion that the unique sensory orientation of Deaf people leads to a sophisticated form of visual-spatial language that provides opportunities for exploration into the human character."<sup>11</sup> Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* demonstrates what is gained by adding Deafness to the sound of musicals. This chapter opens with a consideration of Deaf West Theatre as a consciously created "contact zone," followed by a survey of how musicals employ Deafness and disability relative to voice. It continues by examining the stakes of Deaf and Disability

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<sup>10</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso Books, 1995), xiii.

<sup>11</sup> H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, "Deaf Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: 'Deaf-Gain' and the Future of Human Diversity," in *The Deaf Studies Reader*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (London: Routledge, 2017), 234.

Studies and how they relate to models of performance. The second half of the chapter is devoted to labor issues, casting, and staging *Spring Awakening*, and concludes by examining the production's critical and popular reception in order to argue that, while Deaf West's Broadway musicals have been artistic and critical successes, their financial failure reveals that Broadway audiences prefer disability to remain metaphoric.

### **“All Shall Know the Wonder”: Deaf West Theatre as Contact Zone**

Staging Broadway productions is not part of the mission of Deaf West Theatre, which has always been about serving its local community: “West” might be nearly as important in its name as “Deaf.” Founding Director Ed Waterstreet explains:

All my life I wanted to see deaf theatre in America. I used to perform with the National Theatre of the Deaf for fifteen years and I wanted something different. So I moved to Los Angeles. I found out that although there were 2 million deaf and hard-of-hearing people there, there was no theatrical art form for them. I was shocked by that. I started thinking to myself, “Well, let’s build something.”<sup>12</sup>

“Something” became Deaf West Theatre, which aimed to put American Sign Language (ASL) on stage in order to serve Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences. Waterstreet notes that their shows attracted more hearing audiences than expected: “The deaf audience wasn’t even very big: 95% of the audience were hearing.”<sup>13</sup> This realization meant that the company’s strategy shifted in

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<sup>12</sup> “Waiting for the Light,” Roundabout Theatre Company *Upstage*, Spring 2003, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

response to the composition of its audience. Rather than stage plays only with and for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, as in traditional Deaf theatre, Waterstreet began to focus on connecting Deaf and hearing cultures through ASL theatre.

This shift effectively made the theatre into one of what Mary Louise Pratt terms *contact zones*: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”<sup>14</sup> Deaf West remains the first point of contact with Deaf culture for many hearing people. Deaf people experience the asymmetry of power daily because they live in a world where hearing culture dominates. Theatre is an effective contact zone because it is a shared social space encouraging the meeting and clashing of cultures through spectators’ proximity to each other. The dynamics of multiple languages communicating at once further emphasizes the potential of Deaf West Theatre as a contact zone. Pratt writes, “The idea of the contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, we might best understand the contact zone as also disrupting ideas of a singular or unitary “Deaf community” or “hearing community.”

The embodied nature of an ASL musical theatre performance like *Spring Awakening* also supports reading theatre as a contact zone because of the tension between the performative nature of ASL itself and the performativity of song and dance. Tobin Siebers argues that “because linguistic structuralism tends to view language as the agent and never the object of

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” in *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*, ed. Janice M. Wolff (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2002), 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

representation, the body, whether able or disabled, figures as a language effect rather than a causal agent, excluding embodiment from the representational process almost entirely.”<sup>16</sup> ASL undoes this exclusion as it is always already embodied representation. Staging an ASL musical—a bilingual musical—allows for signing to be seen as both the agent and object of a body. And yet ASL is still often positioned relative to text, whether written or spoken; Lennard J. Davis explains, “Sign language is far closer to writing than is speech. Speech is an oral production linked to the mouth. Sign language can be seen as a form of writing done in space rather than on paper.”<sup>17</sup>

ASL musicals further complicate the contact zone by adding music and choreography to the swirl of communication from stage to spectator. However, the contact zone extends not just to the audience but also to everyone working on the production onstage, backstage, and offstage as well. Waterstreet consciously made Deaf West a contact zone for hearing and deaf/Deaf/hard-of-hearing communities by casting and staging their productions with actors from each of these communities and using both ASL and spoken American English as the two languages in their plays. The company’s website describes its mission:

Founded in Los Angeles in 1991, Deaf West Theatre engages artists and audiences in unparalleled theater experiences inspired by Deaf culture and the expressive power of sign language. Committed to innovation, collaboration, and training, Deaf West Theatre is the artistic bridge between the deaf and hearing worlds.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> “Deaf West Theatre,” Deaf West Theatre, [www.deafwest.org](http://www.deafwest.org), accessed August 8, 2018.

Until staging *Oliver!* in 2000, Deaf West had staged only plays like *The Gin Game* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Waterstreet relays that the idea to stage a musical at Deaf West was borne of simple curiosity and the question: why not try a musical?<sup>19</sup>

It was its musicals that raised the national profile of Deaf West, which began to hire Broadway talent to stage their musical productions, thereby bridging the space between commercial and non-profit, mission-driven theatres. Deaf West sought out Broadway director-choreographer Jeff Calhoun to stage their first musical production, *Oliver!* Calhoun agreed to take on the assignment after a heavy amount of skepticism. He admits to asking himself, “This is what my career has come to? I’m being asked to direct musicals with deaf actors?” Now, I’m embarrassed by that statement because it feels so arrogant.”<sup>20</sup> He earned just \$500 for two months’ work directing the musical and found himself changed by his time in the contact zone:

It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, the most fun I’ve ever had, and probably the most fulfilled as an artist that I’ve ever been. It was such a lesson learned, and it changed everything. It opened up the sandbox to me again. It reminded me what it’s like to be an artist without the limitation of doing commercial theatre. There’s so much pressure to deliver a Broadway show, and so much money on the line, that I think artistically you re-create what you know works. You do it out of fear, so there aren’t many fresh ideas because you’re pulling out old tricks that are tried and true.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Waiting for the Light,” Roundabout Theatre Company *Upstage*.

<sup>20</sup> Lyn Cramer, *Creating Musical Theatre: Conversations with Broadway Directors and Choreographers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Calhoun returned to Deaf West to stage *Big River*. He resisted following one rule of casting or double-casting when staging the show, instead letting the narrative determine how the roles would be cast in terms of speaking and signing. He explains:

It was always different, no common rule. There were about four ways it could go. To use *Big River* as an example, Huck was the deaf actor, and he played the role of Huck singularly. However, Mark Twain, who was our narrator, voiced for Huck. Another way we handled characters—the one you’re referring to—was the role of Pap. Pap existed with two actors: one hearing, one deaf. You didn’t have Pap if you didn’t have both of those. The third way had another deaf actor playing a role, and someone in the ensemble voiced for him. Last, you had a hearing actor who was playing the role himself, who had to learn sign language. So, the whole show was signed and voiced every second of the show, but the rules kept changing.<sup>22</sup>

Calhoun’s approach to *Big River* influenced Michael Arden, who played Tom Sawyer in the production and later shared the title role in Deaf West’s *Pippin* with his *Big River* co-star Tyrone Giordano. Arden went on to direct Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*, which transferred to Broadway in 2015. Deaf West’s musicals, including the original musical *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* (2007), have all been directed either by Calhoun or Arden, two hearing men.

Because Deaf West’s mission in part is to connect the Deaf and the hearing worlds, there is inherently a pedagogical imperative built in to the experience of attending one of their productions, especially in a mainstream venue like Broadway. This is seemingly as much about

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 57.

bringing the experience of music and musicals to Deaf audiences as it is about giving hearing audiences the chance to experience ASL theatre. Once on Broadway, *Spring Awakening* was not only trying to attract audiences but also aiming to educate audiences via two notes published in the *Playbill*: one from Arden, which will be discussed further in the following section, followed by “A Note About the ASL Translation”:

Deaf West Theatre employs American Sign Language (ASL) Masters, who facilitate the adaptation and translation process from written English to American Sign Language. This process requires careful attention to preserving the integrity of ASL while adhering to the script as written. In addition to executing the translation, the ASL Masters must see that it appropriately reflects the actor and the character portrayed. The ASL Masters then work with each actor to ensure that the playwright’s intentions, tone, rhythm, poetry, idiomatic expressions and humor are all reflected in each actor’s signing.<sup>23</sup>

*Big River*’s *Playbill* included no such statement for the audience, since Calhoun’s concept for the show did not explicitly relate to Deafness in the way that Arden’s concept for *Spring Awakening* did. This note about ASL Translation informs audiences of several important facts: that ASL is not the same as written/spoken English, that this production requires different labor as a result (not literal translation, but adaptation into ASL by an ASL Master), and that the ASL Master works with the actors much like a director in addition to creating the ASL translation.

An insert in the *Playbill* for *Spring Awakening* encouraged spectators to “keep the conversation going” by following and interacting with the production’s social media pages—

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<sup>23</sup> “A Note About the ASL Translation,” *Spring Awakening Playbill*, September” 2015, 18.



presumably also providing word-of-mouth marketing for the show—while also inviting audiences to “join the guilty ones,” an online fan community. Finally, the insert suggests audiences “Learn ASL” by finding local classes or downloading the app “Marlee Signs,” featuring the production’s star Marlee Matlin. The flip side of the insert features six pictures of cast members signing keywords related to the production: ASL, theatre, schools, dance, love, and applause. More information about ASL is included in order to educate hearing audiences about ASL:

ASL is a language with its own grammar and rules. There are about 500,000 users of ASL in the US. It is now the third most taught language in schools and colleges across America. ASL is different from the sign language used in other countries. This innovative new production of *Spring Awakening* choreographs American Sign Language, along with dance, into the emotionally charged story, creating a mesmerizing expression of our universal human need for love and connection. It is our hope that this production inspires you to learn ASL. One day all will know.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the pedagogical goal of framing *Spring Awakening* as contact zone (which came at the expense of the experience of Deaf spectators through the productions use of SimCom, as I discuss later in the chapter) is explicitly stated to the majority-hearing audience. *Spring Awakening* was able to also harness the power of YouTube to educate audiences about the production and issues surrounding it, something unavailable to *Big River* since YouTube did not exist until 2005.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “Spring Awakening on Broadway” insert to *Playbill*, September 2015.

<sup>25</sup> *Spring Awakening* also provides a unique model for theorizing the digital contact zone in its engagement of online audiences as well as donors for its fundraising campaigns, though that is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Because Deaf people and people with disabilities are often asked to explain the origin of their difference, many of the interviews with the cast became pedagogical and only highlighted the asymmetrical power relations of the contact zone. Davis notes, “the disabled body must be explained, or at least tolerate the inquisitive gaze (or the averted glance) of the questioner.”<sup>26</sup> An article appearing in the *Spring Awakening Playbill* notes of the production’s Wendla, Sandra Mae Frank, “The 25-year-old actress was born hearing, but premature; she was three months early. At about the age of three, her father noticed that she was experiencing hearing loss; she was soon diagnosed profoundly Deaf.”<sup>27</sup>

Though the production meaningfully staged itself and its interaction with the public as a contact zone-cum-pedagogical space, ASL musicals as staged by Deaf West also taught another impactful lesson: that musicals can be inclusive of abilities previously excluded from them on Broadway. Kurs explains how Deaf actors “realize, perhaps subconsciously, that appearing on stage is the repudiation of the advice that their hearing parents were given when their child was born, that they were deficient and needed to be fixed. Appearing on stage and signing in front of a paying audience is the personal affirmation of the Deaf identity over pathology.”<sup>28</sup> Deaf West’s Broadway productions answer intriguing questions of voice: what happens to a musical when its lead actors cannot hear the music?

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<sup>26</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Gioia, “The Sounds of Spring,” *Playbill*, September 2015, 6.

<sup>28</sup> DJ Kurs, “American Sign Language in Theatre and Its Impact or, Why We Need More Deaf Actors Onstage,” *Howlround*, April 5, 2016, <http://howlround.com/american-sign-language-in-theatre-and-social-advancement-or-why-we-need-more-deaf-actors-onstage>.

## The Sound of Musicals

Deaf actors in a musical? The prospect sounds challenging, to performers and audiences alike. But you will be surprised at how readily you can assimilate the novelties involved, and soon find yourself pleurably immersed not in a worthy, let's-pat-ourselves-on-the-back experience, but simply in a first-rate production of a transporting musical.—Martha Wade Steketee<sup>29</sup>

One of the most compelling moments in a Broadway musical this century so far occurred near the end of the Broadway revival of *Big River*, a coproduction of Deaf West Theatre and Roundabout Theatre Company. During the final chorus of “Waitin’ for the Light to Shine,” the ensemble stopped singing but continued signing the lyrics. For the hearing audience, this silence highlighted the absence of auditory music. Stephanie Lim notes, “For those who can understand ASL, the scene and song continue in these moments, whether or not there is anything auditory happening. Silence thus contains action and is not ‘silence’ in the traditional sense, but rather should be understood as a powerful and central act in and of itself.”<sup>30</sup> The silence of the signed phrase in the song was aimed at giving hearing spectators an idea of what not just attending a musical but daily life was like for the deaf and hard-of-hearing spectators sitting next to them in the auditorium. Theatre remains linguistically bound to ability: the ancient Greek word for *theatre* roughly translates to “seeing place” while *auditorium* indicates that where the audience sits is for hearing. Theatre *is* a place for seeing and hearing for non-disabled audience members, yet for audience members who are Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and/or otherwise disabled, attending

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<sup>29</sup> Martha Wade Steketee, “Introduction and Background” (National Endowment for the Arts Roundtable Report: Creating Opportunities for Deaf Theater Artists,” Washington, D.C., 2016), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Stephanie Lim, “At the Intersection of Deaf and Asian American Performativity in Los Angeles: Deaf West Theatre’s and East West Players’ Adaptations of *Pippin*,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 11, no.1 (March 2017), 26.

theatre is a different experience—one in which they often see their identities reduced to or expressed as metaphor.

Musicals often use muteness rather than deafness as a metaphor; mute characters can still hear the diegetic music in the world of the play even if they do not respond in speech. Singing remains the prevalent way for characters in musicals to communicate, and thus a character's inability to sing generally indicates something about their status as outsider or Other (and there are plenty of non-singing characters peppered throughout musicals, from Doc in *West Side Story* to Zach in *A Chorus Line*). However, these mute (or nearly-mute) characters have traditionally been female and have often used dance as their medium of communication; *Finian's Rainbow's* Susan the Silent is a prime example of this strategy. *South Pacific's* Liat has a danced interlude during "Happy Talk" but otherwise does not sing and speaks little dialogue. *The Fantasticks* contains a character called simply "The Mute," who acts as the wall dividing Matt and Luisa during the show. Musicals have at least some history of non-singing, non-speaking characters, usually in small roles related to secondary plots and subplots.

While silent characters are a relatively little-used trope in musicals, disability is not—it reappears with relative frequency throughout the musical theatre repertoire and must tell or reveal something about the character. "Characters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning, as are moments of disease or accident that transform such characters," writes Davis.<sup>31</sup> A typical approach is what happens when, as in *The Who's Tommy*, the so-called triple-threat is bound not with a performer's ability, but a character's disability: Tommy is

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<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 49.

famously “that deaf, dumb, and blind kid.”<sup>32</sup> Add to this the fact that Tommy is a “supercrip”—a character whose disabilities are offset by some special talent, being a pinball wizard in this case.<sup>33</sup> Another recent rock musical, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (2010), features a character in a wheelchair named “The Storyteller,” which was part sight-gag given that musical’s penchant for irony and the fact that the actor in this role was not mobility-impaired. These musicals find their antithesis in *The Light in the Piazza*, which features the developmentally disabled character of Clara. *Piazza*’s near-art music score and narrative subject matter certainly differ from rock musicals, yet it compellingly depicts the stigmatization of disability. *Piazza* demonstrates how whiteness and class privilege allow characters to “pass” as “normal,” something which would not have been available to Clara had she been of another race and class during the era of the show’s setting. Additionally, Clara’s beautiful singing allows her disability to remain invisible for most of the show.

Scholars have begun to point out how disability permeates the musical theatre repertoire. Knapp begins his survey of disability in musicals with *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and also details how disability appears in *The Music Man* (1957) and *Wicked* (2003) as well as *Next to Normal* (2005).<sup>34</sup> Jessica Sternfeld points out how central disability is to the longest-running Broadway musical, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1987). She argues that the musical “is, at base, a modern version of a circus freak show.”<sup>35</sup> *Phantom*’s logo is the mask used to hide the titular character’s

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<sup>32</sup> Original Broadway Cast, “Pinball Wizard,” by Pete Townshend, in *The Who’s Tommy*, RCA Victor, 1993, CD.

<sup>33</sup> Knapp, “Waitin’ for the Light to Shine,” 820.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 816-823.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Sternfeld, “‘Pitiful Creature of Darkness’: The Subhuman and the Superhuman in *The Phantom of the Opera*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability*, ed. Howe et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 796.

disfigurement, and the musical creates tension building up to the un-masking of the Phantom's bodily difference—the same representational strategy used in freak shows. Other Broadway musicals re-stage the early twentieth-century circus freak show, albeit with very different intentions. *Barnum* (1980) is about the showman famous for promoting the freak show; the musical deftly avoids the seedier side of Barnum's history to focus on rosier areas like the circus. However, the musical does permit two of Barnum's "freaks" to have songs: Tom Thumb's "Bigger Isn't Better" and Joice Heth's "Thank God I'm Old." Tom Thumb was not staged with an actor with dwarfism; the Broadway production featured exaggeratedly large scenery to make Thumb appear small. Though *Barnum* engages with real historical figures, it is certainly not alone in peddling sanitized versions of non-normative bodies to Broadway audiences as played by otherwise normatively bodied actors. In *Annie* (1977), President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did use a wheelchair though the actor playing him did not. The examples above make abundantly clear both how prevalent disability is in musicals and how casting actors without disabilities in these roles is the norm.

The theatrical function of the non-normative body, or "freak" as certain musicals describe them, is to produce the fiction of normativity for spectators.<sup>36</sup> Michael Chemers argues that freak studies is indebted to the relationship of "freaks," stigma, and theatricality; he explains, "The defining characteristic of these very diverse scholars is an agreement that a 'freak' cannot exist in the absence of an extant social stigma, and cannot exist without conditioned theatrical

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<sup>36</sup> "Freak" theory is a subfield within disability studies and has been described as "a sideshow of a sideshow of a sideshow."<sup>36</sup> Much of the scholarship in this subfield focuses on freak shows and the societal stigma that in many cases meant the only employment opportunities available to these extraordinary bodies was to put themselves on display as "freaks."

conventions that enter into a dialogue with that stigma.”<sup>37</sup> Musicals are often explicit about their intention to do just that. *Side Show* (1997, revival 2014) openly invites its spectators to “Come look at the freaks!” in its depiction of conjoined twin sisters Daisy and Violet Hilton. It flopped twice on Broadway, perhaps indicating that Broadway audiences prefer their disability metaphoric or invisible, even when it is apparent that the illusion of disability is created by costuming and staging.

In 1994, two Broadway musicals that centralized freakish bodies opened: *Beauty and the Beast* and *Passion*. Each of these musicals makes use of fairy tale-like conventions to persuade audiences that the protagonist’s freakish body is deserving of love, though to different ends—*Passion*’s Fosca dies while *Beauty*’s Beast is transmogrified into a handsome prince inside a conforming body. In this respect, *Beauty* follows the persistent myth that a normative body lies within the stigmatized one (whether they be fat, gay, disabled, deaf, racial or ethnic Other): the “real” individual inside the ogre. The binary nature of non-normative and normative as mutually constituent categories is evidenced in the pairing of the Beast/Gaston and Fosca/Clara: the Beast cannot be produced without the Beauty, and vice-versa. Additional musicals that form the network of freak bodies in musicals are *Violet*, whose title character has a facial disfigurement, *Shrek*’s ogre-like body, and the queer freaks of *Taboo*, *Hedwig*, and *A Chorus Line*. In the last show, Paul memorably relates, “Nobody at the Jewel Box had any dignity and most of them were ashamed of themselves and considered themselves freaks.”<sup>38</sup> Paul’s narrative is important to consider here because his knee injury late in the musical raises important connections between

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Chemers, introduction to “Staging Stigma: A Freak Studies Manifesto,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25, no.3 (2005), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/574/751>.

<sup>38</sup>Bennett, Kirkwood, et al, *A Chorus Line*, 102.

disability and labor; his career may be ended by this injury, or it may just be a temporary disability. The extent of his injury is left unresolved, but it also serves to enfreak him in relation to the other, normative dancers.

These characters represent both the reach and the dilution of the term *freak*, from those with congenital differences to other embodied kinds of non-normativity. Deaf West's productions stand out on Broadway because while narratives have often represented disability, musical productions have historically relied upon normative bodies to present these characters. Deaf West's intervention is not just that Deaf and hard-of-hearing actors play Deaf or hard-of-hearing characters, but that they play any character. This move is more than rhetorical: it embodies an inclusive identity politics as it challenges casting's status quo.

### **“And Who Can Say What We Are?”: Deaf and Disability Studies**

Deaf. deaf. Disabled. Disability. Impaired. Crip. Freak. Normal. Accommodation. These terms are all deeply contested—as is nearly every term related to identity—and often contain more than the possibility of stigmatization. While each term produces its opposite—i.e., deaf/hearing, disability/ability—I believe, like many scholars intervening in Disability Studies, that it is more beneficial to move beyond simple binaries and acknowledge that identities exist on spectrums and should not be viewed as fixed or fixable.<sup>39</sup> All of these words are also umbrella terms, the meanings of which are hard to pin down or agree upon, particularly when understood differently in different contexts. Disability, for example, is so broad that its vagueness makes it

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<sup>39</sup> Scholars who have productively interrogated these terms include Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Petra Kuppers, Robert McRuer, and Carrie Sandahl, among many others.



applicable to many different things at once, which allows it to evade a unitary meaning. Despite these caveats, the words do have power and meaning. “The categories ‘disabled,’ ‘handicapped,’ ‘impaired’ are products of a society invested in denying the variability of the body. The category ‘disability’ begins to break down when one scrutinizes who make up the disabled,” notes Davis.<sup>40</sup> Even though they are contested, these terms are useful for considering how and why we apply them only to certain individuals and groups, especially since disability is potentially the most inclusive identity category of all and one that many of us will inhabit at different points in our life.

Disability Studies addresses the social and political spaces that bodies inhabit and is thus especially pertinent to understanding how musical theatre employs embodied, non-essentialized difference. Siebers defines the work of Disability Studies as explicating “the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and [asking] how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression.”<sup>41</sup> As an academic field of inquiry initially existing on the margins of other disciplines, Disability Studies has become an increasingly accepted inter-discipline, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Deaf Studies further helps us to understand the complexity of the various issues related to deafness, Deafness, and representation. Situating Disability Studies and Deaf Studies relative to each other will undoubtedly be viewed as problematic or offensive to some; many Deaf people actively resist being labeled “disabled,” which acknowledges the degree to which disability itself is stigmatized. Many in the Deaf community “think of themselves as a linguistic minority like Latinos or Asians, who are defined

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<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xv.

<sup>41</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 3.

by their use of a language other than the dominant one in the United States,”<sup>42</sup> rather than as people with a disability. Deaf communities were formed around this linguistic minority model and were aided by Deaf schools.

The Deaf have had to forge their own community ever since Oralism became the dominant paradigm for educating Deaf children, in late nineteenth-century attempts to “mainstream” them by sending them to public schools where ASL was not part of their education. The *Playbill* for Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* includes a note from director Michael Arden, briefly explaining how and why the musical has been not just translated and transposed for this revival but re-contextualized. He writes,

In 1891, Frank Wedekind’s highly controversial and socially indicting play, *Frühlings Erwachen* (*Spring’s Awakening*), was published in Germany and subsequently banned. Eleven years prior, the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf (known as the Milan Conference) passed a resolution banning sign language in schools across Europe and the United States, declaring Oralism (lip reading, speech and mimicking mouth shapes) superior. The term given to Deaf students unable to succeed with the abusive oral method was “Failure,” the same word that sends young Moritz Stiefel down his destructive path. Children were told that if they failed at speech, they failed at life. Deaf marriage was looked down upon, and the barbaric sterilization of the Deaf was commonplace. This exploration of adolescence within the context of this dark time in

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<sup>42</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions* (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 37.

Deaf history serves as a haunting reminder of the perils of miseducation and miscommunication.

Though much has changed since the time of Wedekind and the Milan Conference, we still live in a world where beliefs, cultures and individuals are silenced and marginalized.

I am honored to continue the legacy of Deaf West, an organization dedicated to bridging cultures and shifting perspectives.<sup>43</sup>

Arden's production reframed the musical's original narrative (discussed later in this chapter) by incorporating Deafness into the narrative through casting and staging. He was able to make the production fundamentally about Deafness in ways that, due to the nature of their narratives, Deaf West's previous musicals were not. Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* artfully embodies onstage the violence done to the Deaf in the practice of Oralism and "mainstreaming." Davis explains, "Disabled people want to be mainstreamed into the 'normal' educational system rather than be segregated in often inferior schools. But for the Deaf, mainstreaming is seen as cultural genocide since residential schools are the breeding ground of Deaf culture."<sup>44</sup> By making this musical about and inclusive of deafness and Deaf history, Arden's production is reparative in its historicization, which is an aim of Deaf and Disability Studies as well.

Though *Big River* and *Spring Awakening* placed stigmatized bodies on the musical's biggest stage, Broadway, they also permit disability and deafness to function as what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder term "narrative prosthesis," in allowing disability to be

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Arden, "Director's Note," *Spring Awakening Playbill*, September 2015, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 37.

simultaneously literal and metaphoric.<sup>45</sup> In *Spring Awakening*, the deafness of the actors amplifies the effect of the inability of the characters within the narrative to metaphorically hear each other, highlighting themes of repressed and failed communication intrinsic to the musical. Narrative prosthesis need not be necessarily negative; though, in a musical, narrative prosthesis almost always functions as inspiration porn, permitting hearing and/or non-disabled audiences to encounter disability only aesthetically as something that inspires them while they are watching it, a feeling that soon expires. Because the production features Deaf actors and seeks to demonstrate the history of educating Deaf youth, it allows narrative prosthesis to function in a more positive light than it often does, because the audience shares the space with actual bodies and not simply imaginary ones, as in a novel. It *is* undeniably inspiring and moving to witness young performers—many of whom never thought theatre, let alone Broadway, was a possibility—make their Broadway debuts in such an inclusive production.

If disability is regularly discussed in terms of narrative prosthesis, it is more common to see it discussed as metaphor—which can be reductive in its own way. Lennard J. Davis argues, “metaphorization can be problematic in terms of identity because it disembodies disability and makes it a template for something else.”<sup>46</sup> Davis complicates his argument by noting, “In an ableist culture disability can’t just *be*—it has to *mean* something. It has to signify. . . . In this sense, disability is allegorical—it has to stand for something else...and be the occasion for the conveyance of some moral truth.”<sup>47</sup> Davis’ intervention into the semiotics of disability can be

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<sup>45</sup> David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>46</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 20.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

fruitfully applied to sign language, in that sign language is quite literally a linguistic sign system itself—a visual language where hand gestures and positions stand in for something else. Signs are always already symbols that signify.

## **Deaf & Disability Identity in/as Performance**

A central point about Deaf West's Broadway productions is that they are *not* backstage musicals, unlike the other case studies in this project. This major difference complicates how identity is formed, received, and represented onstage, but also pertains to the perception of identity offstage. Backstage musicals inherently destabilize identity (and identification), as the body of the actor potentially represents three identities: their own body (assumed to be subsumed by the role), the character they are playing, and the role their character plays in the show within the show. This disjuncture allows for a fair amount of slippage to occur relative to identity politics due to the actor stepping in and out of various roles during the performance. For actors with a visible disability or impairment, there is yet another layer of identity added to the semiotic mix; Erving Goffman notes, "the stigmatized individual is likely to feel that he is 'on,' having to be self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making"<sup>48</sup>—in other words, performing. Disability theorists from various fields have developed Goffman's notion of performance and found it a productive way of looking at disability; the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* write, "disability (like gender) can be understood as a performance: something you do rather than something you are."<sup>49</sup> Understanding disability as

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<sup>48</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 14.

<sup>49</sup> Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus, Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, 5.

performance rhetorically reframes the stigma associated with disability as belonging not to individuals with non-normative bodies but “to the exclusionary societies that fail to accommodate bodily differences.”<sup>50</sup>

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander describe “the sense that disability in daily life is already performance” as they note how daily life turns people with disabilities into something to be gazed upon.<sup>51</sup> For the Deaf, this turns upon sign language. Signing requires looking at the signer in order to receive the communication, yet it also inspires staring from passersby, whom Sandahl and Auslander term “the audience” of the disabled.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, “One listens to speakers; one stares at signers,” while noting that the Deaf also must stare in order to read lips in addition to hands.<sup>53</sup> This staring does not necessarily make the Deaf *performers* per se, but it does contain the potential of their *acts* being viewed as performance. While performance may be a useful lens through which to view the perception of Deafness and disability, it contains the risk of positioning the Deaf or disabled person not as an agent but an object of representation, even in their daily life. Additionally, it allows for the possibility that the Deaf or disabled person is never allowed an offstage existence if they are always “performing.” It is thus telling then that none of Deaf West’s musicals are backstage musicals. Because their musical productions already feature shared and/or split characters/subjects between the signing actor and the singing actor, the backstage musical would be redundant. ASL’s inherent performativity is always already present.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>51</sup> Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, Introduction to *Bodies in Commotion: Disability & Performance*, ed. Sandahl and Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>53</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121.

Deafness and disability are often reduced to metaphor through casting non-disabled and/or hearing actors in roles calling for Deafness or impairment. This casting practice also reinforces notions of the performativity of Deaf and disability identity, in that the non-disabled/hearing actor gets to play the role but does not experience the stigma associated with those bodies. Few things in representation are as fraught as the relationship between casting and identity politics—who should play whom is a debate that never seems to run out of steam. As ever, identity politics are contingent upon cultural and historical contexts. These debates rightfully center around those being represented being denied the opportunity to portray their own identity onstage (or onscreen, etc.), yet extend to the opportunity to audition for those roles at all. As often as not, casting controversies have historically been about ethnic and racial representation (see Jonathan Pryce’s casting as the Engineer in *Miss Saigon*) but have turned as well toward gender, sexuality and ability. Deaf and disability activists and advocates have begun to ask, “shouldn’t a d/Deaf person play a d/Deaf character?” Or, as a video by *The Guardian* asks, “Actors don’t black up, so why do they still crip up?”<sup>54</sup> Answer: because it wins awards and seems like the Mount Everest of acting to convincingly play a character who is so clearly different from the actor. These controversies around and debates over casting often focus problematically around concepts of “authenticity,” which becomes rather essentializing, rather than access to resources, which is what is revealed by the casting of a disabled character with a non-disabled actor.

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<sup>54</sup> Guardian News, “Actors don’t black up, so why do they still crip up?,” YouTube video (02:37), uploaded September 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwXcMuE4G7M>.

## Totally Fucked? Labor, Deafness and Disability

Disability Studies grows out of movements for disability rights that developed through the course of the twentieth century. These movements formed around labor issues in response to changes resulting from industrialization; Sarah F. Rose explains, “As mechanized factory labor became increasingly central to the economy, employers in nearly all sectors began to demand workers who . . . had intact, interchangeable bodies.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, disabled workers found themselves newly excluded from many employment opportunities and from society as a result. Laws meant to help correct this were passed throughout the century without any provisions ensuring their enforcement, essentially rendering them ineffectual.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first law prohibiting employment discrimination against people with disabilities, and although it applied only to federal employment, it set the stage for the broader rights later passed under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The exclusion from the labor force resulted in governmental assistance programs, which further stigmatized disability and marked its recipients as both unproductive workers and citizens.<sup>56</sup> Rose argues that attitudes toward disability have hindered even the attempts at legal protections: “Unlike in the case of other civil rights legislation, disabled people who wish to sue over employment discrimination must first prove that they are qualified to do the job and that their accommodation requests are reasonable; in other words, lawmakers presumed that people with

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<sup>55</sup> Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s-1930s* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.



disabilities were by and large unqualified.”<sup>57</sup> This is yet another way that disability must always perform itself and disabled people must prove themselves deserving of equal protection.

Disability rights activists were not just fighting for employment protections, they were also agitating for public spaces to become accessible. The 1968 Architectural Barriers Act and the ADA each sought to achieve this goal with varying degrees of success. The passage of these acts forced reckoning with the ways that public spaces were disabling; a common example of this is a building with stairs instead of a ramp for entry that disables many with mobility impairments from entering. Theatres are not immune from inaccessibility and lack of accommodation, even after the passage of the ADA. Howard Sherman contends, “So many of the provisions of the Act are still not only not being followed, they are actively avoided within the theater community by many, and in some cases the only way it gets implemented has been through lawsuits.”<sup>58</sup> Accessing basic needs like bathrooms, which may be down a flight of stairs, proves impossible at some theatres and performance venues. While many venues now have wheelchair seating areas, occasional ASL-interpreted performances, and listening devices available, access and accommodation backstage lag behind. Access and accommodation are more often thought of in terms of spectators, but those working onstage are of course also impacted by the same spaces and systems that disable their full participation; casting is one such system.

Casting one actor over another remains inherently tied to what can be termed the aesthetics of disqualification, for casting ultimately remains an aesthetic choice as much as it

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>58</sup> Steketee, NEA Roundtable Report, 17.

may be driven by other imperatives, economic and otherwise. Actors with disabilities are so rarely offered the opportunity to play any role, let alone ones that align with their specific embodied identity, that they are often expressly cast out of the system of representation. The way that the professional theatre world is currently structured also disables the Deaf from nearly every job offstage as well as on. Though employment statistics are low for all actors, they are especially dire for actors with disabilities.

As of 2017, Actors' Equity explains, "We are aware that many members choose not to self-identify for any number of reasons. Currently only 219 members self-identify as having a disability of some kind, and we know those numbers are not representative of the actual population of our membership."<sup>59</sup> This means that just 219 out of over 50,000 members of the union were willing to self-identify as having a disability, which certainly reflects the fear that an actor might be labeled as disabled and hence kept from even more employment opportunities. For comparison, "12.6% of the civilian non-institutionalized population," almost 40 million people, identified themselves as having a disability in 2015 according to the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>60</sup> Equity did not include statistics about the employment rates of these 219 members in its report. For comparison, Equity's sister union, the Screen Actors Guild, reported that one-third of its "disabled members were able to find film or television work in 2003, and that they worked on average four days a year."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Looking at Hiring Biases by the Numbers," Actors' Equity, *Equity News* (Spring 2017), <https://www.actorsequity.org/news/PR/DiversityStudy/>.

<sup>60</sup> Kristen Bialik, "7 Facts about Americans with Disabilities," *Pew Research* "Fact Tank" (blog), July 27, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/27/7-facts-about-americans-with-disabilities/>.

<sup>61</sup> Michael P. Ventura, "Working Miracles with Disabled Actors," *Backstage*, February 11-17, 2010.

Though Equity contracts typically last longer than four days, barriers to employment in theatre persist and often begin with the lack of professional or pre-professional training for the Deaf and disabled. Deaf West does offer training opportunities for Deaf performers interested in sign language theatre. Other training programs exist, such as Performing Arts Studio West, which trains performers with intellectual disabilities, and Infinity Dance Theater, which trains wheelchair users to dance.<sup>62</sup> These programs provide vital training in pockets around the country yet are not accessible to the vast majority who might want to participate in them.

Outside of professional actors, labor concerns paint a stark picture for the Deaf and disabled. According to 2016 employment statistics released by the National Deaf Center, 48% of Deaf individuals were employed, with 47% not in the labor force versus 72% of hearing individuals employed and 23% not in the labor force. Average earnings for full-time workers were within \$300 of each other. The numbers look less rosy when specific categories of Deaf identity are broken down: there is a near 8% gender gap between men's and women's employment, and employment gaps for non-whites and whites. Only 31.7% of individuals with disabilities in addition to being Deaf are in the labor force; they earn \$11,530 less than deaf people who do not have an additional disability.<sup>63</sup> As stark as these statistics are, for disabled individuals they are worse. In June 2018, The U.S. Department of Labor released a report on people with disabilities and the labor force noting that only 18.7% of people with disabilities were employed and that most of the remaining people with disabilities were not in the labor force

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<sup>62</sup> Simi Horwitz, "Rising to the Challenge," *Backstage*, June 18-24, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Carrie Lou Garberoglio, Stephanie Cawthon, and Mark Bond, "Deaf People and Employment in the United States: 2016," National Deaf Center Report, [https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/Deaf%20Employment%20Report\\_final.pdf](https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/Deaf%20Employment%20Report_final.pdf).

and therefore not counted as employed or unemployed, meaning that these individuals are not seeking work for a variety of reasons from age to education.<sup>64</sup> Both reports note that higher education increases the employment of the Deaf and the disabled.

According to the US Department of Justice’s website, “The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation.”<sup>65</sup> The law clearly states that persons with disabilities should have equal opportunity in employment, yet only a quick gloss on all forms of live and mediated entertainment demonstrate that this is not quite the case. “Equal opportunity” does not confer equal representation nor was any plan ever put in place to enforce the ADA, ensuring that the burden of enforcement rested on those seemingly “protected” by its passage.

In terms of how this impacts professional theatre, Actors’ Equity has at least made sure that their language is correct when it comes to disability, even if they can’t always control what producers do or who they cast. Equity’s policy on “Creating Equal Opportunity” explains, “Equity has always been in the forefront of struggles against discrimination and has led the way for decades in the fight for non-traditional and inclusive casting. Casting policies designed to expand opportunities for women, seniors, actors of color and performers with disabilities are

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<sup>64</sup> “PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY: LABOR FORCE CHARACTERISTICS — 2017,” News Release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, June 21, 2018, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> “The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Revised ADA Regulations Implementing Title II and Title III,” ADA.gov, accessed March 24, 2016, [http://www.ada.gov/2010\\_regs.htm](http://www.ada.gov/2010_regs.htm).

provided in all agreements.”<sup>66</sup> Like the ADA, these policies are largely unenforceable without a lawsuit.

The Deaf and disabled already find themselves disqualified from many forms of labor and gainful employment because of a social system that excludes them (the social model of disability) and pathologizes their bodies (the medical model of disability). The medical model of disability supports the ideology that disability needs diagnosis followed by cure or death: the kill or cure binary. This ideology and its resulting terminology can be understood as the result of 19<sup>th</sup>-century eugenicist thinking: “Words like ‘fit,’ ‘normal,’ ‘degenerate,’ ‘feeble,’ ‘defect,’ and ‘defective’ are all interlaced. Their roots lie directly in the ‘scientific’ study of humans that reached its liminal threshold in the middle of the nineteenth century.”<sup>67</sup> Eugenics, the pseudoscience of human “improvement,” was, like casting, fundamentally about the aesthetics of disqualification and about “fit.” The pseudoscience of eugenics also introduced the idea of the norm against which to measure deviance, whether statistical or embodied—there could be no deviance without a norm: a heterosexual, white, able-bodied male).<sup>68</sup> Davis details just how capacious this ideology was in its quest to eliminate certain identities (which all then fell under the umbrella of disability):

Eugenics saw the possible improvement of the race as being accompanied by diminishing problematic peoples and their problematic behaviors—these peoples were clearly delineated under the rubric of feeble-mindedness and degeneration as women, people of

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<sup>66</sup> “Equity at a Glance,” Actors’ Equity Association, accessed July 27, 2016, [http://www.actorsequity.org/docs/about/equity\\_glance.pdf](http://www.actorsequity.org/docs/about/equity_glance.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 34.

color, homosexuals, the working classes, and so on. All these were considered to be categories of disability, although we do not think of them as connected in this way today.<sup>69</sup>

While these identity categories are not necessarily connected to disability today, they retain their opposition to a norm. Representation reiterates but also challenges the power of the norm depending upon context and intent. For example, even a production as inclusive as Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* challenges normative standards of ability while also reiterating normative standards of size in its casting of thin actors as the romantic leads.

Arguing that casting in some ways bears traces of eugenicist ideology is not to say that casting directors (or creative teams) themselves are eugenicists or that casting itself is eugenicist. Casting directors enjoy connecting actors to employment, and the major downside of their job is that typically one role to cast equals one job for one actor; they are also bound to the creative team's vision. And yet casting has developed systems of exclusion and disqualification to make this process more efficient, from the detailed breakdowns listing requirements for the role (including height, race/ethnicity, voice type, dance ability, size, etc.) to the practice of "typing": lining actors up and dismissing those whose "type," or physical appearance, is deemed incompatible with the vision for the role. "Disqualifying and qualifying statements about human appearance, [are] made almost always, of course, in the guise of judgments of taste," writes Tobin Siebers.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Davis, *Bending Over Backwards*, 14.

<sup>70</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 28.

These systems often seem thoughtful to actors in the sense that one won't waste time going to certain auditions or take the rejection personally when you aren't the right "type." Typing is thus at once kind and cruel: it rejects actors on the basis of appearance, but at least saves them a day waiting to audition for roles they will never get. However, these systems are determined by aesthetics, both in terms of appearance and talent. Siebers explains how "disqualification finds support in the way the bodies appear and in their specific appearances—that is, disqualification is justified through the accusation of mental or physical inferiority based on aesthetic principles."<sup>71</sup> This might be a perceived mismatch between how a body looks and how it sounds or moves.

When are the Deaf and disabled considered the right type? Deaf West's Broadway productions stand out as the only two Broadway musicals to cast Deaf performers and, with Ali Stroker, a person with a visible mobility impairment (surely many actors with invisible disabilities have worked on Broadway). The fact that these productions originated at regional, non-profit theatres far from Broadway is important. Though a commercial producer like Ken Davenport took the risk of bringing *Spring Awakening* to Broadway, no other commercial production has yet cast a Deaf or visibly disabled actor in a musical on Broadway, whether disability and/or Deafness figure in the narrative or not.<sup>72</sup> What actually is more progressive than characters with disabilities being performed by actors with disabilities is Deaf West's integration of Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and otherwise-abled performers alongside typical musical theatre

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Medoff's 1980 play *Children of a Lesser God* has played Broadway twice and did cast Deaf actors as Deaf characters. *Spring Awakening* star Marlee Matlin made her name starring in the 1986 film version, winning an Academy Award in the process.

actors. *Spring Awakening* then, through this inclusiveness, countered what Tobin Siebers details as the process by which “the ideology of ability simultaneously banishes disability and turns it into a principle of exclusion.”<sup>73</sup>

### **“Sometimes We Do Musicals”: Casting *Spring Awakening***

Staging an ASL musical requires rethinking most of the traditional processes of producing a musical, including casting. Since Deaf West’s Broadway productions were never intended for Broadway and played limited runs once there, the casting process was also not typical. In March 2014, a video was posted on YouTube announcing that Deaf West Theatre was seeking actors, via online auditions, for its upcoming Los Angeles production of *Spring Awakening*. Artistic Director DJ Kurs opens the video by signing about Deaf West, telling viewers, “Sometimes we do musicals . . . Our musicals are inspiring to deaf and hearing audiences alike.”<sup>74</sup> Casting via YouTube was not just a publicity stunt: it made auditions accessible for actors unable to make the costly trip to Los Angeles and was effectively the show’s “cattle call” audition according to Kurs. Kurs also noted that doing this musical would “allow us to find a new generation of talents who will be able to perform in musicals.”<sup>75</sup> Kurs explicitly acknowledges in this appeal to performers that Deaf West’s musicals are meant to be inspiring and that this means inspiring young performers to consider their ability being put to work in musicals. Because the cast had to be able to play adolescents, Deaf West needed to find young, possibly inexperienced actors. Due to this, Deaf West’s video effectively functioned as an

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<sup>73</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>74</sup> Deaf West Theatre, “Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening*: Casting Call,” YouTube video (06:08), uploaded March 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVf21r6330s>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*



instructional video for how to audition for an ASL musical. Arden explains, “We’re not only looking for deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing actors who are comfortable with music and rhythm and folk and rock music, but also for musicians who can play the score while voicing for our deaf and hard-of-hearing actors. So, there are many opportunities for every kind of actor, no matter where you lie on the hearing spectrum.”<sup>76</sup>

Assuring Deaf and hard-of-hearing actors that they would not merely shadow the hearing performers but would be central to the action onstage was part of the casting process. While initially recruiting actors for *Spring Awakening* in 2014, the production highlighted the fact that ASL Masters would be integral to the rehearsal process; this production used three ASL Masters due to the complexity of staging a musical. Shoshanna Stern, one of the ASL Masters, notes, “it is my duty to make sure that spoken English and music become equal to the ASL in the production. No one language will take precedence in the production.”<sup>77</sup> Deaf and hard-of-hearing actors were instructed to sign a two-minute song for their auditions, a daunting task for many actors who could not hear or even feel the rhythm of the music. The video ends with the following written instructions:

Deaf Actors: please include a 2-minute classical monologue and a 2-minute ASL Music Video in your video.

Hearing Actors: please include a 2-minute classical monologue and a 2-minute Folk/Rock song in your video. If you play an instrument, please accompany yourself or demonstrate your abilities.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Seeking piano, guitar, bass (upright and electric), percussion, viola, violin, cello.<sup>78</sup>

Casting this production was necessarily complicated due to the multiple requirements for each role. Beth Lipari cast *Spring Awakening* in Los Angeles for Deaf West. She notes the challenges she faced, saying, “It was a big, tall order. Like, a very large order . . . half the cast was going to be hearing impaired, deaf, and the other half was not. Everyone had to play an instrument. Everyone had to be able to sing pop-rock kind of music. Everybody had to be able to act, and willing to work for like \$25 a week.”<sup>79</sup>

Hearing actor-musicians were sought to sing and speak the text, while Deaf actors signed and acted the roles. Kurs relates, “We have two people that are creating one character and that’s an important aspect in our company. Again, and first and foremost, I’m looking at talent of course, and does it match the role and what I envision.”<sup>80</sup> Lipari explains the calculations that the creative team had to perform to match performers with roles: “She’s an amazing singer, amazing actor, great, she plays the violin, then we brought her to the signing portion and it was like, ‘Oh my god, she can’t sign.’ And so like, a necessary thing would be cut. It was so specific that you just knew when you found the person you were like, ‘That’s the person.’”<sup>81</sup> In short, there were multiple competing factors for each role, and while this is true of almost every musical, ASL musicals require more. For the in-person auditions and callbacks, Arden had an ASL interpreter with him in the audition room and a deaf actor as the “reader” for the actors. He explained how he could “get insight into an actor from how they choose to translate English into the sign

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Beth Lipari, casting director, in discussion with author, September 2017.

<sup>80</sup> HuffPost Live, “‘Spring Awakening’ Interview: Daniel Durant, Alex Boniello and D.J. Kurs,” YouTube video (20:24), uploaded January 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozb5294yxxM>.

<sup>81</sup> Lipari, discussion.

language.”<sup>82</sup> Apart from the presence of an ASL interpreter and a Deaf reader, it is notable that Deaf auditionees had to translate the audition material themselves.

Staging *Spring Awakening* as an ASL musical meant that Arden and his team had to decide which characters would be played by Deaf or hard-of-hearing actors and which would be played by hearing actors and how these choices would serve the narrative (e.g., how would each parent-child pair in the musical be configured relative to hearing or Deaf). The casting breakdown for the production’s Broadway engagement, which did not change substantially from the first production in Los Angeles, reveals these choices:

Seeking-Melchior (Hearing Actor): male, 18-20, all ethnicities. Wendla (Deaf Actor): female, 18-20, all ethnicities. Voice of Wendla (Hearing Actor): female, 18-20, all ethnicities. Moritz (Deaf Actor): male, 18-20, all ethnicities. Voice of Moritz (Hearing Actor): male, 18-20, all ethnicities. Ilse (Hearing Actor): female, 18-20, all ethnicities. Adult Men (Deaf Actor): male, 40-59, all ethnicities. Adult Men (Hearing Actor): male, 40-59, all ethnicities. Adult Women (Deaf Actor): female, 36-50, all ethnicities. Adult Women (Hearing Actor): female, 36-50, all ethnicities. Adult Hearing Male Standby: male, 40-59, all ethnicities. Adult Hearing Female Standby: female, 36-50, all ethnicities.<sup>83</sup>

The cast was assembled for the first production at the 99-seat Rosenthal Theater at Inner City Arts in Downtown Los Angeles, co-produced with Arden’s company Forest of Arden. This cast would be the one that traveled with the production to Broadway, with a few exceptions. For

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<sup>82</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, “DWSA’s ‘Broadway Backstory’ Episode,” YouTube video (54:36), uploaded January 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqxHv7yEHRo>.

<sup>83</sup> *Spring Awakening* casting notice, *Backstage*, July 9, 2015.

many in the cast, this production was their professional debut, and ultimately their Broadway debut as well—all but four of the Broadway cast were making their debuts.

The video submission process worked: the show's two leads, Sandra Mae Frank as Wendla and Austin Mackenzie as Melchior, were cast from taped submissions. Mackenzie was in college studying to be a special needs teacher when he saw the casting notice and decided to submit a video; he was not planning to pursue a career as an actor.<sup>84</sup> Many of the Deaf actors never considered performing in an ASL musical; Daniel Durant says, "I'm not even interested in music. I'm profoundly deaf."<sup>85</sup> Durant was the only cast member who was with the production from its first workshop in Los Angeles all the way to Broadway. He felt that trying to sign the lyrics during auditions was daunting because he is profoundly deaf. "Before *Spring Awakening*, I really didn't have a sense of music." The show helped him understand a bit of what hearing people get out of music.<sup>86</sup> While the Deaf and hard-of-hearing actors learned to sign to music they were unable to hear, many of the hearing actors learned ASL for the first time. Kurs explains, "During auditions we looked at the hearing actors to see if they had an ability to sign. We would give them a line and see what they would do with it. Some people had two left hands...that was an additional level that we were conscious of, and that might have been a little different."<sup>87</sup>

Though the production largely retained its cast from its first production at Inner City Arts, a few original members were unable to join the additional run at the Wallis Annenberg in

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<sup>84</sup> Talks at Google, "Spring Awakening (Broadway revival cast) | Talks at Google," YouTube video (45:07), uploaded November 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utX-pB8Odg>.

<sup>85</sup> HuffPost Live, "'Spring Awakening' Interview: Daniel Durant, Alex Boniello and D.J. Kurs."

<sup>86</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, "DWSA's 'Broadway Backstory' Episode."

<sup>87</sup> HuffPost Live, "'Spring Awakening' Interview: Daniel Durant, Alex Boniello and D.J. Kurs."

Beverly Hills. The show picked up Andy Mientus, Arden's husband and the person who suggested *Spring Awakening* to Arden for Deaf West, and Alex Boniello, who sang and spoke Moritz and played guitar. When the production moved to Broadway, it meant picking up a few additional cast members, including swings and standbys. Broadway casting agency Telsey + Company took over at this point (and they were involved in recasting the adult roles for Broadway as well). Robert Ariza was cast as a swing and participated in ASL work sessions during the auditions for hearing actors to demonstrate their ability to pick up ASL, though ultimately he learned the ASL in the production by imitating the cast in rehearsal.<sup>88</sup> In the *New York Times*, Laura Collins-Hughes wrote about the casting of this production, noting the rarity of Broadway's need for Deaf actors—not seen on the Great White Way since the Deaf West/Roundabout *Big River* in 2003. The article poignantly ends with a quote from Deaf actor Rita Corey, who describes what the opportunity just to audition meant to her at 61 years old: “All of a sudden here, after 40 years of waiting and waiting for a Broadway show, I’m now having this opportunity. I am just so happy. I want to show what I can do.”<sup>89</sup> The chance for Deaf actors to even audition for a Broadway production offered a kind of validation, even if they weren't cast in the production.

Unfortunately, Corey did not get cast as one of the adults in the show. Neither did the actors who played the roles in the Los Angeles productions, who were replaced with “name” actors for the Great White Way. These actors apparently did not have to audition to be a part of

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<sup>88</sup>Talks at Google, “Spring Awakening (Broadway revival cast) | Talks at Google.”

<sup>89</sup> Laura Collins-Hughes, “‘Spring Awakening’ Revival Requires Signing in Lieu of Singing,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2015.

the Broadway transfer according to a *Playbill* headline, which reads, “All It Took Was a Text!”<sup>90</sup> Deaf film stars Marlee Matlin and Russell Harvard joined the production and made their Broadway debuts after each had seen the Los Angeles run (Harvard previously appeared in Deaf West’s original musical *Sleeping Beauty Wakes*). Hearing stage and television stars Camryn Manheim and Patrick Page were cast as the other two adults in the production (all four of the “adults” played multiple roles). Unlike some in the cast, Manheim already knew ASL coming into the production. Apart from the historic nature of being the second ASL musical on Broadway, *Spring Awakening* broke another important barrier in casting Ali Stroker.

### **Breaking Type: Ali Stroker’s Mission**

Stroker’s Broadway debut as Anna in *Spring Awakening* was revolutionary: her *Playbill* bio states that she was “the first person in a wheelchair to appear on Broadway.”<sup>91</sup> The bio includes Stroker’s philosophy on her impairment: “Ali believes any limitation can be an opportunity.” However, Stroker’s casting almost did not happen because of concerns about the conflation of Deafness and disability. Lipari remembers vividly the debate:

When Ali came in . . . it was a no-brainer. She was so talented, it was like, she’s in the show, right? At the time, I remember there being a discussion between the artistic director and us about how that might not be a possibility. And he was a little bit worried, because he didn’t want people thinking that deaf people were disabled . . . You know, that’s the whole real crux here, is that how we view people, and how they view

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<sup>90</sup> Jen Tesse Fox, “All It Took Was a Text! Learn How Marlee Matlin and Russell Harvard Got on Board for *Spring Awakening*,” *Playbill*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/all-it-took-was-a-text-learn-how-marlee-matlin-and-russell-harvard-got-on-board-for-spring-awakening-com-366787>.

<sup>91</sup> *Playbill*, September 2015, 20.

themselves when they're actually the people living it are two very, very different situations. I'm pretty sure DJ's pretty psyched that he did have Ali now . . . it was a real conversation. And it was the first time in life that I went, "Wait, is this really happening?" . . . I think we're missing out on an entire world of talent, because of how we view things as opposed to what they actually are.<sup>92</sup>

The perception that Deafness is not a disability almost kept Stroker from being cast. That this was a conversation among *Spring Awakening*'s team reveals the extent to which debates over the terms of identity politics have material effects in unexpected places.

Stroker is the rare performer with a mobility impairment to make it to Broadway, yet she frames this fact not as about discrimination but lack of education and uncertainty about which words to use.<sup>93</sup> She told *Howlround*, "I don't really feel like I face discrimination on a day to day basis. I sometimes meet people who are not educated about how to handle certain situations and that is an opportunity for me to explain and share with them how something could be handled. . . . The main thing I've found is people don't really know always what language to use."<sup>94</sup> She relates being rejected from a few college musical theatre programs because they were unable to conceive of the how a person in a wheelchair could dance; she ended up graduating from NYU and signing with an agent. When *Spring Awakening* reached Broadway, the Brooks Atkinson Theatre was inaccessible to Stroker's wheelchair, so a dressing room was renovated for her on the stage level.<sup>95</sup> "When a disabled body moves into any space, it discloses the social body

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<sup>92</sup> Lipari, discussion.

<sup>93</sup> Madison Ferris soon became the second in Sam Gold's 2017 revival of *The Glass Menagerie*.

<sup>94</sup> Ricky Young-Howze, interview with Ali Stroker, *Howlround*, July 23, 2016, <http://howlround.com/six-lessons-i-learned-from-ali-stroker>.

<sup>95</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, DWSA's 'Broadway Backstory' Episode."

implied by that space. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the dimensions of the built environment and its preferred social body—the body invited inside as opposed to those bodies not issued an invitation,” explains Siebers.<sup>96</sup> For actors with a disability, this affects not just their environment once they book an acting gig but their very ability to access auditions, and the audition space itself.

Stroker has had a remarkably successful career for any actor, appearing on several television shows and in a Broadway musical, and enjoying a flourishing career in regional theatre. She works regularly despite the barriers she faces as a person who uses a wheelchair; these range from access and accommodation backstage and on set to changing a creative team’s conception of a role. She says, “Type has been a tough one for me because I just never really felt like I fit into one. And so I tried to figure out if I had to type myself, where would I fall?”<sup>97</sup> This is because, as she notes, “very rarely in a breakdown does it say they are looking for someone with a disability. . . . I always feel like it’s my job to actually break the idea of type.” Due to her success and ensuing visibility, now Stroker is a known quantity when she wheels into an audition, and it’s not hard to imagine seeing a casting breakdown looking for an “Ali Stroker type” in the future.

Before *Spring Awakening*, Stroker appeared in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* at the Paper Mill Playhouse in 2011. Reviewing the production for the *New York Times*, Anita Gates writes, “But maybe Ms. Stroker’s greatest achievement is that we’re not thinking about her all the time. We’re paying attention to the extremely funny dialogue . . . and to the

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<sup>96</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 85.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Gray, “Living the Dream,” podcast, *Howlround*, December 11, 2015, <https://howlround.com/living-dream-podcast-12>.



music.”<sup>98</sup> Gates means of course that she was able to “forget” Stroker’s wheelchair and see her as an actor, not a disabled actor. In the press, Stroker is rarely mentioned apart from her wheelchair or from explanations about how she came to need one—disability must always tell. Despite her positive attitude, Stroker notes how she performs a special kind of labor as an actor. She goes out of her way to accommodate others, saying, “I have to be really solid and comfortable in how I’m moving. It also puts everyone else at ease if there’s any fear or discomfort around what I do. I have to be the first person who’s on board.”<sup>99</sup> Stroker’s advocacy and visibility have naturally led her to be a role model for others. As she told *Teen Vogue*, “I remember young kids with disabilities coming to see the show and being like, ‘I didn’t know this was possible, and now I’ve seen it done, and I know it is.’”<sup>100</sup> She continues, “When you see somebody else who looks like you, who is in your similar position, you somehow are given confidence that you’re going to make it. That’s why representation is so important.”

As Lipari revealed, the stigma of disability almost kept Stroker from being a part of the initial Deaf West production of *Spring Awakening* let alone making her Broadway debut. Yet Stroker argues that her disability is in fact what has taught her to handle the industry. “Having a disability is perfect training to getting into this industry because you’re used to somebody saying ‘you can’t do that.’”<sup>101</sup> Stroker’s success has come in playing roles not written for characters with disabilities, which is a sure measure of progress and inclusion at a time when roles that are written with disabilities are regularly played by nondisabled actors. She explains, “Having a

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<sup>98</sup> Anita Gates, review of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* *New York Times*, January 28, 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Matthew Gray, “Living the Dream.”

<sup>100</sup> De Elizabeth, “Ali Stroker on ‘Oklahoma!’ and Bringing Disability Representation to Another Iconic Musical,” *Teen Vogue*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ali-stroker-oklahoma-disability-representation>.

<sup>101</sup> Matthew Gray, “Living the Dream.”

disability is a full life experience, and somebody with a disability would represent that authentically. . . . I always want to be hired because I'm the best actor, not because I'm disabled."<sup>102</sup> In nearly every interview, Stroker has framed her impairment as enabling her to become more creative. In fact, she notes factors other than her impairment that she thought would get in her way, "I never thought I'd be a part of *Spring Awakening*, because I'm 28 and these characters are 14."<sup>103</sup>

Can producers, audiences, and critics see Stroker's success not as either because of or despite her wheelchair, but as the result of the singular combination of talent and determination that it takes to make it as an actor? Unlike her Deaf castmates, Stroker has been regularly considered for roles in non-ASL productions. For example, she played Ado Annie in Daniel Fish's production of *Oklahoma!* at St. Ann's Warehouse in fall 2018. She explains, "My entire life is not just around my wheelchair," and notes that she is rarely cast in roles where a wheelchair user is sought.<sup>104</sup> In March 2019, she will return to Broadway in *Oklahoma!*

For the Deaf and hard-of-hearing members of the *Spring Awakening* company, Deaf West's success at raising awareness on the U.S.'s biggest stage has translated into more opportunities, though not always in musicals: Frank has since played Joan in *Fun Home* and Hodel in *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma as well as other roles around the country in non-musical plays; Treshelle Edmond, who played Martha in *Spring Awakening*, returned to Broadway in the 2018 revival of *Children of a Lesser God*; and Harvard played the

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<sup>102</sup> Brandon Voss, "How Ali Stroker Reps the Bisexual and Disabled Communities with Class," *New Now Next*, October 1, 2017, <http://www.newnownext.com/ali-stroker-ten-days-in-the-valley/10/2017/>.

<sup>103</sup> Talks at Google, "Spring Awakening (Broadway revival cast) | Talks at Google."

<sup>104</sup> Seth Rudetsky, "Spring Awakening's Krysta Rodriguez and Ali Stroker Interview on Seth Speaks," YouTube video (13:34), uploaded December 16, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-CMPvptROY>.

title role in *The Who's Tommy* at Maryland's Open Circle Theatre in 2016 and appeared Off-Broadway in Craig Lucas's *I Was Most Alive with You* in 2018. Stroker has certainly not been the only actor from the production to "break type."

Deaf West's presence on Broadway changed not just the lives of those involved in the production, but those of its spectators as well. Stroker relates the messages she's received from fans with disabilities telling her, "'I never really knew if I could be on Broadway and now that you've done it, I know that it's real and that my dream can come true.'"<sup>105</sup> She notes that her very presence on Broadway can "help younger people realize that . . . your disability is not a disability. . . . You're just differently abled. So use what you've got." Several other cast members have spoken about the show's impact on audiences, noting that many people were moved to share personal experiences with them at the stage door. Frank remembered one woman in particular who lost her hearing in mid-life and never fully learned ASL, and the musical inspired her to actually learn it, while Stroker described how audience members have highlighted the importance of the musical's expression of sexuality and disability.<sup>106</sup> A year after the show closed on Broadway, Durant remembers its impact, "People were in awe of it. People would say they would want to see more ASL integrated into theatre because it's a more three-dimensional language and that it has emotional impact on people and that the emotions stick with people."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Talks at Google, "Spring Awakening (Broadway revival cast) | Talks at Google."

<sup>107</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, "DWSA's 'Broadway Backstory' Episode."

## Sign Me a Song with Social Significance: Transposing the Narrative and Staging Deafness

Translating a musical into ASL and staging it was a new challenge for the company. It is a dramaturgical truism that characters in musicals typically break into song when they can no longer express themselves through spoken dialogue, and that they dance when singing will no longer suffice as the preferred mode of expression. Deaf West's artistic team had to figure out how to add ASL into this formulation. Producing director Bill O'Brien explains how the team approached this question with *Big River*: "The question was, what happens when deaf people in their own language are forced to break into song? Translating *Big River* into American Sign Language was all about why these emotions need to be expressed in a poetic way. So the real trick is finding pieces that are actually enhanced by translating [them] into American Sign Language."<sup>108</sup>

In his brief, monographic explanation of his lyrics for *Spring Awakening*, Steven Sater states "the primary theme of our play: 'Mama who bore me.'"<sup>109</sup> Sater's book was borne out of his experiences working with translators on German and Korean language versions of the show. That a book exists giving notes on the lyrics of the musical is a testament to just how poetic they are and their difference with typical musical theatre lyrics, which aim to advance the narrative or character development. The lyrics are also peppered with literary and theatrical references, from Aeschylus and Baudelaire to the Bible and Shakespeare, giving Sater another reason to write the book. Sater's lyrics might be best understood as extra-narrative or non-diegetic, meaning that they comment upon the dramatic action but are not part of it. He explains (and this was written

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<sup>108</sup> "Waiting for the Light," Roundabout Theatre Company *Upstage*.

<sup>109</sup> Steven Sater, *A Purple Summer: Notes on the Lyrics of Spring Awakening* (New York: Applause, 2012), 3.

before Deaf West's production), "Throughout the show, one character cannot 'hear' what another is singing."<sup>110</sup>

Sater and composer Duncan Sheik worked on adapting Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* for years before it opened on Broadway in December 2006. The show had been developed in various workshops since 1999; Deaf West's workshop production reiterated the challenges of getting this material right. Sater and Sheik were selectively faithful to Wedekind, in spirit if not to the actions of his play. They changed much of the plot and, crucially, added a classroom scene, which "allows us to see the repressive nineteenth-century German school system in operation: force-feeding young minds a 'proper education,' while quelling all the life in them."<sup>111</sup> Arden later made this scene central to his conception, vividly demonstrating the experience of Deaf children in mainstreamed education forbidden from communicating in their native language, sign language. This change allowed the musical to show (rather than tell) the audience how the adults failed to educate the adolescents, beginning and ending with their own bodies. "For when sign language is repressed as a signifying practice, what is repressed is a connection with the body. The body of course will signify," contends Davis.<sup>112</sup> Staging the oppressive effects of mainstreaming only highlighted how this educational practice cuts the Deaf off from each other (and mainstreaming is still happening in 2018). *Big River* star Tyrone Giordano explains, "We're being isolated from one another in mainstreamed environments within our educational system."<sup>113</sup> Durant explains, "I went to . . . a general education school,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>112</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> Steketee, NEA Roundtable Report, 20.

where I was the only Deaf person. It was hard to socialize. We're such different cultures."<sup>114</sup>

*Spring Awakening* attempted to stage this oppressive power structure and show how it begins at home.

The musical opens with Wendla's plaintive song "Mama Who Bore Me," which alerts the audience that something is amiss in its fourth stanza. Wendla sings, "Mama who bore me. Mama who gave me/No way to handle things. Who made me so bad."<sup>115</sup> This is followed by a scene in which Wendla unsuccessfully implores her mother to tell her the truth about how babies are conceived. The scene shifts to the classroom, where the boys recite Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin by rote for their cruel teacher. Melchior is introduced as an intellectual rebel in "All That's Known," in which he questions everything he's been taught. Moritz is introduced by telling Melchior about a sexual dream he'd had the night before; all of the boys join in singing "The Bitch of Living" with their own tales of adolescent sexual angst. A brief conversation between the teachers reveals that there are too many boys in the class to fit into the upper grade during the next term and that Moritz is a prime candidate for the chopping block. The rest of the first act centers on the growing attraction between Melchior and Wendla, understood by him but crucially not by her. Wendla learns that a classmate regularly is beaten and raped by her father ("The Dark I Know Well") which causes her to wonder what it's like to be hit (reminder: this is a musical written by men). In the woods with Melchior, she confesses, "I've tried hitting myself—to find out how it feels, really, *inside*."<sup>116</sup> She asks Melchior to beat her with a switch, which he does,

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<sup>114</sup> HuffPost Live, "'Spring Awakening' Interview: Daniel Durant, Alex Boniello and D.J. Kurs."

<sup>115</sup> Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, *Spring Awakening* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), 15.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

but he takes the game too far and becomes aggressive, saying, “You bitch. I’ll beat the hell out of you.”<sup>117</sup> He throws her to the ground roughly, which scares both of them into sobs.

Meanwhile, it is revealed that Moritz has failed his exams and will not advance to the upper grade. At the end of “And Then There Were None,” he walks offstage carrying a gun, intent on ending his life. Act One ends as Melchior and Wendla lose their virginity, which is portrayed as consensual in the musical—another marked change from Wedekind. Sater explains, “In Wedekind’s script, Melchior ‘date-rapes’ Wendla. We wanted to see him make love to her. More: we wanted to show how this young man...first uncovers ineluctable sexual feelings; how he begins to own his sexual identity; how he helps Wendla awaken to hers.”<sup>118</sup>

In Act Two, the youths feel the consequences of their actions. Wendla foreshadows her pregnancy as a result of sex with Melchior (“The Guilty Ones”), though it is still unknown to her. Moritz shoots himself, ending his life. After his funeral, a document written by Melchior that graphically explains sex is discovered among Moritz’s things. This leads to Melchior’s expulsion from school (“Totally Fucked”). Wendla is examined by the doctor, who prescribes her medication to ease nausea from her pregnancy. Wendla finally learns what produces babies when her mother reveals her pregnancy to her. Melchior’s parents send him to a reformatory after learning he has impregnated Wendla. The scene shifts to Wendla’s mother procuring an abortion for her, also without her knowledge. She dies as a result of the procedure. In *Spring Awakening*, the children learn, but their parents never do. Melchior has planned to meet Wendla in the graveyard after he escapes the reformatory; instead he meets her fresh tombstone (“Those

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., x.

You've Known"). He is joined by the ghosts of Moritz and Wendla, whose deaths were ultimately caused by adults' failure to communicate. The musical ends with the cast reassembling onstage to sing "The Song of Purple Summer."

Sater notes that in this song, the actors appear not as their characters but as themselves as they "tell us of the promise ahead."<sup>119</sup> This gives the rather tragic plot a hopeful ending as well as leaving audiences wondering exactly what a purple summer might be—as an article in *Playbill* claims, "Steven Sater may have written a song called 'Purple Summer,' but that phrase doesn't mean anything to the Deaf community."<sup>120</sup> Arden says, "We had to actually translate, like, what does 'purple summer' mean. . . . How do we express that to a Deaf audience? So how do we not favor the hearing audience?"<sup>121</sup> Even the songs with more straightforward lyrics were challenges to stage in ASL. One way the production sought balance was to be conscious of giving strong visual cues to onstage action so Deaf spectators knew where to look. Lyrics from "Purple Summer" include: "The earth will wave with corn,/The days so wide, so warm,/And mares will neigh with/Stallions that they mate, foals they've borne."<sup>122</sup> Not only were these words undoubtedly tough to translate into German or Korean, they had to find their equivalent in ASL, a visually poetic language with its own syntax. We might usefully understand one difference between ASL and English to be the difference between simply telling and simultaneously showing and telling.

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<sup>119</sup> Sater, *A Purple Summer*, 85.

<sup>120</sup> Ruthie Fierberg, "After Endless Hours, Spencer Liff Formed a New Language—the Choreography of *Spring Awakening*," *Playbill*, December 29, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/after-endless-hours-spencer-liff-formed-a-new-language-u2014-the-choreography-of-spring-awakening-com-376781>.

<sup>121</sup> Seth Rudetsky, "Tony Nominated Director Michael Arden on Seth Speaks," YouTube video (09:57), uploaded June 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cirkgwS1XA8>

<sup>122</sup> Sater, *A Purple Summer*, 83.



The lyrics were completely different in ASL than in English while the scenes were translated in a more straightforward manner, though still not on a one-to-one basis. Sandra Mae Frank, who played Wendla, explains, “Instead of following exactly what the English words are, we go for more of the concepts and so once people see what the signs are and they’re hearing the words, even if they don’t understand each one right away, it all comes together and I feel like the ASL adds a whole strong layer that makes it oh so very visual.”<sup>123</sup> Manheim describes the mental shift she had to make as an actor fluent in ASL and English:

I know I’m saying one thing in English, and I’m watching Marlee sign something entirely different in sign language. It’s a similar story. I mean, the audience is getting the same understanding of the story, but the words are all inverted and turned around. So, it’s complicated for me because I see what she’s signing and I’m speaking something totally different.<sup>124</sup>

Manheim aptly describes the benefits and pitfalls of what is referred to as Simultaneous Communication (SimCom), in which the same person signs and speaks simultaneously. In theory, it does not intend to privilege one language over the other, but in practice this is not always the case. As described by Shannon Bradford, SimCom “may also engender a different misperception by hearing nonsigners: ASL may be read as an aesthetic stage language, akin to costuming or lighting rather than as a legitimate linguistic system.”<sup>125</sup> Bradford also notes that

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<sup>123</sup> Talks at Google, “Spring Awakening (Broadway revival cast) | Talks at Google.”

<sup>124</sup> Seth Rudetsky, “Camryn Manheim Talks Career & Spring Awakening on Seth Speaks,” YouTube video (20:25), uploaded March 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1qdMbdviTs>.

<sup>125</sup> Shannon Bradford, “The National Theatre of the Deaf: Artistic Freedom & Cultural Responsibility in the Use of American Sign Language,” in *Bodies in Commotion*, 90.

SimCom also risks giving hearing spectators the impression that ASL is “merely a gestural representation of English,” which is decidedly not the case.

The themes of Sater and Sheik’s musical mapped onto Arden’s concept for Deaf West. He explains his vision, noting the show depicts “a group of schoolchildren in 1890’s Germany all coming of age in a time and place when they’re not given all the information about what’s going on with their bodies. It’s really about two groups of people trying to communicate.”<sup>126</sup> This focus on the inability to communicate, which is central to the musical as written, became even more urgent as an ASL musical. Arden learned about the Milan conference while in rehearsals for the first production at Inner City Arts:

I thought, “Oh, we have actually a much more interesting and important story to tell in this.” And so it’s sort of been my fight in directing it to be able to tell that story that isn’t on the page of *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik. And so it’s just been clarity of, you know, casting and what’s happening on stage. Trying to bring light to this huge event and the fallout and aftermath of this awful, awful series of decisions that were made by people who had no right to make them. Which is exactly what’s happening in the play. These adults are choosing the fate for these children that they have no right to.<sup>127</sup>

Though the concept did not come to him until rehearsals, Arden quickly found novel ways to apply it to the musical without changing the narrative or spoken text, such as staging the

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<sup>126</sup> Deaf West Theatre, “Deaf West’s Spring Awakening: Casting Call.”

<sup>127</sup> Ken Davenport, “Michael Arden,” The Producer’s Perspective podcast, September 7, 2015, [https://www.theproducersperspective.com/my\\_weblog/2015/09/podcast-episode-transcript-36-michael-arden.html](https://www.theproducersperspective.com/my_weblog/2015/09/podcast-episode-transcript-36-michael-arden.html).

classroom scenes and not allowing Moritz to sign there.<sup>128</sup> Kurs noted the opportunity the production had to educate hearing audiences, “It takes place during a dark time in deaf history . . . in which hearing educators of the deaf got together and decided that deaf students should be taught orally and that sign language should be banned. It is the desire to normalize deaf people that proved destructive to the deaf individual then and still does today.”<sup>129</sup> Arden cites the fact that Deaf women were regularly sterilized at the time as a way to eradicate deafness in order to explain how deep the fear of deafness was.<sup>130</sup> Oralism was becoming prevalent at the same time that Wedekind was writing his play, which gave Arden’s concept a soupçon of historical authenticity. The production’s ASL masters also incorporated certain ASL signs from circa-1891 to further give a sense of historical accuracy to Deaf audiences.

Casting was the most visible way that Arden’s theme was embodied for audiences. Katie Boeck, who provided the vocals for Frank’s Wendla, explains how casting two of the three leading roles (Moritz and Wendla) with Deaf actors served “to amplify that theme of the difficulty in communicating.”<sup>131</sup> The fact that Wendla and Moritz are the two characters who die by the end of the musical placed the situation of Deaf children and adolescents into sharp relief to Melchior, who at least survives in the narrative. Arden also split the adult roles so that there were two Deaf adults and two hearing adults voicing for the Deaf actors, and all four played multiple roles. This allowed for Moritz and his father to each be played by a Deaf actor, depicting the relationship of a Deaf father and son for the first time on Broadway, and giving

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<sup>128</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, “DWSA’s ‘Broadway Backstory’ Episode.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Talks at Google, “Spring Awakening (Broadway revival cast) | Talks at Google.”

new resonance to the scene. Splitting roles between two actors also shed new light on the narrative. Austin Mackenzie, who played Melchior, notes, “the voice actors aren’t just voice actors, [they] are [their] own characters. People have equated them to the subconscious of the Deaf characters...I see them as guardian angels.”<sup>132</sup> Boeck also describes moments between her and Frank as guardian angel-like, and how “honoring her choices, allowing her to be free within the moment” influenced her voicing of Wendla.<sup>133</sup> She notes that many of the lyrics are in the past tense, which influenced how she sang and spoke the part of Wendla while Frank signed. This staging decision, central to all of Deaf West’s ASL musicals, does not simply separate body and voice but amplifies multiple aspects of these characters and aims to enrich the experience of both actors and audiences.

The sharing of roles made the production inherently more collaborative as the Deaf actor and the hearing actor had to find a common tempo for their movements both during songs and spoken/signed dialogue. This was in addition to the elaborate if necessary system of cueing used for the Deaf actors throughout the show, as they did not hear musical cues. Manheim explains, “Many of the actors are singing, dancing, signing, acting, and cueing Deaf actors simultaneously.”<sup>134</sup> These cues were everything from a lighting change to a tap on the shoulder, and they all made the labor of staging the musical much more complex. Choreographer Spencer Liff explains just how intricate the system of giving cues had to be:

Everything is actor-driven, is cue-driven on stage. So, if there is a phrase of music and a deaf actor is starting to sign, then a hearing actor standing next to them will fold their

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Seth Rudetsky, “Camryn Manheim Talks Career & Spring Awakening on Seth Speaks.”

arms, or unfold their arms, or shift their body weight, or simply look at the actor. . . . So there are thousands of these throughout the show.<sup>135</sup>

This process took its toll on the cast and creative team. During technical rehearsals, the frustration was exacerbated by the fact that many in the cast couldn't hear when the director told them to hold in place while the show was lit. As in the musical's narrative, the cast and crew were experiencing the perils of the inability to communicate with each other while they were staging the show. Arden relates how much attention this production demands, saying, "It just requires every single person involved, from the prop person to the dresser to every single actor to have 100% concentration at all times. Which is kind of exhausting mentally. I go home, and I feel like my mind is melting after each day. It's hard to concentrate both with your ears and your eyes and just your attention for so long."<sup>136</sup>

The challenges of staging an ASL musical were evident from the very first workshop, where Arden and Liff intended to stage five or six songs; Liff relates, "We got two done, which showed us how long everything was going to take."<sup>137</sup> That initial workshop experience led Deaf West to commit to staging a full production, but the labor only became tougher. Liff explains how frustrating and rewarding rehearsals were:

I came so close myself to throwing in the towel, because I was physically exhausted and it was launching back into this world that was so incredibly difficult to communicate. Our cast was brand new, we really didn't have any of our workshop cast. So you have the

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<sup>135</sup> Ken Davenport, "Spencer Liff," The Producer's Perspective podcast, September 28, 2015, [https://dev-the-producers-perspective.pantheonsite.io/my\\_weblog/2015/09/podcast-episode-39-transcript-spencer-liff.html](https://dev-the-producers-perspective.pantheonsite.io/my_weblog/2015/09/podcast-episode-39-transcript-spencer-liff.html).

<sup>136</sup> Ken Davenport, "Michael Arden."

<sup>137</sup> Ken Davenport, "Spencer Liff."

hearing kids on one side of the room and the deaf kids on the other side of the room and nobody was talking to each other. And there was so much tension in the room, and it was really, really scary for everybody. And we just kept pushing on and seeing those glimmers of hope rehearsing in this horrible church rec room in the Valley. And everybody was coming free, trucking it in there and spending these hours. And I think every single person had the same thought, that they wanted to quit because it was really, really hard, but at the same time you couldn't stop it. It had us. So that went on for like two months. It was the longest rehearsal process ever. . . . You can't use counts. You can't rely on musicality. Everything had to be visual. And how do you make two and a half hours out of sign language not look like two and a half hours of standing there signing?<sup>138</sup>

The challenges turned into opportunities to tell the story, and to layer Deaf history onto the existing narrative. The team was always focused on making sure both ASL and English were equally valued, while ensuring that this made sense theatrically as well. Arden details the process:

If there are two deaf characters in a scene together it's silent. Because in the minds of those two characters, there wouldn't be an audible language. And if there are two hearing characters speaking to each other, we don't sign those scenes. Those are projected in the same way that the silent scenes are projected. So, at all times trying to just honor both history and truth always sort of brings us to a better idea.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ken Davenport, "Michael Arden."

Press attention focused on the still-remarkable feat of staging an ASL musical, but also positioned the labor of the hearing creative team as what was truly extraordinary. Arden and Liff often spoke about how hard their respective tasks were; the press framed the production as extra labor for the hearing people involved, and the opportunity of a lifetime for the Deaf. To an extent, this framing inadvertently perpetuated the idea that extra labor is required for ASL theatre, which in turn sends signals to producers and non-profit theatres that it will be too hard or too expensive for them to attempt. Despite how tiring the work was, the creative team was sure to highlight how it was worthy. Liff relays just how unexpected the success of their production was by noting its fairy tale-like nature for the cast: “To watch their Cinderella story from these hodgepodge kids who showed up in L.A. to do a show for 20 dollars a week, and then a year later they’re on production contracts making Broadway debuts — we had 25 Broadway debuts on this show!”<sup>140</sup>

### **“Deaf Actors in a Musical?”: Critical Reception**

*Spring Awakening*’s reviews were positive-to-mixed. Charles Isherwood’s review in the *New York Times* sought to assuage readers’ anxieties about the production in its second paragraph:

Deaf actors in a musical? The prospect sounds challenging, to performers and audiences alike. But you will be surprised at how readily you can assimilate the novelties involved, and soon find yourself pleasurably immersed not in a

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<sup>140</sup> Ruthie Fierberg, “After Endless Hours, Spencer Liff Formed a New Language—the Choreography of *Spring Awakening*,” *Playbill*, December 29, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/after-endless-hours-spencer-liff-formed-a-new-language-u2014-the-choreography-of-spring-awakening-com-376781>.

worthy, let's-pat-ourselves-on-the-back experience, but simply in a first-rate production of a transporting musical.<sup>141</sup>

Isherwood's framing of assimilation as something that happens to the audience here is noteworthy, because in this production the musical became about what happens when the Deaf are forced to assimilate to the mainstream. His next sentence, meant as praise, recalls the criticism of the original production of *La Cage aux Folles*, in that the audience is damned with faint praise for wanting to pat themselves on the back simply for being open-minded enough to attend the musical. Isherwood's rhetoric suggests that critics and audiences alike approached *Spring Awakening* with skepticism, as much about the ability of the actors as their own ability to deal with the defamiliarization posed by the staging. He ultimately gave the production a rave, concluding, "Deaf actors may not have the same tools that most actors do, but the gifted men and women in this splendid production achieve the same ideal ends, lighting up the lives of their characters from within, even when the light only reveals the darkness of their confusion, frustration and despair."

Other critics were not as taken by the show. David Rooney of the *Hollywood Reporter* noted, "There's beauty in the descriptive power of ASL translations . . . and delicacy in the way the visual language conveys such things as tactile sensation or heartbeats. But more often, sad to say, it proves a distraction here, and the double casting dilutes the characters' emotional intensity, creating a disconnect."<sup>142</sup> Rooney countered Isherwood's claim about the production's fitness for Broadway, claiming that "being the rare musical rendered entirely accessible to deaf

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<sup>141</sup> Charles Isherwood, review of *Spring Awakening*, *New York Times*, September 27, 2015.

<sup>142</sup> David Rooney, review of *Spring Awakening*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 27, 2015.



theatergoers gives it considerable value. But while the intent merits applause, the execution is not sufficiently fresh or Broadway-caliber to justify the swift return.”

Jesse Green detailed the staging’s social impact in his *New York* magazine review:

As color-blind casting begins to become established practice in the professional theater, this production promotes a vision of community that is even broader, not just onstage, where the cast includes Ali Stroker, a terrific performer who uses a wheelchair, but in the audience. (Deaf theatergoers are immediately evident after every number, when their hands rise and vibrate, like a grove of aspens.) As a hearing person, I was strangely moved by the notion that some of what was going on was not meant for nor understandable by me, which seemed only fair.<sup>143</sup>

Among mainstream critics, these approaches remained the normative ones—it either worked or did not, depending upon whether the critic bought in to both Arden’s concept for the show and Deaf West’s casting practice of sharing roles.

Notable among critics was the tendency to conflate ASL with choreography. Matt Windman of *am New York* explained that the ASL “functions as a kind of gestural choreography.”<sup>144</sup> It’s hard to totally fault critics for what might be seen as conflating ASL with choreography, given that *Spring Awakening*’s choreography by Bill T. Jones in its first Broadway outing relied on gesture to an extent rarely seen on Broadway since Agnes de Mille’s heyday in the 1940s. Isherwood notes, “In fact, the use of sign language, when it is entwined with the high-energy choreography by Spencer Liff, is intriguingly reminiscent of Bill T. Jones’s

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<sup>143</sup> Jesse Green, review of *Spring Awakening*, *New York*, September 27, 2015.

<sup>144</sup> Matt Windman, review of *Spring Awakening*, *am New York*, September 27, 2015.

superb work the first time around.”<sup>145</sup> While gesture may be part of choreography, it is not in and of itself choreographic. Like ASL and other sign languages, choreography and gesture are visual systems of communication but not codified languages, and to conflate them risks masking the power dynamics inherent in language. Additionally, ASL communicates specific meanings while choreography (and gesture in choreography) is often abstract, like music itself. An ASL musical invites the comparison to choreography because signing functions like gesture during musical numbers for those spectators not fluent in ASL—intellectually they may recognize that actors are signing, which signifies as “dance” to musical theatre audiences because it is performed to music. Staging ASL musically enhances its visual appeal as a sensual performative language and reorients the frontal nature of signed communication: it is customary to face each other when signing in order to see the conversation. Davis memorably describes signing as “conversation . . . received through the eye and generated by the hand,” which in turn makes it seem less like language to some, and more like dance.<sup>146</sup>

Signing is not just how Deaf actors “speak,” it is also how they “sing,” giving ASL a dual function in musicals. As Peter Debruge explained in *Variety*, “Deaf performers ‘sing’ via sign language, their graceful hand movements (choreographed by Spencer Liff) a natural extension of Bill T. Jones’ original choreography.”<sup>147</sup> In this way, we might reconsider how signing forces reconsideration into the musical theatre adage that characters break into song when they can no longer speak their emotions, and they dance when they can no longer sing about them. Signing in ASL musicals proves an effective means of singing and dancing at once, and to be sure, the

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<sup>145</sup> Isherwood, review, September 27, 2015.

<sup>146</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 103.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Debruge, review of *Spring Awakening*, *Variety*, September 27, 2015.

production needed to actually choreograph ASL during the songs as it had to be timed to music that many of the cast could not hear. Deaf West employed a Deaf associate choreographer in order to help choreographer Liff incorporate ASL into the musical numbers. According to ASL master Shoshannah Stern, “The big challenge is that A.S.L. is not a very abstract language—it’s more concrete, it’s visual and spatial.”<sup>148</sup> The inherent tension between choreography, dance, and ASL’s respective modes of communication ensured that the musical numbers attempted to simultaneously reach both hearing and Deaf spectators.

Hearing critics revealed their assumptions that this *was* the most accessible musical to Deaf audiences. Deaf spectators’ responses, however, belie these assumptions. Deaf and hard-of-hearing spectators also had mixed reactions to the musical. Though many noted the power of seeing themselves represented in a Broadway musical, not all thought that the production was entirely successful in its approach to accessibility. In the *Atlantic*, Rachel Kolb explained that the significance of this representation extended beyond just the Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities:

To say, then, that *Spring Awakening* dazzles mainstream audiences with its staging of that astounding novelty, a deaf musical, might be to overlook the full significance of this show. With every production element, *Spring Awakening* prompts audiences to consider fundamental questions about the nature of full inclusion and communication. Without being remotely voyeuristic, it invites viewers to engage with the signs and choreography

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<sup>148</sup> Michael Paulson, “Lights, Gestures, Action! How to Stage a Broadway Musical with Deaf Actors,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2015.

of its deaf and hearing actors, without any further explanation. Whether deaf or hearing, signing or speaking (or singing), the cast appear to the audience simply as individuals.<sup>149</sup> Kolb describes how the sharing of the roles between Deaf and hearing actors “feels profoundly personal. As a deaf individual, I have rarely encountered performance spaces that are neither deaf nor hearing, but open to both. My prior experiences of the theater, when they have been accessible at all, have been mediated by an ASL interpreter.”

On the other hand, the British newspaper *The Guardian* brought five Deaf New Yorkers and one ASL-English interpreter to see the production and gauge their reaction; several pointed out how the production’s use of SimCom was actually a failure of accessibility. Max Graham-Putter explains, “I definitely struggled to understand some of the sim-com and found myself wishing that the hearing actors had Deaf shadows the same way the Deaf actors had hearing shadows. In this way, it was very clear that the play was designed for a hearing audience with a secondary intention of being accessible to the Deaf.”<sup>150</sup> The use of SimCom, then, ultimately admitted for whom the musical was mostly intended as well as how this reinforced the privileging of hearing audience members.

SimCom is not considered effective in the ASL/Deaf community, in part because it is seen as privileging English due to the fact that speaking renders the speaker’s face unavailable for the nonverbal cues that are an integral part of ASL communication. Despite some reservations about how the musical was realized for Deaf spectators, all of those brought to the show by the *Guardian* concluded that it was worth it just to see such an attempt at inclusivity.

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<sup>149</sup> Rachel Kolb, “*Spring Awakening* and the Power of Inclusive Art,” *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Kayla Epstein and Alex Needham, “*Spring Awakening* on Broadway: Deaf Viewers Give Their Verdict,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2015.

*Spring Awakening* was the first time many Deaf audience members attended a show on Broadway outside of an ASL-interpreted performance. Aleksandr Rozentsvit wrote a letter to *Playbill* describing his experience at the show. He notes the contact zone created by the production, “I saw a mix of Deaf and hearing patrons that night, which was cool to see. Usually, I’m surrounded by hearing people in shows, or Deaf people at interpreted plays.”<sup>151</sup> In a special article for the *Tallahassee Democrat*, Lee Kitchen described the show as “a surround-sound-visual sensation for the hard-of-hearing.”<sup>152</sup>

*DeafDigest*, a weekly blog, noted, “The buzzword on Broadway right now is diversity. As part of the diversity theme, Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* play has been mentioned. The question behind this diversity buzzword is—will it attract new audiences? *DeafDigest* hopes it will.”<sup>153</sup> *Deaf News Today* aggregated posts from mainstream media about the show but published no articles of its own about the show.<sup>154</sup> The kind of attention paid to the musical by the mainstream press indicates a general lack of familiarity with ASL and Deaf theatre, which in turn highlights the dominance of traditional hearing theatre in the US. The lack of sustained attention paid by the few Deaf media outlets, showed some indifference to the project of an ASL musical. However, the production was by some measure critic-proof, as it was always intended to be a limited run on Broadway, opening in September 2015 and running through January 2016.

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<sup>151</sup> Aleksandr Rozentsvit, “How Broadway’s New *Spring Awakening* Is Resonating for a Deaf Theatre Lover,” *Playbill*, December 16, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/how-broadways-new-spring-awakening-is-resonating-for-a-deaf-theatre-lover-com-375499>.

<sup>152</sup> Lee Kitchen, “‘Spring Awakening’ from a Hard-of-Hearing Point of View,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, January 16, 2016.

<sup>153</sup> “DeafDigest Mid-Week edition, October 23, 2015,” *DeafDigest* (blog), published October 23, 2015, <http://deafdigest.net/mid-week-news/20151023/>.

<sup>154</sup> Deaf News Today (blog), accessed October 15, 2018, <https://deafnewstoday.blogspot.com/search?q=spring+awakening>.

## “Money Is Their Idol”

Even though *Big River* had been a critical success during its limited run at the non-profit Roundabout Theatre Company, bringing *Spring Awakening* to the stage at all, let alone Broadway, was a financial risk at every step, from its 99-seat black box production all the way to Broadway. Musicals are expensive. Despite some very positive reviews, including Isherwood’s in the all-important *New York Times*, *Spring Awakening* never really found its footing at the box office and did not repay its \$4.5 million investment. According to financial figures reported by *Playbill*, the production’s potential gross was \$1,003,600 for a regular 8-show week. The box office never cleared the \$700K mark, with most weeks bringing in less than \$500K.<sup>155</sup> An announced national tour never materialized, a casualty of the show’s poor financial performance on Broadway.

Concerns over money trailed Deaf West’s *Spring Awakening* from its origins to its post-Broadway life: the production initially relied on crowdfunding to get it off the ground and, later, to secure a spot on the Tony Awards broadcast. This fact reflects the underinvestment in ASL theatre; the production made it as far as it did as the result of community support. Davenport “had to raise \$4.5 million in 86 days” to produce the show on Broadway.<sup>156</sup> However, the crowdfunding began with a Kickstarter campaign for the initial production in Los Angeles at the 99-seat theatre. This campaign raised \$30,706 from 285 backers, \$5,706 more than their goal.<sup>157</sup> The campaign’s webpage explains the reasons for requesting the funds:

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<sup>155</sup> *Spring Awakening* Grosses, *Playbill*, <http://www.playbill.com/production/gross?production=00000150-aea8-d936-a7fd-cefc72fb0000>.

<sup>156</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, “DWSA’s ‘Broadway Backstory’ Episode,”.

<sup>157</sup> “Deaf West Theatre presents Spring Awakening,” Kickstarter, published July 21, 2014, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1832685006/deaf-west-theatre-presents-spring-awakening>.

We're committed to making this show a sensory and visual experience, and Brent Stewart, our Projection Designer, has developed amazing animated background projections that will enhance the beauty of the story. Any additional funds realized past our goal will go towards enhancing the visual qualities of the production and help us ensure the standard that Deaf West Theatre productions have become known for.<sup>158</sup>

Original *Spring Awakening* cast members Jonathan Groff and Skylar Astin were recruited to star in the video fundraising plea on Kickstarter alongside Arden. *Spring Awakening* thus used video to find not just its cast but its funding too. In the video, ASL Master Stern explains that the production is “about what we don’t talk about when we’re talking,” while Kurs promises “this production is going to be the perfect marriage of form and content.” Arden promises that those who “help out” will “get in first to see the show” in one of the 99 seats available per performance for the first run. Selling access here became yet another way of raising the funding.

The Broadway production closed a few months before the Tony Award nominations were announced. It was nominated for Best Revival of a Musical, guaranteeing it a coveted spot on the Tony telecast if the associated costs of performing were covered. Kickstarter had worked previously, and Deaf West turned to it again, hoping to raise \$200,000:

Since our limited run ended in January, we don’t have the funds to pay all the expenses associated with the performance. We need to fly our cast back to New York, we have to get the costumes and instruments and props out of storage, we have to pay for rehearsal space since we don’t have a theatre, etc. And then there’s the actual expense of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

performing on the broadcast! So we're going back to our roots and raising money on Kickstarter just like we did for our first production in that 99 seat theatre in LA on Skid Row.<sup>159</sup>

Davenport and the other Broadway producers stood to lose money by putting the production on the Tony telecast, because as noted there was no national tour of the production to recoup the investor's money and the production had not generated surplus income to pay for such a performance. However, Deaf West knew that a performance on the Tony Awards would matter more than money. As Broadway personality Seth Rudetsky said to Arden in an interview, "This is the kind of thing where I know Deaf people for years will go, 'Oh my God, I remember seeing it on the Tony Awards and it changed my whole life.'"<sup>160</sup> In the video for this fundraiser, Arden says, "It's a dream of so many of ours to get to show what we do and the power of Deaf West's special work to a nation and beyond." A few of the Deaf cast members appear in the video as well signing together, "There's only one night a year that theater gets this major worldwide platform. Our performance will be an undeniable statement to the world that theater is for everyone, no matter who you are, and is inclusive." In return for donating, one could receive a mention on social media or, for \$1000, "an Interpreting/Translation Mentoring Session OR Learn Part of the Spring Awakening Translation Session with one of our ASL Masters and swing Elizabeth Greene (in person in LA or via Skype)!" A donation of \$8500 would get you lunch with Marlee Matlin, while \$10,000 would grant access to the *Spring Awakening* Tony Awards party in New York.

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<sup>159</sup> "Deaf West Theatre's Spring Awakening Tony Performance," Kickstarter, published May 23, 2016, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1832685006/deaf-west-theatres-spring-awakening-tony-performan>.

<sup>160</sup> Seth Rudetsky, "Tony Nominated Director Michael Arden on Seth Speaks."



Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* was able to perform on the Tony telecast after \$211,634 was raised from 1,769 backers (for perspective, the production's Broadway home, the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, only holds 1,069 audience members). In a move that few saw coming, the ASL lyrics, not the English ones, for "The Bitch of Living" were censored by CBS. This was quite a shift from the original production's Tony performance, where the lyrics of this song were censored.<sup>161</sup> Mientus told *Playbill*, "the signs were a little too hot for TV, so we had to change some of the sign language."<sup>162</sup> *Spring Awakening* has almost never failed to attract some measure of controversy or censorship ever since Wedekind wrote his play in 1891. That the ASL was censored by CBS was yet more evidence that the kind of paternalism the musical's narrative rails against was still alive and thriving, in addition to revealing an oralist bias—the censoring of the signing gave cover for the previously-censored lyrics.

The production lost the award to the revival of *The Color Purple*. Despite the loss, the visibility of performing on the Tony Awards allowed the production to reach more people in one night than it did during all of its runs combined. This performance undoubtedly did matter because, as Amy Cook notes, "how we tell stories changes how we see ourselves."<sup>163</sup> This performance alone certainly reached many who were not able to travel to New York or Los Angeles to see the production. Durant recalls, "My dream was to become an actor and to tour but I never thought of Broadway. I never thought that was even possible."<sup>164</sup> Thanks to Durant and

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<sup>161</sup> Michael Gioia, "ASL for *Spring Awakening* Tony Performance Was Censored By CBS," *Playbill*, June 12, 2016, <http://www.playbill.com/article/asl-for-spring-awakening-tony-performance-was-censored-by-cbs>.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Amy Cook, *Building Character: The Art and Science of Casting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 136.

<sup>164</sup> HuffPost Live, "'Spring Awakening' Interview: Daniel Durant, Alex Boniello and D.J. Kurs."

*Spring Awakening*, now others know what is possible for them, too. Liff relates seeing a woman in a wheelchair in line waiting for an audition at Pearl Studios. She told him, “I saw *Spring Awakening* and for obvious reasons I was incredibly inspired . . . and I’m able to come to these auditions now and put myself in positions [where the casting breakdown] doesn’t specify an actress in a chair.”<sup>165</sup> Seeing the show allowed this young woman to recast her idea of what is possible for her, embodying Cook’s notion that “casting might provide a way of refusing the roles we are given, the stories we are told. Can casting counter our way of thinking?”<sup>166</sup>

Though Deaf West’s two productions each played short runs on Broadway (just 253 performances, including previews, for both productions combined), their impact reverberates far from New York City, even as Broadway and other institutional theatres across the country largely continue to only pay lip service to Deaf and disabled actors, playwrights, and other theatre-makers. Through their inclusion on Broadway, *Spring Awakening* and *Big River* raised awareness about the exclusion of Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and disabled performers from the professional theatre; the presence of these performers in these productions highlighted their absence elsewhere. These productions also vibrantly demonstrated not only the social but the emotional and theatrical power of ASL musicals. *Spring Awakening* garnered so much notice that the highest levels of the federal government paid attention. The Obama administration invited the cast to perform at the White House in November 2015 as part of an event called “Americans with Disabilities and the Arts: A Celebration of Diversity and Inclusion.” This invitation was in some ways more profound than the Tony Awards performance because it

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<sup>165</sup> DWSA, [CC] Videos, “DWSA’s ‘Broadway Backstory’ Episode.”

<sup>166</sup> Cook, *Building Character*, 135.

countered more than a century's worth of social stigma and exclusion from work and showed that Deaf and disabled people belong not just on Broadway but at the White House, recognized as full citizens who contribute to the nation.

The National Endowment for the Arts held a roundtable entitled "Creating Opportunities for Deaf Theater Artists" in January 2016, and as the title suggests, the NEA panel discussed inclusive ways to build upon *Spring Awakening*'s success and visibility. The NEA's report on their roundtable include the striking fact that "in the decade since *Big River*, no Deaf actors had appeared on Broadway until the *Spring Awakening* production."<sup>167</sup> Not surprisingly, the roundtable revealed how most decisions in theatres of all sizes, from a scrappy regional theatre like Deaf West to commercial Broadway productions, are determined by financial constraints. Various participants voiced concerns about theatres not being able or willing to spend the extra time and money to make theatres accessible or accommodating to the Deaf, on-, off-, and back-stage. *Spring Awakening* producer Ken Davenport chastised his fellow hearing theatre producers:

It's more the attitude towards it than the money itself. I don't hear the same resistance when importing a play from the UK and we have all British actors and they require housing and transportation. The amount of money that costs, versus interpreters, or ASL masters, or any of the additional staff, required so much less. It's about attitudes within the hearing culture and my fellow producers.<sup>168</sup>

It is not just traditional theatres that have funding issues of course: when the United States Department of Education cut its funding for Deaf theatre in 2004, the National Endowment for

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<sup>167</sup> Steketee, NEA Roundtable Report, 7.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 12.

the Arts stepped in to help fund Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*.<sup>169</sup> The government effectively swapped its funding of ASL and Deaf theatre from educational to artistic and aesthetic, which meant that as arts funding is cut, so is arts programming. Organizations like Deaf West depend upon this funding for their very existence.

Deaf West is a company without a permanent home despite all of its increasing visibility after having been on Broadway. When the production started gathering steam, *Playbill* reported, "Having given up its administrative offices, performance and rehearsal space several years ago and seen much of its federal funding dry up, Deaf West is essentially an itinerant company. And now they're producing their largest endeavor, unaided."<sup>170</sup> Deaf West's last production closed in December 2017 and no plans for future productions have been announced as of late 2018. In fact, the company was dark during all of 2018 despite the message on the company's homepage: "We're working on new productions for 2018 and beyond." After *Spring Awakening*, Kurs explained, "It made such an event, you couldn't ask for more. And now we're wondering what we can do next. What's the next thing we're going to build on. We don't want to lose the momentum."<sup>171</sup> His statement now reads as poignant given the company's present state, but it also indicates how the company was unprepared to capitalize on its success.

However, ASL and Deaf theatre do not begin and end with Deaf West. The onus for the inclusion of Deaf artists and artists with disabilities should not fall solely upon companies with missions specific to those constituencies. Jim Nicola, artistic director of New York Theatre

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>170</sup> Evan Henerson, "'The Word of Your Body' is Reborn in Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*," *Playbill*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.playbill.com/article/the-word-of-your-body-is-reborn-in-deaf-west-s-spring-awakening-com-329874>.

<sup>171</sup> HuffPost Live, "'Spring Awakening' Interview: Daniel Durant, Alex Boniello and D.J. Kurs."

Workshop notes, “we have to remove the sense that this is an extra burden. This is actually capital that we need to invest in to have a fairer art form.”<sup>172</sup> Investing in this capital within the theatre begins with including Deaf and disabled artists at all stages of production, from literary management to writing to casting in addition to related staff positions supporting the onstage work. La Jolla Playhouse’s resident dramaturg Shirley Fishman explains, “It’s as simple as going to your casting director and saying: I would like to have disabled or Deaf artists come in for every show in the season.”<sup>173</sup> However, it is rarely so simple in the commercial theatre: Davenport noted that from his perspective, “A Broadway producer specifically cares about what’s great, and then what’s going to sell tickets, to be perfectly honest. The more we inspire Deaf artists to become playwrights, or Deaf playwrights to produce more work, the more we increase the chance of this culture being more exposed to mainstream America.”<sup>174</sup> In Davenport’s formulation, the burden falls not on “mainstream America” but on Deaf artists to “produce more work” rather than the barriers keeping Deaf artists on the margins.

It is not only Deaf artists that face barriers to inclusion in the theatre: Deaf audiences too often do not feel welcome in the theatre. Roundabout Theatre Company’s Executive Director Julia Levy says, “We should have captioning or some other system that allows if you are hard-of-hearing or if you are deaf to come to our theaters. If a play is written and nobody comes, or your play’s on stage and nobody comes, did the play happen? We need audiences.”<sup>175</sup> Even after producing Deaf West’s maiden outing on Broadway, Roundabout has not fundamentally

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<sup>172</sup> Steketee, NEA Roundtable Report, 13.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 17.

changed—and for that matter, *Spring Awakening* did not visibly change Broadway in the short term. Most of the institutional theatres brought together by the NEA roundtable, too, have not yet followed through on their own suggestions. Sign-language interpreted performances (SLIPs) remain the norm.

SLIPs are ultimately failures “on three levels: failure to appropriately capitalize the theatrical space; failure to conceptualize the interpreter as performer; and failure to create a meaningful translation,” according to Michael Richardson.<sup>176</sup> SLIPs fail spectators in terms of performance and translation, as the interpreters typically perform several roles at once and are also responsible for translating the spoken dialogue into ASL. Richardson reveals that the failure is tied to casting: “In practice, rarely is there any kind of casting process; one interpreter is typically expected to represent the multiple characters onstage, and the determination of who will work on a particular show is often made only on the basis of interpreter availability.”<sup>177</sup> In short, SLIPs are an after-thought constrained by finances and lack of imagination on the part of theatres. These failures contribute to a less-than-satisfying experience for the Deaf spectator, and ultimately lead to less attendance at the theatre. Richardson posits that the predominance of SLIPs is “easily seen as merely a symbolic fulfillment of the access and diversity agenda.”<sup>178</sup> Arden hoped that his production would challenge the prevalent ideology of American theatre when it comes to different abilities:

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<sup>176</sup> Michael Richardson, “The Sign Language Interpreted Performance: A Failure of Access Provision for Deaf Spectators,” *Theatre Topics* 28, no. 1 (March 2018), 63.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

I hope that our production gave both audiences and theatre makers and producers an opportunity to see how exciting performers with different abilities can be. I think there's so many ways to tell stories and having deaf actors and hard-of-hearing actors and actors in wheelchairs, these things just don't happen . . . I hope it served as an enlightening experience, to think, "Hey, why can't I hire a Deaf actor for this role? Maybe there's something, maybe I'll get something more out of it because of that." And an opportunity for audiences to come and enjoy theatre in their own language and to not feel like they had to come to just the one signed performance where they get to look to the side of the stage but miss what's happening on the stage.<sup>179</sup>

Despite the artistic and social successes of *Spring Awakening*, not much has changed. A few of the actors from the cast have continued to work, but is this alone a measure of progress? Lipari suggests that the barriers to more Deaf and disabled actors begin when hearing people let their good intentions remain intentions rather than actions:

I find that was I very disappointed with myself that I didn't learn sign while I was with these actors. I didn't have time before. I just didn't have enough time, but I'm so mad that I didn't do it, because you get in this room with these brilliant people and you want to converse, and you feel almost ignorant. . . . It would help people to know how people with disabilities. . . . I think people are scared. I think they're scared to work with deaf actors.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, "DWSA's 'Broadway Backstory' Episode."

<sup>180</sup> Lipari, discussion.

Lipari's experience is not unique, and her candid admission explains why Deafness and disability continue to function as aesthetic and pedagogic experiences in the theatre: because the majority of the population has not bothered to learn sign language, nor do they regularly encounter Deaf and/or disability culture. Notwithstanding her lack of ability to sign, Lipari feels *Spring Awakening* "will be probably the highlight of my career. I'm sure I could even work another 25 years, and nothing will touch *Spring Awakening*."<sup>181</sup> Other members of the production echoed Lipari's feelings, noting that the production had something magical about it. Kurs looked back with pride on the production a year after it closed:

Talking about it a year later, we can only view it from the rearview mirror, the achievement of our production feels even more exceptional in the age of Trump. It is magical when deaf and hearing artists cross cultural and linguistic boundaries to work together in the purpose of creating art and even more so when hearing and deaf audience members sit together to enjoy the same show. . . . I'm very proud of the outsized impact that our little theatre company has created.<sup>182</sup>

The historic nature of *Spring Awakening* was overshadowed by *Hamilton*, which opened later the same season. These productions, along with *Waitress* (2016) shared Actors' Equity's Extraordinary Excellence in Diversity on Broadway Award for the 2015-2016 season.<sup>183</sup> Both productions helped make that Broadway season the most truly diverse in history, in that diversity on Broadway was finally understood in terms other than black and white. Both productions also

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> DWSA [CC] Videos, "DWSA's 'Broadway Backstory' Episode."

<sup>183</sup> Adam Hetrick, "*Hamilton*, *Waitress* and *Spring Awakening* Win Equity's Diversity Award, *Playbill*, July 29, 2016, [www.playbill.com/article/hamilton-waitress-and-spring-awakening-win-equitys-diversity-award](http://www.playbill.com/article/hamilton-waitress-and-spring-awakening-win-equitys-diversity-award).



notably recast protagonists in identities not initially assigned to them: ethnically and racially in *Hamilton* and as Deaf and/or disabled in *Spring Awakening*. Yet Broadway audiences supported the recasting of white historical figures with actors of color, while they tended to stay away from the recasting of fictional characters with actors of differing abilities. *Spring Awakening*'s power was produced by this act of recasting and adding Deafness to the narrative. The production embodied how, as Siebers elucidates, "Disability marks the last frontier of unquestioned inferiority because the preference for able-bodiedness makes it extremely difficult to embrace disabled people and to recognize their unnecessary and violent exclusion from society."<sup>184</sup> Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* shows audiences that they have much to gain by rethinking of disability and deafness not in terms of lack of but expansion of abilities.

We must also consider the movement of Deaf West's musicals to Broadway from what might be considered the margins of American theatre to its commercial center on Broadway as a kind of mainstreaming itself, albeit mainstreaming with a crucial difference: it was not the Deaf or disabled being forced to assimilate to the mainstream in this case, but the mainstream being invited to assimilate to embodied difference. That *Big River* moved from a 65-seat space in North Hollywood to Broadway while *Spring Awakening* began in a 99-seat black box space also reveals something about the performative power of musicals themselves as sites of inclusion and difference. Deaf West had produced dozens of plays, yet only its musicals made the journey from Los Angeles to Broadway, giving voice to the presence of the Deaf and people with disabilities, and re-sounding musicals along the way.

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<sup>184</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 6.

## Conclusion: Recasting Broadway

This dissertation has surveyed the boundaries of inclusion in landmark Broadway musicals since *A Chorus Line* (1975). Each of the musicals studied has also been revived on Broadway (except *Hairspray*, which was performed live on television), demonstrating how Broadway has and has not evolved when it comes to casting non-conforming, non-normative, and stigmatized bodies. My research has focused on identities historically denied the chance to play themselves onstage as well as the resultant ambivalence with which musicals employ these non-conforming bodies during and after the casting process. Power circulates through casting because of theatre's insistent materiality and the co-presence of spectators and actors. Visibility and inclusion are intimately bound to the politics of identity in casting.

It appears that Broadway is inching toward more open casting in musicals like *Head Over Heels*, which starred a fat woman as the romantic lead and featured a transgender actor in a role not written as transgender (the understudy was Sharon Brown, a former Broadway Effie in *Dreamgirls*), and the 2019 revival of *Oklahoma!*, featuring Ali Stroker as Ado Annie. Despite this move toward more-inclusive casting, the problematic conceit of the "Broadway Body" continues to hold sway. I recently asked my students what the most urgent conversation is that we should have about musicals and identity; one responded, "Despite being progressive and outwardly political, musical theater has a long way to go before it can really be considered 'inclusive' and 'diverse.'" She went on to describe how "the overall 'Broadway body,' or the typical look you are supposed to have in order to make it" impacts her: "I am constantly being

shoved into a mold by other people, despite that mold not staying true to who I am.”<sup>1</sup> The idea of the “Broadway Body” has thus ingrained itself into aspiring performers’ conceptions of where they might fit into the professional theatre based on the appearance of their body.

Though each musical examined in this dissertation represents a breakthrough in some way, the identities staged in them have not necessarily become regular Broadway presences as a result. Though musicals have become demonstrably more welcoming to gay men (and, increasingly, lesbians) during the time span of this dissertation, they have been less so to actors who are Deaf, disabled, fat, or mobility-impaired apart from the examples discussed here. This shift toward more inclusive LGBT representation, and halting progress with the other identities, mirrors societal shifts measured in a 2019 study that tracked these changes from 2004-2016. This study on bias and attitude change revealed “a rapid 49% decrease in explicit bias towards gay and lesbian individuals,” according to psychological scientist Tessa E. S. Charlesworth.<sup>2</sup> Charlesworth notes, “disability and body weight attitudes haven’t changed; actually, body weight attitudes even showed a slight tendency that they’re becoming worse over time.”<sup>3</sup> Positive representation could make a difference for attitudes around size and ability—as noted in Chapter 3, the sitcom *Will & Grace*’s effect was profound on the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. Casting contains the potential to destigmatize non-conforming and non-normative bodies by breaking concepts of type. Casting is power made visible; by adhering to a hegemonic set of

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa Motherway, communication with author, January 24, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> “Implicit Attitudes Can Change Over the Long Term,” Association for Psychological Science, published January 7, 2019), <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/implicit-attitudes-long-term-change.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Carey Goldberg, “Study: Bias Drops Dramatically for Sexual Orientation and Race—But Not Weight,” *WBUR* (blog), January 11, 2019, [https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2019/01/11/implicit-bias-gay-black-weight?fbclid=IwAR2Id1to\\_i35P4iz7PRVFhD1xsqPUuDTOnX8L\\_Mj6BwQN\\_Pi6kdfhLeDvgU](https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2019/01/11/implicit-bias-gay-black-weight?fbclid=IwAR2Id1to_i35P4iz7PRVFhD1xsqPUuDTOnX8L_Mj6BwQN_Pi6kdfhLeDvgU).

bodily norms, casting reveals how the disciplining of bodies reifies not just aesthetic stances but systemic structures of oppression.

Each of the fields of embodiment applied in the case studies emerged from social movements aiming to fight back against these structures of oppression. Their related academic fields emerged only after each movement had existed for at least a decade. Because these movements are all still active in one form or another, the terminology used to discuss identity is always shifting and always contested. For instance, what terms were in use at the time of *Dreamgirls*' opening? Or to discuss homosexuality throughout the run of *La Cage* in the 1980s? These shifts and contestations within movements admit the reality that unitary social movements do not exist; factions always co-exist and agitate each other as they produce change within and among movements. Conversely, the embodied identities studied in this dissertation also cannot be considered unitary or stable but must be understood and historicized relative to their context.

As the embodied identities studied in this dissertation exist on a spectrum from conforming to non-conforming, so too, do their associated social movements exist on a spectrum from assimilation to liberation. Performance destabilizes attempts to pin down a musical, a role, or a performance on a binary understanding of the terms on this spectrum—like identity itself, performance shifts constantly. We might find liberation in certain moments of musicals at the same time that the narrative of the musical invests in assimilation. The performance of identity is always both a *being* and a *doing*. Our bodies are who we are and also what we do with them—how they perform. Casting's explicit stakes in the performance of identity make it the ideal site to study bodies that refuse conformity. Recasting Broadway, as each of the musicals studied here did, offers the potential to cast off ideas about bodies regulating who gets to play whom.

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