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Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical (review)

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trasts “the flatness of the visible” (174) with the uniqueness of the present stage moment; he convincingly explores similarities between Wild West Shows and tele-icons as simulacra; and he even evokes mythologized rock stars as those who would (quoting Barthes) “displace the subject’s topology” (64). The readings here energize many of these plays in new ways. If the “politics” in question are not always clear, certainly that is due to the state of our increasingly bizarre “pop” environment. Konstantinos Blatanis does much to show us how that environment is inexhaustibly recapitulated and, at times, transformed in the modern theatre.



ANDREA MOST. *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 253, illustrated. \$29.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by David Krasner, Yale University

This cogently argued book examines the contributions of Jewish songwriters and lyricists in the golden age of Broadway musical theatre. Beginning with Samson Raphaelson’s *Jazz Singer* (1925) and ending with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1951 musical *King and I*, *Making Americans* illuminates the conflicting issues experienced by immigrant Jews caught between ethnic pride and what the author calls the “assimilation effect” (9). Utilizing a New Historicist framework (a literary theory that examines texts through their historical contexts), Most borrows W.E.B. Du Bois’ well-known description of “double consciousness” in explaining competing cultural forces. Under the influence of these forces, prominent Jewish composers such as Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George and Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein II, Lorenz Hart, and Richard Rodgers helped define American musical theatre. They are credited with creating a popular style that incorporated Tin Pan Alley, jazz, big band orchestration, and vaudeville, and then turning it into musical theatre with coherent narratives and social commentary.

Most’s path through this material is poised and well-researched. The opening chapter lays the groundwork by examining musical theatre that became a place where Jews might “negotiate their emergence into modern, cosmopolitan, non-Jewish societies” (13). Chapter two concerns the relationship between cultural loyalties and show business success. While the author side-steps the issue of racism in the blackface performance of *The Jazz Singer*, she examines the protagonist’s confrontation with his Jewish-American identity. Most also takes up Gus Kahn’s *Whoopee* (1929) and George and Ira Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy* (1930), recognizing the feminizing male as portrayed by Eddie Cantor in *Whoopee*. The book also examines how Jewish authors, using

surrogate characters, sought identification with Native Americans. By “becoming” Indians in *Crazy Girl* and avoiding real world conditions that Native Americans faced, “Jews could claim to be original ‘native’ Americans, with all of the privileges accorded to this position” (62). Through theatrical “self-fashioning” (a New Historicist concept of creating identity through performance), the stage served as a conduit for Jews seeking mainstream acceptance.

The 1930s and the Great Depression provide the backdrop for chapter three. Rodgers and Hart’s 1937 musical, *Babes in Arms*, is the locus of the author’s perspective on the ways Jewish intellectuals oscillated between American mainstream and European socialism. The musical creators were caught between the socialism of their Yiddish-speaking parents and the allure of American capitalism. Many staked a middle ground, providing an impetus to American liberalism, a moment that embraced Roosevelt’s New Deal. *Babes in Arms*, the author notes, “illustrates the basic features of American Jewish liberalism” (70) by depicting the rights of the underprivileged, fostering democracy, and advocating equality, while maintaining the importance of individualism and the youth movement. Moreover, Rodgers and Hart, in order to locate Broadway musical theatre’s particular niche, developed another middle ground: the idea of musicals that rejected high art (opera) and low art (Tin Pan Alley), hovering instead in a unique and emerging middle-brow culture.

Chapter four explores the intricacies of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1943 musical, *Oklahoma!* For Most, the show’s concept of westward expansion reflected the composers’ Zionism and a yearning to be connected to the land. It also reflected Jewish-American unease with Communism. *Oklahoma!* the author notes, “was instantly accepted as true Americana at a time when Jews in America felt increasingly marginalized” (117). Irving Berlin’s successful *Annie Get Your Gun* (1945) supplies the main topic of the next chapter, notably the most satisfying in the book. Most reads *Annie Get Your Gun* as a “Bildungsmusical,” a coming-of-age story of Annie Oakley who “realizes her potential and becomes a full member of her community” (123). In doing so, the author persuasively argues that women in the show move symbolically from wartime independence to domesticated post-war housewives supporting their homecoming troops. Chapters six and seven shed light on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* (1949) and *The King and I* (1951). The treatment of *South Pacific* is especially rewarding for its musical insights, something lacking in other chapters.

Despite its strong merits, the book occasionally oversimplifies. For instance, the author identifies musicals as indicative of Brecht’s anti-realistic “alienation effect,” saying that it is “never ‘natural’ for people to break into song in the middle of a conversation. (They certainly never do it in the realist theater.)” (93). By virtue of this example all musicals are ipso facto Brechtian, and vice versa. The book claims that the non-white caricatures depicted in

South Pacific are “[f]orced to don a single stereotypical mask and to interact with white characters within a realist dramaturgy” (158). The one-dimensional portrayals in *South Pacific* are not “realist dramaturgy” and are hardly comparable to the multi-dimensional characterizations limned by Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Miller, and other realist playwrights. In addition, the book’s characterization of Jewish Depression-era social consciousness, while perspicacious, is so broadly construed that its applicability extends to non-musical entertainment as well. If, as Most suggests, the characters in *Babes in Arms* explore the “real test [of] whether you have the guts to take the chances life offers and do something with them” (99), then the same can be said of Clifford Odet’s 1935 play *Awake and Sing*. Cinema, too, demonstrated Jewish immigrant influences, represented by Harry Cohen, Louis Mayer, and the Warner Brothers, among others. The book provides little if anything to distinguish the genesis of Broadway musicals from dramas and films developed by Jews during the time. Finally, while the book insightfully pinpoints the social and ethnic self-consciousness of the musical’s creators, the importance of Yiddish language and music is missing. For this, one has to turn to Jack Gottlieb’s *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish*, which examines *Yiddishkeit* (“Yiddish-ness”) by Jewish songwriters and their Broadway musicals. Still, *Making Americans* is well worth reading for its copious research and wealth of original observations regarding the place and significance of Jewish artists who wove musical theatre into the fabric of American society.



PHILIP C. KOLIN, ed. *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004. Pp. xxix + 350, illustrated. \$89.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by Andrew Sofer, Boston College

Tennessee Williams has been enjoying something of a posthumous critical renaissance. In the wake of the 1994 death of Williams’ self-styled literary executor, Lady St. Just (Maria Britneva), scholars gained new access to Williams’ unpublished papers, and New Directions published a series of important apprentice plays (*Not About Nightingales*, *Spring Storm*, *Stairs to the Roof*, and *Fugitive Kind*). Lyle Leverich’s definitive biography of Williams’ early years, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, appeared in 1995, while monographs by such scholars as David Savran, Ann Fleche, and Nicholas Pagan brought queer, poststructuralist, and postmodern perspectives to bear on their subject. And whereas the critical consensus used to be that Williams’ creative achievement was over by the early sixties, the later plays have been plausibly reassessed.

No one has energized Williams studies more than Philip C. Kolin. In addi-