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The purpose of this study is to formulate a critical, gendered approach to research for informed character preparation in classic musical theatre. Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat* provides a framework for an examination of performance practice based on stereotypes of contemporaneous gender roles. As a model for research, four areas are explored to prepare context for an original, informed interpretation of the female lead roles in *Show Boat*.

The first area is the context of the early twentieth-century musical. American musical theatre is a fusion of European operetta, melodrama, minstrel shows, vaudeville, musical revue, musical comedy, and popular songs. Characteristic elements of each of these are found in *Show Boat* (1927), yet it established a marked departure from these trends.

The second area is an examination of the socio-historical trends relevant to the historical era of *Show Boat* (1890-1927). Specific gender roles are introduced through the debate of the "Woman Question" and the stereotypes of traditional versus progressive moral values. Four societal gender stereotypes that are represented in *Show Boat* are the New England Victorian, the Southern Belle, the Ethnic Other, and the New Woman.

The third area is a discussion of the implicit audience assumptions and stereotypes of professional women in the theatre as sexually promiscuous. These societal and theatrical gender stereotypes are then examined in relevance to the female characters of *Show Boat*.

The fourth area is an exploration of performance practice in musical theatre. A synthesis of gender-based preparation is modeled through a method outline of character development and song analysis for "Make Believe" and "Can't Help Lovin' 'dat Man."

AN EXAMINATION OF THE FEMALE LEAD ROLES IN *SHOW BOAT*  
AS A MODEL FOR GENDER-BASED PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

by

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## CHAPTER I

### OVERTURE

Musical theatre has become an extremely popular type of entertainment and activity among young singers, from the elementary school to the collegiate level. This trend is exhibited in the economic successes and cultural indoctrination of the “Broadway Jr.” series (Musical Theatre International) that is aimed at elementary and middle school students as well as in the popularity of local high school and community productions. Musical theatre may be experienced as part of the admission price on cruise ships and in amusement parks. Or one may enjoy professional musical theatre through national touring companies and sold-out performances in Broadway theaters, at triple-digit ticket prices.<sup>1</sup> Its pervasive influence is also seen in the increased number of colleges and universities, following the lucrative examples of Ithaca College and the University of Michigan, with musical theatre departments that turn out triple threats (actor/singer/dancer) who go on to successful careers in some form of musical theatre entertainment.

The purpose of this study is to address the needs of young performers involved in each of these venues. The thesis is to formulate a critical, gendered approach to research for an informed approach to performance practice for classic musicals, achieved through an examination and preparation of the female lead roles found in *Show Boat*. As a model

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical research has confirmed that the majority of tourists traveling to New York City plan to see a Broadway show (either musical or “straight” play). See Paul Libin’s comments in *It Happened on Broadway: An Oral History of the Great White Way*, eds Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 283.

for research, this paper will explore four areas of context for performance practice and character development in early twentieth-century lyrical musicals. These areas of context are the history of the American musical until *Show Boat* (1890-1927), the socio-historical trends relative to this era from the perspective of gender role stereotypes of women in society and on the stage, and the traditions of an embodied performance in musical theatre. The rationalizations for this type of academic study are described on the following pages as this approach fits within a research niche between two relatively new disciplines of musical theatre performance practice and gender studies.

## **The Need for an Academic Study of Musical Theatre**

### **Performance Practice**

American musical theatre shares with jazz a distinction as an original American art form that germinated in the early twentieth century. Similar to jazz, it is a hybrid of musical and theatrical styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that could have come together only in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Unlike jazz, however, whose academic scholarship began in the 1950s, the formal scholarship of musical theatre as an academic discipline did not garner serious respect until the 1980s. Before that time, musical theatre history and criticism had been the domain of popular music critics and fans.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the delay for serious research is due to the universal expectation that musical theatre's purpose is to provide an entertaining and enjoyable evening of spectacle, not an aesthetic or

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<sup>2</sup> Some of these style sources include Viennese and British operetta, French cabaret and music hall revues, minstrel shows, burlesque, British musical comedy, eastern European klezmer bands, and American ragtime.

<sup>3</sup> "Musical comedy" did not appear as an article in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* until the 1980 edition.

ennobling experience like some other music genres or art forms. Abigail Miriam Feder-Kane described mid-twentieth century scholars' attitudes toward the value of musical theatre as "trite, conventional, predictable, silly, and escapist and therefore unworthy objects of serious analysis."<sup>4</sup>

Early examples of this stereotype of the musical as simple entertainment include the first "accidental" American musical extravaganza, *The Black Crook* (1866), the Viennese-style operettas of Victor Herbert, and the competing musical revues of Florenz Ziegfeld's *Follies* and George White's *Scandals*. The sounds and lifestyles of Broadway wielded a pervasive influence on American music (popular and serious) and behavioral norms from the 1890s throughout the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> A backlash against this influence is found in many types of writings in the early twentieth century. Music critic Theodor Adorno described the "business" of musical theatre as a mass-produced commodity, a "part of the 'culture industry' which deceived the working class, replacing genuine inspiration with a standardized and stylized 'barbarity.'"<sup>6</sup> Art critic Clement Greenberg referred to musical theatre as "Kitsch," and social political analyst Dwight

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<sup>4</sup> "‘Anything You can Do, I Can Do Better’: Transgressive Gender Role Performance in Musical Theatre and Film, 1930-1950" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1999), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Musical revues were marketed to the upper class, as well as to the newly independent class of shop girls, as sophisticated leisure entertainment. Ziegfeld and White kept their shows a step above the burlesque with the all-American girl persona of the long-limbed chorus girl and the glamorous depictions of fashions in extravagant parades as an acceptable entertainment for ladies. Yet, they still represent the prevalent trend of objectification rather than the liberation of woman. Linda Mizejewski addressed this phenomenon thoroughly in *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> "Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Cultural Studies Reader* (1995), 36, 41; quoted in *Approaches to the American Musical*, ed. Robert Lawson-Peebles (London: Exeter University Press, 1996), 6.

MacDonald, labeled musical theatre as “Masscult anti-art.”<sup>7</sup> In his dissertation, Donald Egan Whitaker III summarized this backlash and the reasons why musical theatre has not been given its due academic consideration. Besides its dismissal as light entertainment and spectacle, musical theatre retains the implicit baggage of comedy’s inferiority to tragedy in theatre history, its use of popular music, its ancestry of minstrel shows and vaudeville (considered “lowbrow” culture for the poorest of immigrant classes), its designation of “midculture” entertainment, and (perhaps most important) the basic lack of training in music by theatre scholars and subsequent lack of training in theatre by musicians.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these negative images, the early history of musical theatre is a fascinating conglomeration of styles and performance devices that should receive more attention in the arena of academic research. It is not only a reflection of its society, it is a producer of cultural meaning as well. The ideals of philosophers are embodied in musical theatre. Nietzsche wrote that music can “infuse a dramatic scene with deeper significance than is possible without music,” and dramatist Bertolt Brecht spoke of the “power behind music to inform and illustrate theatrical moments and ideas.”<sup>9</sup> Carey Wall wrote of musical entertainments as a scrim for social truths, “allowing them to be looked at when direct vision is too glaring to be endured.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lawson-Peebles, 5.

<sup>8</sup> “Subversive Aspects of American Musical Theatre” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2002), chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> Whitaker, 8.

<sup>10</sup> “There’s No Business Like Show Business: A Speculative Reading of the Broadway Musical” in *Approaches to Musical Theatre*, 25.

### **Why *Show Boat*?**

The selection of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's musical, *Show Boat* (1927), as a gender-based performance practice model was determined for several practical reasons. The first, and most obvious, reason is that this show is the progenitor of all subsequent American productions. Its premiere in December 1927 was the debut of a new form of dramatic and musical collaboration, a mature integration of plot, libretto, music, and stage action. It is the original book musical.<sup>11</sup> *Show Boat* was unusual for its time as a serious musical drama in the midst of frivolous musical comedies that typified the carefree, urbane attitude of the 1920s. The 1927 Broadway season was a lucrative one with fifty new musicals produced. These included the musical comedy hits of Irving Berlin's *Ziegfeld Follies of 1927*; George and Ira Gershwin's successful *Funny Face*; Vincent Youmans' *Hit the Deck*; as well as Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *A Connecticut Yankee*. These shows introduced enduring Broadway and jazz standards, including Kern's "Ol' Man River" and "Can't Help Lovin' 'dat Man," Gershwin's "S Wonderful," and Rodgers and Hart's "Thou Swell." Viewed from a twenty-first century perspective, each of these shows provides a cultural snapshot of current fashions, humor, political thought, social mores, gender roles, and prejudices that represent urban New York City society in the late 1920s. *Show Boat*, however, stands out as an amalgamation of turn-of-the-century American society, within and without the New York bubble. It is the epitome of Geoffrey Block's definition for a musical worthy of canonization:

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<sup>11</sup> *Show Boat*'s claim to pre-eminence as the first modern American musical versus Hammerstein's later show with Richard Rodgers, *Oklahoma!* (1945), is still strongly debated among musical theatre critics and historians. However, it is included (sometimes as an exception) as the first American musical in every canon of classic musicals.

The musicals that have entered the canon represent the most thoughtful, imaginative, and generally most consuming work of their creators . . . who often consciously set out to surpass the expectations of their genre and their time, whether by musical and lyrical sophistication, by dramatic credibility, or by greater unification of music, drama, and dance.<sup>12</sup>

The second reason for the use of *Show Boat* as a gender-based performance practice model is its marked departure from the contemporary trends of revue and comedy as a musical drama. As a dramatic book musical it incorporates comedic elements, but its primary purpose is to present social issues that affect and influence an audience under the guise of entertainment. The creators of the dramatic musical typically draw inspiration from a literary source, which they then use as a vehicle for social commentary.<sup>13</sup> *Show Boat's* libretto was rife with current social and political topics such as race relations, miscegenation, alcoholism, divorce, and subverted gender roles. Its characters are multi-dimensional, believable people who typify and then disperse conventional attitudes regarding theatrical and gender stereotypes. Perhaps the best summation of *Show Boat's* originality and commercial viability is Lehmann Engel's critique in *The American Musical Theatre*: "*Show Boat* raised the Negro problem, dispensed with the conventional pretty-girl chorus, and was unhappy in tone, but it was a big hit."<sup>14</sup> As a mirror of turn-of-the-century American society, viewed through a filter

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<sup>12</sup> "The Broadway Canon from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* and the European Operatic Ideal" in *The Journal of Musicology* 11/4 (fall 1993): 544. The *New York Times* review for the original 1927 production of *Show Boat* described the performance as "Excellent . . . perilously close to being the best New York has seen . . . an exceptionally tuneful score . . . every ingredient that the perfect musical should have."

<sup>13</sup> The inspiration for *Show Boat* was Edna Ferber's novel, *Show boat* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Page, 1926). Kern and Hammerstein convinced her to allow their adaptation of it for the stage by promis-ing that they would not use a traditional musical comedy format.

<sup>14</sup> rev. ed. (New York: MacMillan Co., 1975), 11.

of the late 1920s, *Show Boat* presents an important context for sociological and historical clues to an informed and original preparation of character roles in performance practice.

The third reason to use *Show Boat* as a gender-based performance practice model is that Kern's score incorporates operetta, blues, and popular singing styles that require a flexible approach and a healthy, well-trained technique for each performer. Today, the lyrical operetta style of singing is not restricted to revivals of early classic musicals like *Show Boat* or *Carousel*. It is also the preferred manner for period works that include Charles Strouse's *Rags*, Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's *Ragtime*, Adam Guettel's *The Light in the Piazza*, and the British "poperettas" of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Claude-Michel Schönberg (*Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, and *The Woman in White*, Lloyd Webber's latest Broadway incursion).<sup>15</sup> The characters in *Show Boat*, particularly the role of Magnolia Hawkes Ravenal, require a depth of emotional maturity and range of artistic journey that is often lacking in contemporary show performers. This type of role demands an investment of preparation to create a personal characterization that stands apart from the current trend of interchangeable young actors who sound just like the original cast recording, or those who can belt out ear-piercing decibels of "faux emotion" like the pop stars that they have become, as described by *New York Times* columnist, Ben Brantley. He expressed the current lack of original, informed performances with the remark of "good, well-trained voices that can carry a tune and turn up the volume come cheap. What does not is the voice that identifies a character as specifically

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<sup>15</sup> "Popperetta" is a term used by Ben Brantley in his *New York Times* article, "How Broadway Lost Its Voice to 'American Idol'" (27 March 2005).

and individually as handwriting.”<sup>16</sup> A method of song preparation that is based upon the classical training style of lyric operetta along with the more natural vocalization of the blues and early popular music seems lacking in the education of many young musical theatre singers.

### **The Collaboration of Musical Theatre and Gender Studies**

Along with advanced scholarship in musical theatre, another area of burgeoning research in the past two decades has been the field of gender studies. In feminist theory, gender is considered a social construct rather than a biological fate. Susan A. Brasow defined gender as a “psychological and cultural term” intended to distinguish the roles of men and women in different spheres, as defined through active or passive modes of behavior.<sup>17</sup> Musical theatre tradition portrays women in roles as heroines who are secondary to the leading man hero, or as willful, wise cracking characters without need of traditional male support. Musicals are also an excellent vehicle for portraying the marginalized Other, those considered outside the hegemony of middle-class, white heterosexual male culture.<sup>18</sup> Since the late nineteenth century, the “Woman Question” of the feminine aspect of man’s sphere has been a popular topic of debate in literature, art, science, and religion. Woman’s role as Other in America’s hegemonic culture has been delineated in literature and art with explicit expectations and stereotypes of the domestic

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<sup>16</sup> Ethel Merman, Patti Lupone, Betty Buckley, and Kristin Chenoweth are actresses given as examples of individuality in performance. “How Broadway Lost Its Voice to American Idol.”

<sup>17</sup> *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Gender Roles,” ed. Helen Tierney (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation are all designations of Other as outside the American mainstream. Humorist Joanne Gilbert considers women a “marginalized majority” in the United States. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004), 5. Hegemony refers specifically to the power base of the dominant societal culture.

sphere. These gender role stereotypes provide insight into early twentieth century society and possible character motivations and objectives in classic musicals.

In music scholarship, the initial focus of gender studies addressed the historical canon of art music with respect to women's contributions as creators, contributors, and patrons. That focus has gradually moved to performance issues and the embodiment of music from a feminine perspective, as evidenced in the writings of Suzanne Cusick, Susan McClary, and Renée Cox. Scholarship on gender issues in musical theatre has generally dealt with the topic in one of three ways: 1) the adulation of the gay community for the genre; 2) the stereotypical "butch" qualities of strong personalities like Mary Martin and Ethel Merman; or 3) the traditional presentation of the ideal hegemonic relationship scenario (boy and girl meet, fall in love, and wind up together after two acts of relationship roadblocks), which is subtly subverted by musical theatre's traditions of gay ideology. Feminine subversion is often portrayed by strong, independent female types who are social misfits if they do not win a man by the final curtain.<sup>19</sup> A study on gender issues that encompasses these viewpoints as well as role models for a strong, heterosexual female heroine seems lacking.

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<sup>19</sup> Examples of each approach include D. A. Miller, *A Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); John Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Donald Egan Whittaker III, "Subversive Aspects of American Musical Theatre"; and Elaine Small Klein, "The Development of the Leading Feminine Character in Selected Librettos of American Musicals from 1900 to 1960" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1962).

## Methodology

The base of research for this project has been a two-year journey that began with a broad net cast over the familiar subjects of musical theatre history and American popular music. The specific focus on *Show Boat* provided a limited framework of singing styles that could be sufficiently covered in a performance-oriented dissertation. By investigating the musical styles of *Show Boat*, my scholarship branched out into the study of blues history and the personalities of leading blues singers (Sophie Tucker, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey, for example). I also returned to my roots of ragtime for its influence of rhythms and singing style on Kern's characterizations of African-American roles. Because the characters of Julie and Magnolia become cabaret singers, another avenue of study was the cabaret and music hall performance practice of French, German, and Austrian singers at the turn of the century and their influences on American popular performance practice and audiences. The most fascinating and engaging aspect of research for this project has been the interdisciplinary studies of society and gender. This approach directed me away from my comfortable environment of the history of music toward a great mass of information on American cultural history, popular culture, American theatre history, gender studies, feminine aesthetics, and queer theory.<sup>20</sup>

The trend of scholarship on gender issues in dramatic music and musical theatre as a reflection of its society has become extremely popular, particularly in the past five years. There are many articles, books, and dissertations available that deal with gender and sexuality in the arenas of musical theatre and dramatic music. A select group of

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<sup>20</sup> A queer theory approach encompasses all marginalized individuals in a hegemonic culture.

dissertations related to my topic of social issues begins with Donald Egan Whittaker III's "Subversive Aspects of American Musical Theatre." He presents the issue of Other with a focus on sympathetic leading characters based on ethnicity (Jews), sexuality, and race that undermines the hegemonic norm. James M. Dowd's "Musicals Often Demonstrate the Cultural Aspects of the Periods in Which They Were Written" focuses on the decades of the 1920s, 1940s, and 1970s through George and Ira Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing*, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!*, and Stephen Sondheim's *Company*.<sup>21</sup> Lari Dianne Young's "A Historical View of Twentieth-Century American Society as Witnessed Through Musical Theatre: 1927-Present (Twentieth Century)" is closest to my approach as she parallels musicals with their contemporary socio-historical trends, but her work focuses on productions after *Show Boat*.<sup>22</sup>

Dissertations about gender stereotypes and transgressive identity roles are represented by Bruce Steven Kirlé's "Cultural Collaborations: Re-historicizing the American Musical," which is a compelling investigation of musical theatre history through performance and reception in a non-linear chronology of cultural and social context.<sup>23</sup> Another example is Abigail Feder-Kane's "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better . . . ." She describes the "play" in performances of female characters as subversive role models in direct opposition to the prescribed libretto. However, her parameter of musicals from 1930-1950 deals with later gender issues that are colored by World War II. A similar project is an early work by Elaine Small Klein, "The Development of the Leading

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<sup>21</sup> (M.A. thesis, The American University, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002).

Feminine Character in Selected Librettos of American Musicals from 1900 to 1960.”

This is an excellent study of female roles and character development, including an insightful discussion of Magnolia from *Show Boat*, but she also specifically focuses on gender identity issues surrounding World War II.

A select group of dissertations also approach this topic from the opposite direction of gender and performance practice. An early study of *Show Boat* character development is William von Wenger’s “Analysis of the Development of the Character Gaylord Ravenal in *Show Boat*.”<sup>24</sup> Isobel Bartz explored the relationship of gendered performance to theatrical conventions and stereotypes in “The Origins of the Trouser Role in Opera.”<sup>25</sup> But her topic explores the cross-dressing roles of women and castrati rather than traditional female stereotypes. A recent dissertation by Mary Anne Long, “‘All Our Girls are Men’: The Haresfoot Club and the Original College Musical,”<sup>26</sup> addresses the same era of social upheaval in gender role expectations, but its concern is the acceptance of female impersonation as a viable resolution to the “crisis of masculinity” of the 1910s and early 1920s.

In studying these selections, along with many more, I found some similarities to this project, but none that refers specifically to a working model of character development based on gender performance, or to an analysis of the female characters found in *Show Boat*. So this dissertation will provide a unique approach to performance practice in musical theatre. An embodied gender perspective for the performance of musical

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<sup>24</sup> (M.A. thesis, California State University at Long Beach, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> (D.M.A. diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> (Ph.D. diss., The University of Wisconsin at Madison, 2004).

theatre roles is needed to fill the void of academic scholarship in the area of character development and performance practice.

### **Overview of the Study**

The thesis of this study is to formulate a critical, gendered approach to research for an informed approach to performance practice for classic musicals, achieved through an examination and preparation of the female lead roles found in *Show Boat*. Chapter Two provides an overview of musical theatre history from 1890 to 1927 through a discussion of the entertainment trends that coalesced into the first fully integrated book musical, *Show Boat*. Chapter Three introduces the definitions and usage of “stereotype” and its application to the “Woman Question” of feminine gender roles between 1880 and 1930. These gender stereotypes are subdivided into categories related to the female characters of *Show Boat*: the New England Victorian woman, the Post-Bellum Southern Belle, the Ethnic Other, and three generations of the New Woman (the suffragist, the Gibson girl, and the Flapper). Chapter Four narrows the focus to stereotypes of professional theatre women, regarded as sexually promiscuous and a possible third gender. Specific character “types” of the theatre (chorus girl, soubrette, ingénue, ethnic woman, and older woman) are defined and illustrated by the female lead characters in *Show Boat*. Chapter Five presents an overview of performance practice for musical theatre vocal styles at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It concludes with an exercise in character development and song analysis for the *Show Boat* songs, “Make Believe” and “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man.” Although these particular songs date

from the 1920s, they are timeless in their craftsmanship and relevance to vocal performance for both the young and the experienced performer. The outcome of this project shall provide a research model for an historically informed development of character and performance practice in classic musical theatre productions.

## CHAPTER II

### MUSICAL THEATRE HISTORY: 1890-*SHOW BOAT* (1927)

Musical theatre has always been a part of the American experience according to historian Julian Mates. He described it as “both indigenous and our oldest theatre tradition.”<sup>1</sup> *The Black Crook* (1866) is often cited as the first American musical drama. A serendipitous collaboration between an acting company displaced by a theater fire and a stranded French ballet troupe, this production provided an original form of spectacle to a mid-Victorian era audience. Although technically a melodrama with dance interludes, *The Black Crook* should be granted the distinction as the first “modern” American musical, based upon its long New York City run and popular cross-country tours that spanned several decades. Edith Boroff, however, identifies twenty-eight different opinions in her article, “Origin of the Species: Conflicting Views of American Musical Theater History.”<sup>2</sup> The musical strands between 1890 and 1930 that eventually coalesced into the integrated book musical of twentieth-century American theatre include European and American operetta, melodrama, minstrel shows, vaudeville, music revues, musical comedy, and Tin Pan Alley popular songs with their seductive rhythms of ragtime and jazz. A brief background of each of these influences on American entertainment should

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<sup>1</sup> *America's Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *American Music* 2/4 (winter 1984): 101-108.

be helpful to recognize the specific traits later used by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II in *Show Boat*.

### Operetta

The operetta (*opéra bouffe*) began in mid-nineteenth century France as a popular, and often sentimental, alternative to the grand opera styles of Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) and Berlioz (*Les Troyens*). Jacques Offenbach is considered the founder of this freely satirical genre. His modern version of the Orpheus legend (*Orphée aus enfers*) included the pervasive can-can dance that became a standard of the French music hall.<sup>3</sup> Offenbach's operettas quickly influenced composers in Vienna (most notably Johann Strauss, Jr.) and in London (W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan), and eventually transfixed Americans in Boston and New York. The American premiere of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta was *H. M. S. Pinafore* in an unauthorized Boston Museum performance on 25 November 1878. The British team was, of course, unhappy at receiving no royalties for that performance, due to the lack of international performance rights agreements. This was quickly corrected the very next season as Sir Arthur Sullivan himself produced the premiere of *The Pirates of Penzance* at the Fifth Avenue Theater on 31 December 1879. That theatre season was also notable for the introduction of the Viennese style with Franz von Suppé's *Fantinitza* and the first operetta by an American-born composer, *The Smugglers*, by John Phillip Sousa.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 7th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 700.

During the 1890s, the imported waltz-driven works of Johann Strauss Jr. and the effusive satires of Gilbert and Sullivan were guaranteed successful runs and large grosses in American cities.<sup>4</sup> In that decade, several so-called “American” composers also made important contributions to this wildly popular form of highbrow entertainment. Reginald de Koven’s *Robin Hood* (1890) is best known for the sentimental song, “Oh Promise Me”. John Phillip Sousa wrote nineteen operettas that culminated in *El Capitan* (1896), and Victor Herbert, described by Julian Mates as the man who “made the American operetta famous,” had his first success with *The Fortune Teller* (1898).<sup>5</sup>

A new invasion of Viennese-style operetta in New York City was initiated by the music of Franz Léhar’s *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*) in 1907.<sup>6</sup> The twentieth-century European style was more romantic than satirical, exploited exotic settings, and reflected contemporary taste with topical references. This style culminated in the works of Rudolf Friml and Sigmund Romberg in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

The general characteristics of American operetta, derived from the European model, include a plot that revolves around a traditional romantic couple and the forces that impede the ultimate consummation of their relationship. The heroine is typically cast

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<sup>4</sup> New York audiences could not get enough of Gilbert and Sullivan’s works. In the 1890 season alone, five different shows were presented in New York City: *Patience*, *Iolanthe*, *H. M. S. Pinafore*, and multiple bookings of *The Mikado* and *The Pirates of Penzance*.

<sup>5</sup> Mates, 73. I use the phrase so-called “American” because Sousa was the only native-born American. Herbert’s most famous operettas are *Babes in Toyland* (1903) and *Naughty Marietta* (1910).

<sup>6</sup> *The Merry Widow* caused an enormous social frenzy in New York City. The original cast members were instant celebrities, the waltzes became bestsellers as sheet music, and an entire fashion craze of “widow” hats was launched. The show enjoyed a long era of influence in New York City and through six national touring companies.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Friml, originally from Prague, had his greatest successes with *Rose Marie* (1924) and *The Vagabond King* (1925). Sigmund Romberg, from a small Hungarian town, is best known for *The Student Prince* (1924) and *The Desert Song* (1926).

as a Cinderella-type heiress who may or may not be disguised to hide her affluence. The settings are exotic through foreign locale or romanticized historical period. There is little dialogue as most of the libretto is sung or underscored; the actors were usually classically trained singers. This style, which was incorporated into *Show Boat*, continued as a viable entertainment force in the United States until the early 1930s.

### **Melodrama**

The melodrama began as a nineteenth-century dramatic production with “flat character” stereotypes and atmospheric musical underscoring. David Mayer distilled its mature characteristics in his essay on “The Music of Melodrama.” Those characteristics included recurring themes of virtue versus vice, American patriotism, and chaste women. Plots were episodic and sentimental with realistic settings of poetic justice. Predictable stereotypes dictated the necessity of a hero, a heroine, a villain, a young comic man or woman, and an older comic man or woman, plus other minor character actors. Musical underscoring was of utmost importance as the plot’s emotional undercurrent and mask. Composers used techniques dating from the Baroque *opéra seria*, such as leitmotifs to identify stereotypes and “affections” to intensify the audience’s emotional reactions. Music’s role was to supersede the dialogue, not merely to accompany.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, ed. David Bradby, et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 51, 62. Quoted in Mates, 97, 101.

### Minstrel Shows

The minstrel show began in the 1830s as a white imitation of black plantation and urban life. White performers would dress in slave or dandy clothes, use burnt cork as make up for “blackface,” and perform skits, musical numbers, and dances that parodied the dialogue and music of African-Americans through great exaggeration. Even more popular after the Civil War, minstrelsy was the first organized form of “black” musical theatre. Julian Mates described its importance to American theatre as the “backbone of American popular entertainment for over half a century.”<sup>9</sup> Minstrel show elements, such as the olio mix of songs and comedic bits, became pervasive in all forms of entertainment. The circus and the show boat became expedient means of conveying this new entertainment to every community, even across the frontier. Organized choral groups, such as the Virginia Minstrels and the New Christy Minstrels, mixed minstrel songs with spirituals and traditional songs. They traveled across the American continent and became a sensation in Europe as the first indigenous musical export of the United States.<sup>10</sup> Now considered another racist blight on American cultural history, minstrelsy at this time was a subversive means of presenting societal norms to the white, middle-class audience. Performers in blackface could behave outside the boundaries of “accepted norms to comment candidly on social, political, and economic conditions.”<sup>11</sup> Actor/dancer Ben

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<sup>9</sup> Mates, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Several of Stephen Foster’s best-loved songs were written for the New Christy Minstrels. Burkholder, 677.

<sup>11</sup> Burkholder, 677. “Coon” songs, the standard solo song of the minstrel show, became one of the most popular ragtime song genres of the early twentieth century. These were sung in black dialect with ragged rhythms by both white and black performers. Sheet music sales were amazingly successful after Ernest Hogan’s runaway hit, “All Coons Look Alike to Me” (1886). See Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays*:

Vereen described the “blackface coon” as a white entertainment invention: “it was the white guys who created the dialogue and the eye rolling stereotypes.”<sup>12</sup> In the 1890s, African-American performers decided that they could “black up” better than the white folks and so began their own theatrical companies and minstrel productions. One of the most successful African-American “blackface” performers was Bert Williams. His stage persona was perpetuated as a helpless, shuffling “coon” with the signature song of “Nobody.” Williams was actually a well-educated man and a brilliant producer. He starred in the first full-length all-black musical, *Dahomey* (1903), and broke the color barrier of the Ziegfeld *Follies* in 1910 as a comic performer. Unfortunately, he was not accepted by the hegemonic audience as a performer unless he played a racial stereotype.<sup>13</sup>

### Vaudeville

A direct descendant of the minstrel show that became popular in the immigrant neighborhoods of New York City was known as vaudeville. Originally a variety show, vaudeville was an olio of song and dance acts, comedians, animal acts, gymnasts and body builders, and short comedy sketches of ethnic stereotypes. These acts attracted large audiences at Tony Pastor’s Music Hall and other less reputable establishments.<sup>14</sup>

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*Popular Song in America*, for a comparison of ragtime “coon” songs with Tin Pan Alley songs (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979, reprint, 1983), 321.

<sup>12</sup> Interview in *Broadway: The American Musical*, Episode 1 (A Film by Michael Kantor, PBS Home Video, 2004). The most famous white blackface actor was Al Jolson, a Lithuanian Jew who became a liberated actor behind the mask.

<sup>13</sup> See *Broadway: The American Musical* for a vivid description of the minstrelsy phenomenon and a synopsis of Williams’ career.

<sup>14</sup> As every fan of Sondheim’s *Gypsy* knows, there is a distinct difference between the “first-rate” family entertainment of Pastor’s upscale Music Hall and its subversive version, burlesque. Burlesque was another thread in musical theatre history for its dance influence and female objectification. Julian Mates

There were two vaudeville associations across the country, white and black, with separate booking agencies and numerous circuits.<sup>15</sup> These agencies had very strict policies about the personal and professional behavior of their contracted players. Many popular singing stars, including “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and Ethel Waters, had their start in minstrel or tent shows before moving to vaudeville, then on to musical theatre. The musical styles of vaudeville incorporated a smattering of all popular music of its day. The singing styles were also eclectic; they ranged from the “coon shouts” of Sophie Tucker, the blues of Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters, the French cabaret stylings of Yvette Guilbert, and the European classical repertoire of Jenny Lind, the “Swedish night-ingale.”<sup>16</sup> While operetta was considered appropriate for the upwardly mobile New York City society, vaudeville was targeted at the newly arrived immigrant class. These new American citizens appreciated the wide variety of musical acts and the comedic ethnic stereotypes as a means of inclusion in American society.

### **Musical Revue**

A cultural step above vaudeville was the extravagant revue. The original American revue, *The Passing Show*, was produced by George W. Lederer in 1894 at the

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referred back to the original musical extravaganza, *The Black Crook*, as catering to the growing appetite for girlie shows, which was unabated in the early twentieth century. Mates, 130.

<sup>15</sup> The black vaudeville association was TOBA, an acronym for the Theater Owners Booking Association, a consortium of white theater owners in the South who ran the black version of the vaudeville circuit.

<sup>16</sup> Guilbert had a difficult time with American audiences not understanding or appreciating her subtle and wry *diseuse* humor on her two vaudeville tours. Jenny Lind, however, enjoyed a resounding success (culturally and financially) through the marketing of her manager, P. T. Barnum, as she initiated a renewed interest in European art songs as well as American popular songs throughout the country. For information on women’s careers in vaudeville, see Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Casino Theatre in Manhattan. The revue continued the olio vaudeville tradition but soon was best known for its requisite chorus line of long-limbed dancers, romantic singers (male and female), and top-of-the-line comedians, such as Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker, and the Williams brothers. The musical revue was an important representation of American pluralism. It was an amalgam of everything available in entertainment: comedians, skits, song and dance numbers, animal acts, body builders, and, especially, beautiful girls. Fierce competition raged between three main New York City companies that reached its zenith in the 1910s and early 1920s. These were *The Ziegfeld Follies*, a revised version of *The Passing Show*, and the *George White Scandals*. The most successful producer of musical revues, however, was Florenz Ziegfeld. He originated the seasonal tradition of an annual show that highlighted current fashions, awe-inspiring set designs, nationally acclaimed musical stars, and up-to-the-minute song styles. These popular songs kept the new Tin Pan Alley song pluggers working overtime, competing to write the next national nickel sheet music best-seller, introduced by one of Ziegfeld's stars.<sup>17</sup>

### **Musical Comedy**

A new composite of comic opera and vaudeville, billed as “musical comedy,” initiated a fresh trend in American theatre with the premiere of *A Gaiety Girl* in 1893.

This sub-genre began as an expanded version of vaudeville skits and developed into a star

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<sup>17</sup> Several of the most successful composers of musicals in the 1920s and 1930s began their careers as pianists for these publishing houses, including Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Irving Berlin. Ziegfeld employed Victor Herbert as a resident composer from 1918 to 1923, and Irving Berlin had his first national success with “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1919*.

vehicle with contemporary satirical humor. Musical comedy actually began in London and was imported to New York where American songwriters would “Americanize” the music and humor.<sup>18</sup> The first quintessential American musical comedy was George M. Cohan’s *Little Johnny Jones* (1904), not surprisingly set in London.<sup>19</sup> Although the plot is almost non-existent, it is important to the canon of classic musicals for its patriotism and its introduction of the American classics, “Yankee Doodle Boy,” “Give My Regards to Broadway,” and “Life is a Funny Proposition After All.”

Cohan continued to write many popular comedies, but with the success of *The Merry Widow* and its Viennese operetta style, musical comedy was overshadowed until after World War I. This interlude allowed composers time to hone their skills and work toward an original American comedic style, described by Cecil Smith in *Musical Comedy in America*, as “its manifest destiny as a native and genuinely popular expression.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Princess Theater Shows**

An important event in the development of American musical comedy occurred when composer Jerome Kern and librettist/lyricist Guy Bolton became creative partners for the Princess Theater in 1915. The “Princess Theater Form” is labeled as intimate because of the small house (only 299 seats), the use of simple costuming, sparse but

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<sup>18</sup> The origin of British musical comedy is attributed to George Edwards at the Gaiety Theater in London. Burkholder, 765. Jerome Kern cut his compositional teeth by working in London’s West End, where he interpolated songs into British musical comedies. He returned to New York’s Broadway to do the same thing, American-style.

<sup>19</sup> The plot is about an American jockey who must clear his name after being charged with cheating at the English Derby. Cohan wrote the music and lyrics, directed, and starred in the original production while only in his early twenties.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Elaine Small Klein, “The Development of the Leading Feminine Character in Selected Librettos of American Musicals from 1900 to 1960” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1962), 40.

functional sets, and an eleven-piece orchestra. Richard Rodgers described this format as “a creation separate and distinct from other theatrical ventures. It employed no chorus, it rarely changed sets, but it did impart to a small audience the feeling that the whole composition of the evening had been created for two ears of a single listener.”<sup>21</sup> Lyricist P. G. Wodehouse soon joined the collaborative team and a new style of light, witty, sophisticated comedies became the next wave of musical comedy. These were loosely integrated book musicals of contemporary stories with modern rhythms and clever lyrics for a more sophisticated New York City crowd. In the next decade, the team at the Princess Theater produced many new shows, including their most successful titles, *Oh Boy!* (1917) and *Oh Lady, Lady* (1918). In the 1920s they moved the “Princess” format to Ziegfeld’s New Amsterdam Theater for *Sally* (1920) and *Sunny* (1925).

The American musical theatre’s position as one of the leading influences on America’s conceptions of sexual and national identity coalesced in the 1920s. This leadership was particularly important for portraying the freedom of the “Flapper Girl” in musical comedy. Elaine Klein explained this phenomena: “Although leading feminine characters in musicals always enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than did their sisters in real life, feminine freedom (evidenced in ‘know-how’ and the ‘wise-crack’) became the leitmotif [*sic*] of music in the twenties.”<sup>22</sup> According to theatre critic and author Ethan

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<sup>21</sup> “Jerome Kern: A Tribute,” *The New York Times* (7 October 1951). Reprinted in *The Richard Rodgers Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Block (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002). Rodgers also admitted to spending his allowance as a teenager for repeated viewings of many of these shows from the cheap seats in the gallery.

<sup>22</sup> Klein, ii. This type of lead character is evidenced in the roles of Sophie Tucker, Ginger Rogers, and Ethel Merman. Charles J. Shindo proposed that because of “the emergence of the ‘new woman’ the twenties are often seen as the first ‘modern’ decade.” “The Twenties” in *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, vol. 4, eds. Tom and Sara Pendergast (Detroit: St. James Press, 2000), 711-712.

Mordden, the audience was crying out for a more believable, more modern, heroine instead of the traditional “masquerading heiresses, and bullied princesses.”<sup>23</sup>

The Princess Theatre Form represented this popular gender trend in mid-1920s musicals of the strong, modern, wise-cracking heroine. Unfortunately, these shows are not yet truly integrated, nor liberated. The plot was still secondary to the performer as a star vehicle, and the independent heroine was still happily coupled and assimilated by the final curtain.<sup>24</sup> The success of these intimate musical escapes, however, quickly became the latest fad on Broadway and was exploited by the Gershwin brothers in *Lady, be Good!* (1924) and *Oh, Kay!* (1926), and by Vincent Youmans in his smash hit, *No, No Nanette* (1924). These shows now seem innocent and archaic, but they introduced some of the most enduring 1920s popular standards that thrilled the “gallery gods” and ensured a long run for the producer’s profits.<sup>25</sup> It was into this period of expectation and financial security that *Show Boat* sailed onto Broadway in December 1927.

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<sup>23</sup> *Make Believe: Broadway Musical in the 1920s*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 152.

<sup>24</sup> *Sally* and *Sunny* were both written for the precise abilities of Ziegfeld’s “comedy queen” triple-threat, Marilyn Miller. *Sunny* is also important as the first collaboration of Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II and includes two innovations that were later used in *Show Boat*’s libretto: the heroine is introduced as part of the chorus rather than in a grand entrance, and the heroine is not affluent in disguise; Klein, 41. Regarding the requisite happy ending of musical comedies, Martin Sutton articulated some very astute observations about the symbolism related to “the bringing together of cultural oppositions” in marriages and the conformity to hegemonic society that women must accept. “Patterns of Meaning in the Musical” in *Genre: The Musical, A Reader*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 194-195.

<sup>25</sup> *Lady, Be Good!* (starring Fred Astaire with his sister, Adele) introduced “Fascinatin’ Rhythm.” *Oh, Kay!* (written as a star vehicle for Gertrude Lawrence) included “Clap Yo’ Hands” and “Someone to Watch Over Me.” *No, No Nanette* was a veritable “hit parade” with “Tea for Two,” “I Want to Be Happy,” and “Hallelujah!” Bruce Kirle described the “gallery gods” as the working class patrons in the cheap balcony seats who became a most discriminating audience; “a full balcony ensured profitable runs.” “Cultural Collaborations: Re-historicizing the American Musical” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002), 10.

### **The History of the Musical, *Show Boat***

*Show Boat* is best described as a musical play, a unique mix of musical comedy and melodramatic operetta. The scope and seriousness of its literary source required an expansive form with an experienced librettist, and Oscar Hammerstein II was the perfect choice for this job. He had established himself as an operetta force in the 1920s with *Wildflower* (1923), and by collaborating with Friml for *Rose Marie* (1924), and with Romberg for *Desert Song* (1926). Theatre professor John Clum regarded Hammerstein as the one “responsible for taking the romance from the operetta and grafting it onto the musical. For Hammerstein, romance was serious business, the province of melodrama, not comedy.”<sup>26</sup>

The transformation of Edna Ferber’s sprawling novel into a musical production began with an innocent encounter in 1926. Jerome Kern just happened to pick up and read the new novel, *Show boat*, by feminist writer Ferber.<sup>27</sup> He had an immediate affinity with the story and felt compelled to set it as a musical. Kern’s biggest obstacle was to convince Ferber that he could set a very serious story as a musical “comedy.” He finally obtained the stage rights to the book when he reassured her that “what he had in mind was not a conventional musical comedy, but a musical play rich with American

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<sup>26</sup> *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 92. Clum also referred to Hammerstein as “the musical’s bard of heterosexual normality.”

<sup>27</sup> Edna Ferber, *Show boat* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Page, 1926). See Frank P. Mulrooney’s dissertation, “The Sunbonnet and the Sombrero: Pioneer Feminism and Feminist Pioneers in the Early Novels of Edna Ferber,” for an interesting perspective on Ferber’s influence as a feminist writer, even though she was ignored by feminist literary critics in favor of Willa Cather (Ph.D. diss., University of South Florida, 2000).

background, characters, and local color.”<sup>28</sup> Kern had less difficulty in persuading Oscar Hammerstein II to join him in creating an operatic “comedy” where the plot would be the primary consideration. Somehow the team also convinced Florenz Ziegfeld to produce this innovative concept within a two-year contract span, an unprecedented amount of preparation time for the 1920s. This was not to be the “typical Ziegfeld girlie show,” according to musical theatre historian Miles Kreuger.<sup>29</sup> Ziegfeld did not quite understand Kern and Hammerstein’s commitment to creating such a tightly integrated drama, nor its extended gestation period.<sup>30</sup> But he allowed the collaborators time to construct and improve the musical version of *Show Boat* through many revisions and out-of-town tryouts until its eventual opening night at the new Ziegfeld Theater in New York, 27 December 1927.<sup>31</sup>

An immediate success, *Show Boat* established a new standard of musical drama in American theatre with its blend of comedy, operetta, and melodrama characteristics. Joseph Swain explained this new plot-driven integration in “the songs, the generous

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<sup>28</sup> David Ewen, *The World of Jerome Kern: A Biography* (New York: Holt & Co., 1960), 86.

<sup>29</sup> *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Show Boat* was also the theatre introduction of a young orchestrator named Robert Russell Bennett. Stacy Wolf compared Kern’s vision of a fully integrated production to Wagner’s realization of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>31</sup> The premiere of *Show Boat* in Washington, D. C. lasted four hours and forty minutes as Hammerstein sought to remain true to the expanse of Ferber’s text. Many songs and scenes were revised during tryouts there, in Cleveland, and in Philadelphia before the premiere in New York City. There is an urban myth that *Show Boat* was intended to be the grand premiere for Ziegfeld’s new theater in January 1927, but its production delays allowed *Rio Rita* to steal that distinction. Miles Kreuger dispels that myth and many others in his fascinating and exhaustive account of all details related to this musical, *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical*. *Rio Rita* (Harry Tierney, music; Joseph McCarthy, lyrics; Guy Bolton and Fred Thompson, libretto) ran 494 performances and was the first successful film adaptation of a musical. See Stanley Green, *Broadway Musicals, Show by Show*, 5th ed., ed. Kay Green (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Publishing, 1996), 55.

amount of instrumental music, the dancing, the crowd scenes, all arise from events in a rather serious plot. Nothing is extraneous.”<sup>32</sup> Dramatic integration had been hinted at in the earlier musicals by Kern, but *Show Boat* was the culmination of two decades of his work.<sup>33</sup> The production ran for two years at Ziegfeld’s new theater with an average weekly gross of \$50,000.<sup>34</sup> The original cast then went on national tour for nine months. A London production began a successful run in 1928, and the show returned to Broadway in 1932 for 180 performances at the Casino Theater; once again produced by Ziegfeld. Revivals have been staged in New York City every decade since its premiere, three movie versions have immortalized the story with representative superstars of their day, and the New York City Opera added it to their standard repertory in 1954.<sup>35</sup> The financial success and continued popularity of *Show Boat* was a revelation to Manhattan musical producers. Finally, an American story had emerged with a setting other than Europe or New York City. It stood apart from other musicals for two decades as an attempt to present a serious libretto with contemporary social themes, its music was

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990; rev. ed., 2002.), 15. Elaine Klein described it as “a welcome relief from the typical frothy tales of musicals.” Klein, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Lehmann Engel, *The American Musical Theatre*, rev. ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1975), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Kreuger, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Kern died during rehearsals for the 1946 revival. The most recent Broadway production was Harold Prince’s extravaganza in 1994, which won the Tony award for “Best Musical Revival.” The 1929 Universal film (directed by Robert Parsons), starring “Stepin Fetchit” as Joe, was originally planned as a silent film. A musical prologue was added with several *Show Boat* songs sung by original cast members, and then popular music of the era was interpolated within the body of the film; Joseph Cherniavsky scored the additional music. The 1936 Universal film (produced and directed by James Whale), starred original cast members Helen Morgan (Julie) and Charles Winninger (Cap’n Andy), Irene Dunne (the national tour cast Magnolia, after Norma Terris), Paul Robeson (the London cast Joe), and Hattie McDaniel (Queenie). The 1951 MGM musical extravaganza starred Kathryn Grayson (Magnolia), Howard Keel (Gaylord), Ava Gardner (Julie), Joe E. Brown (Cap’n Andy), Agnes Morehead (Parthenia), William Warfield (Joe), and Frances Williams (Queenie). Of the three films, the 1936 version is the most critically admired and considered most accurate to the original stage production by Miles Kruger and the editors of the Broadway documentary. *Broadway: The American Musical* (Public Broadcasting Service Home Video, 2005).

specific to this particular show and was not intended for popular consumption as sheet music (with the exceptions of period interpolations such as “Bill” and “After the Ball”), and it demonstrated musical theatre’s ability to tell a reasonably serious story, even with comedic elements. In other words, *Show Boat* established the musical drama for the American stage.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Plot and Characters of *Show Boat***

The basic story of *Show Boat* (aside from all of the pageantry of a show-within-a-show setting) follows the relationships of five couples who live and work on the *Cotton Blossom* show boat: Parthy Ann (Parthenia Ann) and Cap’n Andy; Ellie and Frank; Queenie and Joe; Julie and Steve; and Magnolia and Gaylord.<sup>37</sup> The musical presents the lives of these “show folk” in both their public and private spheres. Following Ferber’s lead, its subplots incorporate issues of class, racial conditions and prejudices, and the outdated “Jim Crow” law of miscegenation.<sup>38</sup> While the novel spans fifty years in Magnolia’s life, from a small child to a widowed mother, Hammerstein compressed the story into about thirty years for his libretto (c. 1888-1927).

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<sup>36</sup> Mates, 185.

<sup>37</sup> John Clum makes an interesting point regarding Hammerstein’s “variations on the operetta format” by always complementing the lead romantic couple with a comic couple. He later crafted this technique into an art form in his collaborations with Richard Rodgers. Clum’s observation is that the comic female lead usually became the career-making (and Tony winning) role rather than the ingénue heroine. *Something for the Boys*, 115. This is true for *Show Boat* as well. There have been many indiscriminate Magnolias, but the role of Julie is indelibly connected with the original, Helen Morgan, and the screen star, Ava Gardner. In Rodgers and Hammerstein’s later formats, the secondary lead always introduced the show’s “anthem”; in this case, “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man.”

<sup>38</sup> “Jim Crow” refers to the post-Civil War Reconstruction laws of segregation for whites and blacks. The definition of miscegenation is a white man married to a black woman, which was unlawful in many southern states in the 1890s.

Ferber's novel begins with the narrative of Magnolia's near demise in delivering her daughter as a glimpse of her zest for life and her wicked sense of humor. The novel then flashes back to the eight-year-old Magnolia and her introduction to life on the show boat. The most apt description for Magnolia's childhood is that of a "tomboy." She was happiest when falling into creeks, flouncing through fields with Julie, learning the ways of the rivers from the doctor and boat pilot, or reading "yellow" romance novels cast off by the troupe. She indulged in all these activities in spite of her mother's insistence on finely starched pinafores and freshly brushed hair, and the routine of daily piano practice and lessons. Magnolia was enthralled by the theatre and often snuck out onto her bedroom veranda to watch the nightly shows. Ferber described Magnolia's enthusiasm for the stage:

She never tired of watching these simple blood-and-thunder dramas. Automatically she learned every part in every play in the *Cotton Blossom's* repertoire, so that by the time she was thirteen she could have leaped on the stage at a moment's notice to play anything from Simon Legree to Lena Rivers.<sup>39</sup>

Hammerstein's libretto begins just before Magnolia turns eighteen as the *Cotton Blossom* docks at Natchez, Mississippi, and the troupe performs a sample show to advertise the evening's performance. The opening scene is a master stroke of economy and spectacle. All of the main characters are introduced both visually and through musical leitmotifs, alongside the social issues of racial inequality, class structure, and prejudice.

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<sup>39</sup> Ferber, *Show boat*, 101.

The primary love story centers on Magnolia and Gaylord, but a sub-plot involves Julie's mixed-blood heritage. A pivotal scene in the first act reveals this to the audience as well as to the characters. Pete, the boat engineer, was earlier rejected by Julie and had vowed revenge. He alerts the sheriff that there is a case of miscegenation aboard the show boat. When the sheriff arrives to arrest Julie, her husband Steve dramatically proclaims himself also of "Negro blood" after cutting her hand and mixing her blood with his. The sheriff is mollified, but the couple decides to leave the boat anyway to relieve the troupe of further embarrassment.<sup>40</sup> The captain's daughter, Magnolia (Nola), takes over as the lead ingénue of the troupe and the romantic lead is played by a young gambler who needs to get out of town quickly, Gaylord Ravenal.

The courtship of Nola and Gay is very public for it unfolds upon the *Cotton Blossom's* stage. This technique goes beyond a show-within-a-show scenario and assists in developing their melodramatic relationship. It also strengthens Magnolia's self-confidence as an actress, for she develops a large following among the levee townsfolk. Hammerstein introduces a bold first-act finale with their wedding scene. Cap'n Andy invites the entire town to their nuptials (knowing that Parthy Ann is away for the day) and the first act concludes as the young couple departs for their honeymoon. In an unusual departure from musical theatre tradition, the ingénue becomes a woman before the end of the first act rather than the final curtain.

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<sup>40</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, *Show Boat*, Act I:4 (New York: The Rodgers and Hammerstein Library, 1927). It should be noted that Kern did not include any songs for this scene. There is only some light underscoring of "Misery's Comin' Aroun'," sung earlier by Queenie and the African-American workers on the levee.

Act II begins four years later as Gaylord has taken Magnolia away from her river life to Chicago. The first scene is the 1893 Chicago World Exhibition's midway, including the famous Dahomey village.<sup>41</sup> The Ravenals, with their daughter Kim, are part of the throngs enjoying the modern sights of the fair.<sup>42</sup> Their life together is shown initially as glamorous and modern in their marriage relationship, but Gaylord eventually abandons his family because of his gambling debts. In the novel, he never returns. As a result, Magnolia is forced to find a job to support herself and Kim, who is enrolled at a private Catholic school. She embarks upon a career as a cabaret singer and musical comedy star that garners international acclaim and financial security for her family. Kim grows up and trains in the family business. She eventually becomes a star in her own right who represents the new tradition of the ingénue on Broadway in the 1920s.

The second act is the weakest aspect of the original production and has been staged differently in every reincarnation. Kern introduces only one new song ("Why Do I Love You?") and then interpolates period songs and dances, or reprises from the first act. In Ferber's novel, Magnolia returns to the *Cotton Blossom* as a retired widow to mourn her mother's death and to take over as mistress of the show boat. The musical version is a drama but not a tragedy. In musical comedy tradition, Hammerstein created a complex series of unbelievable coincidences to reunite all of the lead characters (except Julie) on the *Cotton Blossom* at the same Natchez levee in 1927. Magnolia graciously

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<sup>41</sup> This African village scene was a nod to racial stereotypes and minstrelsy traditions as well as historical accuracy for the Chicago World Exhibition.

<sup>42</sup> Kim, a modern name, is an acronym for Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri, the states where she was supposedly born. The *Cotton Blossom* had tethered in a river junction of the three states during a fierce storm when Magnolia delivered her.

accepts Gaylord's reappearance without question, and they live happily ever after as the "Ol' Man River jes' keeps rollin' along!"<sup>43</sup>

The popularity of *Show Boat* continues to "roll along" through its revivals and its secure foundation in the Broadway canon. Geoffrey Block, American music historian, granted it "unequivocal canonic status" for its "permanence in the repertoire *and [sic]* the critical respect due a masterpiece of a genre."<sup>44</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* headline for the 1996 revival summarized its significance and relevance to twenty first-century audiences and performers: "*Show Boat* dates from 1927 but it's for the ages."

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<sup>43</sup> *Show Boat*, Act II:7. The final set is recycled from the first, with the addition of a banner announcing Charles Lindberg's transcontinental flight for historical interest. The reality of this reunion for people who had long ago died in the novel is an example of the suspension of belief in musical comedy traditions. Theatre historians still argue over the necessity of Ravenal's return to create a traditionally happy ending to the "musical comedy." Miles Kruger is especially adamant about the uselessness of the coincidental return, and what it takes away from Magnolia's survival. *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical*, 50.

<sup>44</sup> "The Broadway Canon from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* and the European Operatic Ideal" in *The Journal of Musicology* 11/4 (fall 1993): 535.

**CHAPTER III**

**SOCIETAL STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN REPRESENTED BY  
THE FEMALE LEAD ROLES IN *SHOW BOAT***

Stereotypes are a necessary tool for coping with change or regaining a lost sense of control in every society. They are developed from childhood maturation as part of the psychological division of self from the outer world and then reappear as an adult response to anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Based upon previous experience, they are a representative form that quickly conveys a database of information and connotations. Psychologist Walter Lippmann explained the necessity for stereotypes and their use in emotional development:

The pattern of stereotypes is not neutral . . . not merely a short cut. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.<sup>2</sup>

In society, the use of stereotypes is effective because it creates a consensus on particular social groups. Our general ideas about a group are based on observed characteristics;

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<sup>1</sup> The term “stereotype” was first used in 1798 to describe a new process of duplicating printing type through a paper-mâché mold. It was adapted by social psychologists in the early twentieth century to “designate images through which we categorize the world.” Sander L. Gilman, “What Are Stereotypes and Why Use Texts to Study Them?” in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sex, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Press, 1985), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Public Opinion*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 96. Reprinted in Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11. Dyer is acknowledged as the original writer to appropriate “stereotype” for social psychology.

however, the attached “highly charged feelings” are part of the attributes that give stereotype a negative connotation in contemporary usage. Other negative attributes are the belief that the stereotype is an absolute truth, and the power, or intent, of the group formulating the stereotype. The primary purpose of a stereotype is to categorize those on the outside of the self (dominant group) as Other; its function is “to maintain sharp boundary definitions” of those who are included in the social group and those who are not.<sup>3</sup>

The image of woman in American society between 1880 and 1930 was filtered through gender stereotypes based on sexuality and prescribed behavioral characteristics of femininity. Psychologists and social historians agree that “gender” is a social construct rather than a biological fact.<sup>4</sup> The hegemonic hierarchy constructed feminine stereotypes to categorize what is not masculine in the societal norm. Gender, then, is a cultural designation of social function through dress, behavior, types of work, and familial duties. In the late nineteenth century, gender role stereotypes were described through bipolar strengths. Men’s roles were identified by terms like “instrumental, hard, active, and agency”; women’s roles were identified by “expressive, soft, passive, and

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<sup>3</sup> See Orrin E. Klapp’s distinction between stereotypes and social types in Dyer, 14 and 16. Lillian S. Robison defined Other as “the element that is *not* the subject, defined only in relation to it and only negatively.” *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 26.

<sup>4</sup> There is a common confusion between sex and gender in stereotypes. Feminist historians Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron DeHart defined “sex” as unchangeable biological differences and “gender” as learned societal meanings attached to those differences. “Gender,” *Encyclopedia of American Social History* vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993), 484. Comedienne Joanne Gilbert explained the two terms as “sex is what you’re born with; gender is what you do with it.” *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004), 6.

communion.”<sup>5</sup> This bias continued well into the twentieth century. The acquisition of gender role stereotypes was (and still is) easily available through mainstream culture mediums (magazines, theatre, movies, popular music), personal interaction with specific men and women in careers, and tacit influences from schools and the legal system.<sup>6</sup>

In her article on “Femininity,” Jill G. Morawski discussed female gender stereotypes of the late nineteenth century through three areas: fictional characterization (women’s sensibilities), “prescriptions for social and moral arrangements” (separate spheres, or the cult of domesticity), and scientific research on biological differences (the “Woman Question”).<sup>7</sup> I believe a brief investigation into the areas of separate spheres and the “Woman Question” is necessary to appreciate fully the subtypes of gender roles encountered in the female characters of *Show Boat*.

### **Separate Spheres and the Cult of Domesticity**

One of the prevailing themes of the female gender stereotype in the late nineteenth century was the discussion of “separate spheres” for men and women. The advent of an industrialized society and the increased impersonality of mechanized business created a division of home and the marketplace for the first time in history. Man’s sphere was the public arena where he was expected to excel in his business field and then return

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<sup>5</sup> *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Gender Stereotypes,” ed. Helen Tierney (Greenwood Press, 2002). Jill Morawski adds independence, rationality, and an interest in objects as characteristics of male roles, and emotionality, dependence, and involvement in personal relationships to characteristics of female roles. “Femininity,” *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*.

<sup>6</sup> “Gender Stereotypes.” Gilman argued that stereotypes “can also be perpetuated, resurrected, and shaped” through cultural mediums, independent of any personal contact with a specific group. *Difference and Pathology*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> “Femininity.”

home to the haven of comfort provided by his companion wife.<sup>8</sup> Woman's sphere was the intimate world of the home, commonly referred to as the "cult of domesticity."<sup>9</sup> This was a relatively new concept formulated in the Victorian period as middle class affluence took husbands out of the family workshop and into the urban workplace. Woman's work, according to Christopher Lasch, was to specialize in rearing children and to provide moral values and emotional solace for the family.<sup>10</sup>

During the late nineteenth century, modern conveniences relieved mothers from the traditional toils of harvesting and preparing food, and doing housework. The makers of these conveniences may have intended to simplify a woman's day and allow her more time to care for her children, but that was not the reality. As many women had to replace their live-in domestic help with machines, the homemaker actually had less help than before. This dilemma was compounded in the 1890s as urban families deliberately decreased their number of children. Since large families were no longer essential for farm work, there was less help from the children as well.<sup>11</sup> Bearing and rearing fewer

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<sup>8</sup> The mid-nineteenth century was also the first era of marriages without parental consent or planning. Christopher Lasch described this new state of marriage as "a union of individuals rather than a union of two lineages." Companionship and love became the new goals of legal unions instead of family dynasties. "Life in the Therapeutic State" in *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism*, ed. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 162.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Pleck labels it the "empire of the mother" in "Family History: Gender Roles and Relations," *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 1950. Lasch describes this "cult" as revolving around a "new glorification of motherhood," 95.

<sup>10</sup> Lasch, 162.

<sup>11</sup> Kerber and DeHart cite statistics that support the fact that "modern conveniences" actually lengthened the woman's workday, especially if she was also forced to work outside of the home. "Gender," 483. This era was also the beginning of a social hygiene that required more frequent bathing and laundry, thus compounding housework. Lasch refutes the all-consuming time constraints of housework by describing the barter economy of unpaid services based on the good will of extended family and friends in the urban neighborhood. In his view, this system worked well until after World War II when the housewife was completely on her own in the isolation of the suburbs. "The Sexual Division of Labor" in *Women and*

children, however, did allow mothers to dote upon the individual child. Marie Richmond-Abbott wrote that the nineteenth-century American female achieved her success “not from ‘doing’ but by ‘being,’ in particular by bearing children and raising them.”<sup>12</sup> The concept of separate spheres should indicate some equality in value for the male and female roles in providing for the family. Unfortunately, all societies value the male role more than the female. America’s economic culture is evidence of that tradition by its evaluation of wage labor as superior to at-home or volunteer work. The woman’s domestic sphere was implicitly considered subordinate to the man’s business sphere.

In the urban Victorian middle class family, the cult of domesticity did provide females an advantage as a symbol of upper class culture. The role of the daughters was to execute particular social accomplishments (painting, calligraphy, singing and playing the piano) to attract the best suitor prospects. The mothers enjoyed autonomy in their marriage partnership that allowed time and means to socialize or to volunteer outside of the home for social causes, such as the suffragist movement, temperance, prostitution laws, and child labor abuses.<sup>13</sup>

A telling portrayal of the late nineteenth-century male view toward these dilettante feminine accomplishments is George P. Upton’s explanation of why women

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*the Common Life*, 102. This trend of isolation was the beginning of what Betty Friedan termed “The Problem with No Name” in *The Feminine Mystique*, 20th anniversary ed (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> *The American Woman: Her Past, Her Present, Her Future* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), 72. Women were expected to begin bearing children as quickly as possible after marriage.

<sup>13</sup> Mabel Donnelly refuted the “patriarchal myth” that woman’s sphere was equal to or superior to the man’s in *The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 137. Her second chapter highlights the stereotypes of separate spheres even for children as evidenced in an issue of *The Juvenile Miscellany* (Boston, 1895). Girls were taught domestic knowledge while boys were directed toward more “masculine” subjects (architecture, race issues, comparative cultures), 14. The novels of Jane Austen also provide amusing commentary on the societal expectation of young ladies’ musical accomplishments and its backlash.

cannot be composers. His characterization of woman is full of gender stereotypes regarding her emotional state and mimetic interpretations, her inability to endure disappointments or opposition (“woman is not calculated to endure”), and her lack of facility to comprehend theory, counterpoint, or form because of her innate use of intuition rather than logic or mathematical deduction. Because of these gender limitations and societal expectations, he wrote, “It does not seem that women will ever originate music in its fullest and grandest harmonic forms. She will always be the recipient and interpreter, but there is little hope she will be the creator.”<sup>14</sup> One must wonder about Upton’s reaction in the next decade to the enormously successful Boston premieres of Mrs. H. H. A. (Amy) Beach’s *Grand Mass in E-flat Major* (1892) and *Symphony no. 1, “Gaelic”* (1896).

Ethnic women of the working-class poor and African-American women did not enjoy a separate sphere. Their reality was the necessity for mothers and daughters to work outside of the home (or to take in piece-work) for ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, just to survive. They then returned home to attend to their own domestic work.<sup>15</sup> This created a serious source of conflict within the home as the husband felt that it demeaned his own abilities to provide adequately for his family. An increase in physical abuse and alcoholism became the norm for working-class fathers.<sup>16</sup> Jobs for women outside of the home were always at the lowest rank of pay and aptitude, and in

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<sup>14</sup> *Woman in Music*, Boston: J. R. Osgood (1880); reprinted in Carol Neuls-Bates, *Women in Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 206-210. Upton was a music critic and editor for the *Chicago Tribune*.

<sup>15</sup> In the textile industry, specifically, daughters worked to supplement the family income so that the sons could continue school. They usually left the work force after marriage, but then returned while raising children to “make ends meet.” Kerber and DeHart, 483.

<sup>16</sup> Pleck, 1951.

unhealthy, sub-human environments. Hired based on gender stereotypes rather than abilities or intellect, women were given little chance to improve their employment level.

### **The “Woman Question”**

As women began to speak out against the injustices of the factory system and inherent inequalities of legal protection in the separate spheres, a universal debate began that involved philosophers, scientists, and religious leaders throughout the late nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century. This debate, known as the “Woman Question” or the “Woman Problem,” centered on the status of woman as a member of human society in terms of biological, sexual, psychological, and intellectual characteristics. Early commentary on the American “Woman Question” is found in Harriet Martineau’s *Society in America* (1837), Sarah Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838), and Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).<sup>17</sup> Each of these authors protested the hegemonic perpetuation of woman as a subordinate object or property. This type of discourse on woman’s social status and biological traits has, of course, been debated since the Middle Ages. But for the first time, woman as Other became equated with pathology in her demands for emancipation and reform.

Even though the term “feminist” was not coined until 1910, the feminist movement began as early as 1848 with its first manifesto by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Her

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<sup>17</sup> Martineau (London, 1837; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1966); Grimké (Boston, 1838; reprint, ed. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1988); Fuller (New York, 1845; reprint, New York: Norton, 1971). The opinions of these writers are summarized in Ann Shapiro’s book, *Unlikely Heroines: Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Woman Question* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

“Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” challenged the hegemonic status quo in demanding equal property rights for married women, voting rights for all women, equal standards of sexual behavior, and equal leadership roles in churches.<sup>18</sup> Young women began participating in intellectual inquiry through female higher education in the mid nineteenth century and soon joined together as societies to fight these inequalities. Kerber and DeHart outlined the purposes of these early feminist groups as 1) to have an understanding of the economic and social relationships that benefit one gender at the expense of another; 2) to develop a language to critique hierarchal relationships and to articulate an alternate vision; and 3) to forge the group solidarity necessary to realize this vision.<sup>19</sup> This was the beginning of feminine empowerment as a reaction to the effects of an industrialized society on women and the lessons learned in the cult of domesticity.

The male response to the “Woman Question” was based upon stereotypes of sexuality rather than the social and economic contexts. Harriet Anderson addressed the opposition to the feminist movement by three separate groups in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna that has parallels in American society. Karl Leuger, leader of the political conservatives, argued that the female was “oversexed” and had been corrupted by men of inferior races [or classes]. The artisans proposed that bourgeois women were jealous of sexually free women (prostitutes). They argued that the natural female role in culture could only be as muse or object for the artist; they also declared that the woman’s movement was responsible for the rejection of femininity in society. Scientists regarded the feminists as

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<sup>18</sup> Kerber and DeHart, 488. Stanton’s manifesto was presented at the Seneca Falls Convention, which is considered the inception of the American women’s movement. It was convened to discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions of women as well as their legal rights. Shapiro, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Kerber and DeHart, 488.

dominated by masculine traits in appearance and intellect, and actually labeled them as a third gender, or hermaphrodites. Sigmund Freud's theories are rather ambiguous regarding outspoken women. He attributed their masculine behavior to arrested development and jealousy in the phallic stage, and he established a close connection between *Frauenrechtlerin* (women's righters) and lesbianism. In the seismic study of sexuality and its influences on character development in both genders, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character), medical doctor Otto Weininger wrote, "The female will always remain incapable of real emancipation for this is the preserve of the masculine. The ultimate enemy of women's emancipation is woman."<sup>20</sup> Francis Parkman articulated an American male view of the suffragist movement by commenting on the "more delicate" physical and mental constitution of the female; while men were "made for conflict," women possess "moral elevation." This was a typical prejudicial response rather than action taken on the relevant issues.<sup>21</sup>

Weininger's study is also significant for female stereotypes as he postulated an original system of "characterology." This crystallized the general characteristics of the ideal woman ("W") as "two elemental figures, the Courtesan and the Mother."<sup>22</sup> This duality within woman became a prominent theme for feminist opponents as well as

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<sup>20</sup> *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movements in fin-de-siècle Vienna* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 3-4. The American version of *Sex and Character* (New York: A. L. Burt) was published in 1906 after the sixth German edition, originally published in 1903. Its amazing influence on gender thought has continued through multiple revisions and reprints, including a new edition introduced in 2005 (Indiana University Press). A female rebuttal, *Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit* (1905), was quickly published by Dr. Rosa Mayreder and translated into English: *A Survey of the Woman Problem*, trans. Herman Scheffauer (London: W. Heinemann, 1913).

<sup>21</sup> "The Woman Question," *North American Review* 129 (1879): 304-08; quoted in Shapiro, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Sex and Character*, 258. Chapter Six is devoted to the "Emancipated Woman" and her masculine qualities.

members of the women's movement, including Rosa Mayreder, a leading crusader for a loftier morality in women's issues. She argued that the emerging promiscuity of the 1890s did not reflect gender equality but a step down to masculine morality, which was ultimately a threat to women.<sup>23</sup>

The "Woman Question" in American society at the turn of the century explored these same stereotypes of moral degeneration in terms of emancipation. As early as 1871, Catharine Beecher addressed the Christian Women of America with an appeal for mothers to influence their families and bring about a more moral nation. She opposed the suffragist movement because she felt that it would expose women to the corruption of contemporary politics and debase their character.<sup>24</sup> By the 1890s, the stereotype of woman as a seductress became a social expectation. The previous glorification of motherhood also had degenerated. In literature and opinion papers the mother was now depicted as "overly protective and rigidly moralistic."<sup>25</sup>

The feminist of the 1890s was represented by Charles Dana Gibson's illustrations featured in *Life* magazine, the "Gibson Girl." This "new woman" put aside the corsets of Victorian dress and domestic expectations for a freer style of fashion and a civic sense of family responsibility. The home was still the fortress of moral education and character, but now women extended their influence beyond its sphere by implementing ideas of reform in the public sphere through their husbands. The new market of women's

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<sup>23</sup> Anderson, 128.

<sup>24</sup> S. Jay Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830-1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 178.

<sup>25</sup> Lucy M. Freibert, "Images of Women in American Literature" in *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Helen Tierney (Greenwood Press, 2002).

magazines, including *Ladies Home Journal* (debut in 1889), advocated this new style of motherhood by advising women “to be active, educated, and not to smother their children.”<sup>26</sup> Young women were also becoming better educated outside of the home. In 1886 there were 365 institutions of higher education for women (266 women’s colleges and 297 mechanical and scientific institutes that accepted females), with an enrollment of 35,976.<sup>27</sup>

The era between 1890 and 1920 has been labeled the “Progressive Era” in history texts and the age of “social housekeeping” in feminist criticism. Social and legal reforms enacted by the professional politicians were actually instigated by the work of women’s societies. Educated women used their classmate and church connections to build organizational networks that rivaled their husbands’ corporate business world, according to historian Mary Ryan.<sup>28</sup> These included benevolent societies, foreign missions boards, temperance societies, prison reform, women’s rights, and the evangelical revivals that swept across the nation. Some specific organizations that began during this period and influenced American culture throughout the twentieth century are the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (1890), the National Council of Jewish Women (1893), the National Association of Colored Women (1895), and the Young Women’s Christian Association (1920). Along with social reform, women’s volunteer service and philanthropy to libraries, hospitals, schools, parks, playgrounds, concert halls, and museums helped build

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<sup>26</sup> Kleinberg, 171.

<sup>27</sup> Shapiro, 13. These figures are in comparison to 802 institutions for men with an enrollment of 78,185. For further discussion, see Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).

<sup>28</sup> Lasch, 96.

new urban centers of society that valued culture and education. Yet most of this “work” is unheralded in the historical canon because of its volunteer nature. Christopher Lasch stated plainly that historians knew of woman’s role in reform and the building of modern civilization but “for historians, as for everybody else, work is understood as something dignified by a salary or a wage.”<sup>29</sup>

In the 1920s a critical backlash emerged against the Victorian type of moral social reformer, now considered the “custodian of American culture” or arbiter of civic taste. Thomas Beer labeled this stereotype the “Titaness” in *The Mauve Decade* (1926). She was “a terror to editors, the hope of missionary societies, and the prey of lecturers.”<sup>30</sup> The emancipated woman stereotype became the “Flapper,” a woman whose battles for equality focused on sexual gratification and social independence rather than civic duty and moral indoctrination.

In the midst of these general female stereotypes are four gender role subtypes that are represented by the female characters in *Show Boat*: the New England Victorian, the Post-Bellum Southern Belle, the Ethnic Other, and the New Woman. Although they share many common qualities through the societal expectations of separate spheres and the “Woman Question,” there are specific traits that provide a distinct stereotype for each.

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<sup>29</sup> Lasch, 95-96.

<sup>30</sup> Lasch, 100. Lasch described “club women, do-gooders, and cultural missionaries” as symbols of Victorian repression and objects of ridicule in the 1920s.

**Nineteenth Century Stereotypes of Women Relative to  
the Female Lead Roles in *Show Boat***

**The New England Victorian Woman**

The New England Victorian woman reveled in her domestic sphere and particularly in her role as moral guardian of the family. Purity established a woman's reputation in New England society. Marie Richmond-Abbott outlined the stereotype of the Victorian "good girl" model as "one who is moral, pure, chaste, modest and without much sexual desire," summarized as "Ladies don't move."<sup>31</sup> Sexual repression has become a cliché of the Victorian era, but the reality was that sex was discussed openly and that women took pleasure in it. Carl Degler proposed that New England Victorian women shaped family dynamics and used the façade of abstinence "in pursuit of their own interests" through the cult of domesticity. He described the so-called patriarchal "ideology" of chaste wives and daughters with limited libidos as actually a feminine creation that reduced the number of pregnancies by allowing women to control the frequency of sexual relations.<sup>32</sup> New England women were "overtly political," according to S. Jay Kleinberg.<sup>33</sup> Their need to influence man's self-control and to protect women from abuse was also the driving force behind the civic reforms of sanctioned prostitution,

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<sup>31</sup> *The American Woman*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (1980); quoted in Lasch, 163-164. Lasch remarked that Victorian-era medical statements that seem to deny women's sexual appetites were actually prescriptive of a new morality to protect women from rape and abuse, 164.

<sup>33</sup> *Women in the United States*, 178.

raising the age of consent, child custody laws, property rights, and the temperance movement.<sup>34</sup>

Second to the chastity stereotype was a divine dictate to nurture and train one's children well for society praised or blamed the mother for the child's success in life. For the first time, a son bonded with his mother as she instilled her vision of morality and self-restraint. This was evident in the practice of sons writing letters to the mother rather than to the father after leaving home.<sup>35</sup> As stated earlier, these mothers were not treated well in contemporary literature. William James described the Victorian need to dominate her children in 1907 as the "bitch goddess syndrome" which formed two new stereotypes: the "bitch of conscience" (moral tyranny) and the "bitch of avarice" (a greed to possess).<sup>36</sup> The resulting picture of the New England Victorian woman is a stoic, rigidly moralistic but conniving female who achieves her own agenda through her husband and children. This stereotype is represented in *Show Boat* by Parthenia Ann Hawkes, the wife of the boat's captain and mother of Magnolia.

### **The Post-Bellum Southern Belle**

Before the Civil War, the Southern plantation wife enjoyed her domestic sphere within a patriarchal community where the master ruled over the house and slaves as part of his business sphere. Like her Northern sister, the Southern woman was in charge of the home and her children. She also became the master-in-absentia for the family

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<sup>34</sup> Lasch, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Pleck, 1951.

<sup>36</sup> Freibert, "Images of Women in American Literature."

business. She was responsible for the bookkeeping duties and harvesting supervision in her husband's absence, in addition to her regular duties: maintaining the gardens, supervising the domestic servants, providing medical care for the servants, and religious education.<sup>37</sup> Chastity was also of supreme importance for the Southern female as a "certification of racial purity and of her husband's prestige."<sup>38</sup> The Southern male's masculinity was identified with his personal honor, and many duels were fought over such reputations. According to Margaret R. Wolfe, the stereotype of the Southern Belle is based in the standards of seventeenth-century English etiquette as a counterpoint to the aristocratic male. Her characteristics were "modesty, chastity, meekness, godliness, and compassion."<sup>39</sup> The Southern Belle should be "a submissive wife whose reason for being is to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, bring up his children, and manage his household."<sup>40</sup>

After the Civil War (or the "War of Northern Aggression" for this stereotype), the subservience of the Southern Belle gave way to a stronger, more outspoken woman as a result of her trials of survival, and the emotional and psychological defeat of the men who did return home. Unlike the New England Victorian, the Southern Belle was skeptical of the suffragist movement and its implicit female independence. From their experiences of being left behind to take care of business during the war, they were convinced that independence meant "intolerable burdens." For those whose men did not return, an "ethos"

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<sup>37</sup> Pleck, 1952.

<sup>38</sup> Pleck, 1952.

<sup>39</sup> "The Southern Lady: Long Suffering Counterpart of the Good Ol' Boy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (summer 1977): 18.

<sup>40</sup> Wolfe, 18.

of social motherhood developed as women tended the graves of strangers and cared for the widows and extended families of the community.<sup>41</sup>

The Southern Belle's common trait is the ability to adapt to social upheaval with a gracious smile and impeccable manners. Sociology professor Sarah Brabant summarized the tripartite code of the Southern Belle, exemplified in her own upbringing, as survival at all costs, survival with dignity ("for fear of being 'tacky'"), and responsibility for others, especially one's own offspring.<sup>42</sup> And yet, the stereotype of the fragile, dependent Southern Belle lives on, perpetuated by coquettish behavior with a shorthand of legendary "Belle-speak" that seems to belittle the speaker.<sup>43</sup> In *Show Boat*, Magnolia Hawkes is introduced as this stereotype with the characteristics of the coquette, and as a survivor with dignity and responsibility.

### **The Ethnic Other**

The Ethnic woman stereotype of the nineteenth century is typically described in the dual context of slavery and sexuality.<sup>44</sup> She is classified as Other in gender, race, and class. She has always had to work both outside and within the home as factory worker, plantation hand, or middle class domestic. Ethnic women attempted to adopt the philosophy of "separate spheres" in family life after emancipation from slavery, but racial (and

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<sup>41</sup> Kleinberg, 177-78.

<sup>42</sup> Brabant, "Socialization for Change: the Cultural Heritage of the Southern Woman," *Sociological Spectrum* 6/1 (1986): 51-61.

<sup>43</sup> See Wolfe, 18. The ultimate character representative of this stereotype is, of course, Margaret Mitchell's Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*.

<sup>44</sup> The Ethnic woman of this period may refer to either the southern African-American or the New England immigrant Jew. As a parallel to *Show Boat*, I am limiting the stereotype to the African-American woman.

gender) inequality forced them instead to work at low-wage jobs to support their families.<sup>45</sup> As young white women are portrayed as innocent and chaste, ethnic women are presented as sexually aware and seductive. In literature, they are portrayed as sexual beings, able to lure men just by their presence.<sup>46</sup> In *Show Boat*, this stereotype is portrayed as a caricature in the role of Queenie and a subplot shorthand for the role of Julie Dozier. The aid societies and civic groups of the Southern Belle excluded African-American women in the “Jim Crow “ segregated politics of the South, but the New England Victorians embraced the plight of the Ethnic woman as part of their reforms for welfare and settlement housing.

As a summary of these nineteenth-century gender stereotypes, Jessie Bernard’s text from *Women in the Public Interest* seems appropriate. She wrote, “American woman’s role is similar to that of an underdeveloped nation—her natural resources are funneled to her husband in return for economic support and protection . . . but she has no equal voice in decisions and is probably viewed as inferior.”<sup>47</sup> Or, as the original suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her memoirs regarding the commonality of women, regardless of class or ethnicity, women are “ranked with idiots, lunatics and criminals in the Constitution.”<sup>48</sup>

Beginning in the 1890s, however, social paradigms began to shift in favor of greater independence, higher education, and greater economic opportunities outside the

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<sup>45</sup> Pleck, 1952.

<sup>46</sup> Kerber and DeHart, 485. Sam Dennison provides a provocative study on sexual stereotypes of black men and women in “Coon songs” of the 1880s and 1890s in his book, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982).

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Richmond-Abbott, 73.

<sup>48</sup> *Eighty Years or More: Reminiscences*, 1898. Quoted in Donnelly, 138.

domestic sphere for young women. This was the era of the New Woman, an evolving phrase described by feminist historian Lynn Dumenil as the middle-class suffragist, the young college coed, the new class structure of shop girls, and a new attitude of athleticism that led to a rejection of Victorian dress and morals.<sup>49</sup>

### **1920s Stereotypes of Women Relative to the Female Lead Roles in *Show Boat***

#### **The New Woman: The 1920s Flapper**

The nineteenth amendment to the Constitution that guarantees the right of women to vote finally was passed in 1920. This opened a Pandora's box on traditional Victorian and Southern female values. The socially conscious, better educated, young American woman of the early twentieth century demanded greater freedom beginning with equality in her social life; the "Flapper" had arrived, as described by Elizabeth Pleck:

The young woman of the 1920s, who bobbed her hair and smoked in public, did not want to suffer the restrictions of the "true woman" [Victorian]. Growth in their educational and employment opportunities and the sexual revolution prompted young women to challenge some of the gender restrictions their mothers had tolerated, or even helped to put in place.

The new woman wanted home and family, but a more modern marriage. Husband and wife should be soul mates and lovers, and as parents they should become the "pals" and playmates of their children. Anything that stood in the way of the couple's romantic and sexual intimacy threatened the marriage.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Lynn Dumenil, "Women and the Family in the Progressive Era," *Encyclopedia of American Social History* vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 178.

<sup>50</sup> Pleck, 1954.

The 1920s was the Jazz Age, a time of “speakeasies” and bathtub gin, a relaxing of sexual standards, all-night “Rent Parties,” and the sexual objectification of the American female in her “immodest” dress.<sup>51</sup> This was the beginning of an American youth culture that afforded unprecedented recreational time as well as mobility with the newly popular automobile. The “Flapper” is represented in *Show Boat* by Kim Raval as a young woman breaking into show business in New York City.

The New Woman expected equality with her male counterpart, including the right to smoke and drink in public, to wear trousers, and to obtain sexual satisfaction. “Good girls” didn’t care anymore. Their role models were Ma Rainey and Sophie Tucker, the self-proclaimed “first of the liberated women” and the “last of the red hot mamas.” Ethan Mordden described Tucker’s influence that “helped instill on a national level the New Woman . . . the non-WASP who is neither frail nor docile, but independent. She doesn’t need your conventions, your morals, even your God.”<sup>52</sup>

Naturally, this New Woman stereotype threatened the very ideal of Victorian and Southern female values, upsetting the carefully tended social order of the nineteenth century. Rather than the traditionally moral domestic sphere, this progressive “popular culture reflected a modern sense of ethics and values focused on individual pleasure and expression.”<sup>53</sup> The secularization of America had begun, and conservatives would have

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<sup>51</sup> The illustrations in *Life* magazine of “Flappers” in New York provided a new image of the emancipated woman for young girls across the country. Girls in high school and college soon tried to emulate the popular uniform of “rolled-down nylon stockings, shiny shift dresses, long necklaces, and high-heeled shoes,” that became available through mass production. Kleinberg, 242.

<sup>52</sup> *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press), 152.

<sup>53</sup> Charles J. Shindo, “The Twenties,” *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (Detroit: St. James Press, 2000), 710.

to wait for the Great Depression for a return to more traditional values and stereotypes. Perhaps, as a reflection of these turbulent changes, that is why Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II chose a story with a liberal agenda of feminine liberation, but set it in a traditional period with representative stereotypical characters.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Miles Kreuger described the early scripts where Hammerstein inadvertently “dates” later scenes, particularly dealing with Kim, by adding in contemporary 1920s touches. Fortunately, those scenes were cut by the show’s revisions to its bare essence during out-of-town tryouts. *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 27. The meaning of “a liberal agenda of feminine liberation” is in reference to Ferber’s novel, not Kern and Hammerstein’s agenda for the musical version.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**THEATRICAL STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN REPRESENTED**  
**BY THE FEMALE LEAD ROLES IN *SHOW BOAT***

This chapter continues the examination of socially constructed female gender roles with specific application to the culture and aesthetic of musical theatre. Gender stereotypes will be presented through the filters of turn-of-the-century society issues regarding American identities, the separation of culture as highbrow and lowbrow through the emergence of mass culture entertainment, and the aesthetic traditions of women in theatre as viewed by the hegemonic public. A brief description of musical theatre character types will be followed by specific examples of both social and theatre stereotypes represented in the female lead roles of *Show Boat*.

**The “Melting Pot” or Pluralist Identities?**

American society has always been a pluralist body as most citizens have an immigrant history in ancestry. The early colonists brought an Anglo-Saxon perspective of values that were retained through the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century. New immigrants were assimilated into the Anglo culture to become homogeneous Americans. This process was described in the eighteenth century as the “American Melting Pot,” a fusion of native ethnic traits with Anglo values that produced a superior person, a true American. The melting pot became a popular metaphor for

American identity through the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the 1890s a massive influx of immigrants from eastern European Slavic countries, with a large percentage of Jews, changed the Anglo balance of power in large east coast city populations like New York and Boston.<sup>2</sup> These immigrants established sub-communities that actually strengthened their native cultural ties and made their ethnicity more obvious in mainstream American culture. Second and third generation Americans rejected a fusion with these considered inferior races and cultures, preferring an acculturation of immigrant culture to an Anglo standard. This prejudice was evident in the government's new immigration quotas and even in the manufacturing sector; Henry Ford was quoted as saying that his new assembly line process manufactured men as well as automobiles.<sup>3</sup> Anti-Semitism also became more overt as Jews were seen as a threatening social Other in both ethnicity and religion.

Historian Horace Kallen coined a new phrase, "cultural pluralism," in 1915 that better described the outward Anglo acculturation of new Americans with the acknowledgement of their unchanged internal ethnicity and racial heritage. Other writers, such as Randolph Bourne and W. E. B. DuBois, celebrated the diverse contributions of non-Anglo cultures to the American ethos. Bourne wrote that Americans "needed the new

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Melting Pot" became part of the historical canon through a play written by an English Jewish immigrant, Israel Zangwill in 1908. Zangwill's premise was that a real American was an inclusive "fusion of all races, perhaps the coming superman." Lawrence W. Levin, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Levin, in his chapter "The Search for American Identity: From Melting Pot to Pluralist Vision," quotes diary excerpts of Henry James and Henry Adams that express their feelings of isolation and insecurity in their own hometown as strangers in the midst of ethnic immigrant communities, 171.

<sup>3</sup> Ford even used a "melting pot" stage set for the graduation ceremonies of his Ford English School, a necessary requirement for employees to participate in his profit-sharing plan. Levin, 110-111.

peoples . . . to save us from our own stagnation.” DuBois penned many admonitions to African-Americans to maintain their racial identities as contributors to a unique American artistic culture.<sup>4</sup> These philosophies also provide parallel ramifications to the acceptance of women and their acculturation to public society. Women of Jewish and ethnic backgrounds were burdened with a double perception of Other to the hegemonic culture.<sup>5</sup>

“Who exactly is an American?” and “What is the American ideal in beauty and aesthetics?” were two themes for early twentieth-century American sociologists. Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., himself a first generation American of Jewish descent, became the arbiter of the ideal in American beauty through his casting process for young women as chorus girls for his musical revues. The following quote summarizes his views on the American ideal:

Beauty, of course, is the most important requirement and the paramount asset of the applicant. When I say that, I mean beauty of face, form, charm and manner, personal magnetism, individuality, grace and poise. These are details that must always be settled before the applicant has demonstrated her ability either to sing or dance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Levin, 113-116. According to Levin, the historical canon ignored these other views of diversity by exclusively promoting the disappearance of ethnic differences through the “great crucible of American society.” The historical pluralist perspective is relatively new with the influence of post-modernism. However, several generations of school children have been (and still are) indoctrinated with the “melting pot” philosophy through the 1970s educational cartoons that are now widely performed as musical theatre, *Schoolhouse Rock*. One of the most popular songs for young performers is “The Great American Melting Pot.” Its catchy melodic phrasing and rhythms in the chorus perpetuate the canon: “Lovely Lady Liberty with her book of recipes. And the finest one she’s got--the great American melting pot.” Lynn Ahrens, et al, lyrics and music, *Schoolhouse Rock Live!* (New York: Musical Theatre International).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Kirle asserts the relevance of the miscegenation scene in *Show Boat* not only to nineteenth racial prejudice but also to 1920s anti-Semitism. “Cultural Collaborations: Re-historicizing the American Musical” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002), 104.

<sup>6</sup> These words were attributed to Ziegfeld in the article, “What Makes a Ziegfeld Girl,” *Morning Telegraph* (1925). John Kenrick, “Ziegfeld 101” <http://musicals101.com/zieglspeaks.htm> (accessed 22

Ziegfeld's advertisements for his chorus girls proclaimed an inclusive call to young women from all class and racial backgrounds. His choices, however, were usually represented by a narrow, Anglo-centric ("Nordic") identity profile. This profile stereotype was based upon the physical type of the "Gibson Girl" icon, which was characterized by a straight nose and small upper lip area. The average height requirement was six feet so that the dance kick-line would be standardized. In an era of increased studies and experiments in eugenics, the *Follies* girls perpetuated the Anglo myth of the American New Woman. The visual image of identity as performed by a uniform, homogeneous line of chorus girls invokes the original definition of "stereotype" (multiple copies of an original object) while it subliminally represents ideal American beauty as an object rather than an individual.<sup>7</sup>

### **Highbrow or Lowbrow Culture?**

The separation of entertainment into elite and popular divisions is a recent phenomenon in American culture. Popular culture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was an egalitarian mixture of European opera, symphonic works, parlor songs, chamber music, and folk dances, which was attended by all social classes and races (with

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September 2005). Ziegfeld's favorite words, "Glorification, Femininity, and Pulchritude," represented his nostalgia for Victorian ideals. Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 79.

<sup>7</sup> See Mizejewski's description of "desirable and undesirable bodies" for the Ziegfeld chorus line, 77ff. A glamorized, Hollywood version of life as a Ziegfeld girl is the 1941 film, *Ziegfeld Girl*. The chorus line hopefuls include All-American "sweethearts," Judy Garland, Hedy Lamarr, and Lana Turner (Burbank: Turner Entertainment and Warner Brothers Entertainment, DVD edition, 2004). The entertainment style of mass "feminine spectacle" became a popular American export with successful European tours for American companies, followed by German and English imitators during the 1920s and 1930s.

separate seating arrangements). The audience of the upper class orchestra section was just as boisterous as the working class and slave participants in the balcony (later known as the “gallery gods”) in their approval and disapproval of the performers. Theater management enacted an educational campaign in the 1860s to instill the bourgeoisie manners of European propriety in their audiences. This campaign included the banishment of cigars in the concert hall, applause only at the end of works rather than shouting during the performance, and the removal of ladies’ hats for the view of other patrons. Perhaps even more telling of nineteenth traditions was an effort to curb prostitution in the theater; women were no longer allowed without an escort. The B. F. Keith and Orpheum vaudeville circuits also sought to book more artistic (“legitimate”) acts in an overt attempt at respectability by catering to the Victorian female patrons.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1890s, an elitist division of the arts was exacerbated by three societal trends that coalesced into the emergence of highbrow and lowbrow culture in the twentieth century. The first trend was the upper class’ need to assert its leadership and social power in the midst of Anglo identity displacement through the “sacralization” of culture. They began erecting monumental temples of art (museums, concert halls, archives) to protect and perpetuate the classics of western civilization. The patrons of this new religion publicly left the popular entertainments to the working class immigrant, but still made surreptitious visits. The second trend was an elitist attitude that American art was inferior to European works in quality, which is still true in many cultural canons. An appreciation and knowledge of European art became a desired sign of breeding and class.

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<sup>8</sup> Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 5.

The third trend was the emergence of popular entertainment distributed by the industrialized system of mass production. Mass culture, or pop culture, was a loosening of highbrow culture with a mixture of high and low entertainment that included mass-produced magazines, the national vaudeville circuits, the new industry of motion pictures, and radio.

Between 1890 and 1930 American society witnessed a cloning of young women's tastes through mass culture in entertainment, fashions, and social rituals.<sup>9</sup> According to Kibler, mass culture "relied on gender symbolism and had particular salience in women's lives around the turn of the century." She continued that critics "used femininity to symbolize the passivity and decay that they identified in mass culture."<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s, musical theatre was not yet a part of mass culture. It was considered "middle-brow" culture (a most serious insult). The popular genre was not serious enough for elite artistic consideration, but was too artistic for popular criticism and too localized for mass consumption. Unfortunately, this perspective of musical theatre persisted through most of the twentieth century. Musical theatre was significant, however, to both lower and upper classes. It provided an entertainment vehicle that used mass culture and current social identity anxieties as plot devices that reflected the rapidly changing American culture aesthetic.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This was an era of increased leisure time for "mixed-sex amusements" (nightclubs, dance halls, movies, and amusements parks). Mizejewski, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Kibler, 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Musical theatre became "highbrow culture" with the 1954 New York City Opera production of *Show Boat*. This began the trend of operetta-style musicals performed in the opera hall rather than on the Broadway stage.

### **Feminine Aesthetic in Theatre**

Any artistic aesthetic is generally assigned a feminine symbolism, particularly in the realm of the theatre. Feminist writer Elisabeth Lenk explained in “The Self-reflecting Woman” that beauty’s aesthetic enigma is “inextricably linked to the enigma of woman” and “cannot be separated from the erotic.”<sup>12</sup> This link was especially stalwart in the stereotype of the female actor and professional singer for the view of woman as an erotic object had a long tradition in dramatic mediums. I shall explore this tradition from a three-part perspective: the hegemonic audience, the feminine audience, and the marginalized female performer.

#### **The Hegemonic Audience View**

I love beautiful girls and I love to gather and show many beautiful girls with regular features and well-made bodies. It is the idea of spectacle which is expressed in “What do you go for?” What do you come to do, why do you go to a spectacle? It is not the story, it is not the stars, nor the music. What people want to see are beautiful girls.<sup>13</sup>

The male desire to look at women was the economic base of “showbiz” in Europe as well as in America at the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup> The perception of the actress as mistress began as a vicarious thrill for the audience. French drama critic Jules Poignard

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<sup>12</sup> In *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker, trans. Harriet Anderson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 52 and 54.

<sup>13</sup> Film director Busby Berkeley, quoted by Lucy Fischer, “The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of *Dames*,” *Film Quarterly*, 30 (fall 1976): 2-11; reprinted in *Genre: The Musical, A Reader*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge, 1981), 71ff.

<sup>14</sup> See Fisher’s analysis of Berkeley’s movie musical, *Dames*, which openly proclaims this fact in the title song, 81.

wrote in 1889 that “the average male spectator was [at the theater] to fantasize about sleeping with one of the actresses before him. We do not believe in the virtue of theatre women. We know them to be, for the most part, available for affairs.”<sup>15</sup> This practice and perspective was imported from the French *corps de ballet* to become the American version of the chorus line (the “chorines”), with its own cult of adoration long before the first generation of “Ziegfeld Girls” in 1907.

The theatre had long been associated with sanctioned prostitution and the class of “working girl” chorines perpetuated the double entendre prototype.<sup>16</sup> The tradition of “stage door Johnnies” who provided dinners and luxuries for the girls began as an economic necessity for young women working in theatre who barely had enough wage to provide their own costumes (particularly the low ranking chorus girls). To have affairs with actresses quickly became a mark of social prestige for the upwardly mobile young businessman; the better one’s economic state, the higher the salary scale of the performer. A leading actress became a preferred mistress because of her assumed intelligence, the time limitations of her career, and, as an independent woman, fewer demands upon her lover. What began as an economical dilemma for stage performers became an expectation for advancement within the company, or even for good press in reviews and the

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<sup>15</sup> *Les Femmes de Paris*, 17-18; quoted in Lenard R. Berlanstein’s *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theatre Women* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 107.

<sup>16</sup> Mizejewski discussed several fictional bestsellers of 1903, including *Confessions of a Chorus Girl*, that established the mythology of the chorine cult. It was stereotyped by the rejection of traditional (Victorian) values to embrace the modern exhibitionism of the New Woman, and the life of ease experienced between rehearsals and performance, “Chorus Girls, New Women, True Bodies,” *Ziegfeld Girl*, 70. Florenz Ziegfeld refuted that myth by outlining the daily expectations for his “girls” to achieve perfection in preparation for afternoon rehearsals and evening performances. Kenrick, “What Makes a Ziegfeld Girl.”

gossip columns.<sup>17</sup> Exploitation on both sides escalated to such an extent that by 1919 when the Ziegfeld musical comedy *Golddiggers* satirized the contemporary male view that “all women of the theatre are chiselers,” the audience accepted it as a given fact and enjoyed the joke.<sup>18</sup>

The stereotype of chorus girls and actresses as being sexually aware and promiscuous heightened their onstage persona and the audience’s enjoyment. An actress could not be taken seriously with a virginal persona, for how then could she interpret passionate roles or give full weight to the sexual innuendos of musical comedy? This expectation of illicit passion was not a professional requirement for male actors, however. Women were portrayed by stereotypes that described physical demeanor or sexual proclivity (blonde bombshell, *femme fatale*, vamp, gamine, and sex goddess), while male types were portrayed by career specifications (cowboy, gangster, newsman, hero, or villain).<sup>19</sup> This practice of gender role stereotyping further established the hegemonic view of woman as a sexual object and provided a socialized excuse for looking.

### **The Feminine Audience View**

The feminine viewpoint of female stage performers was sharply divided by the uneasy coexistence of traditional Victorian morals and modern New Woman aesthetic. The stereotype of the female patron was a genteel, middle class puritan who appreciated

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<sup>17</sup> Eva Rieger discussed this practice in “‘*Dolce semplice?*’ On the Changing Role of Women in Music” in *Feminist Aesthetics*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> The feminine view was “either you work the men, or the men work you.” Mizejewski, 72.

<sup>19</sup> See Berlanstein, p. 124, and Fischer, p. 74, for more discussion on gender roles and mythology of stage personae.

the ultra-feminine opera singers and legitimate stage actresses brought in to upgrade the popular entertainments of vaudeville and early musical comedies. The reality was that the female audience reaction was likely to be just as rowdy and boisterous as that of the male's, particularly for the working class "gallery gods," who preferred the "cyclonic comediennes and animalistic acrobats," as described by Alison Kibler.<sup>20</sup>

The Victorian view of the female stage performer was as Other, an outcast due to the traditions of earlier prostitution and the cult of the chorines. Berlanstein explained that in the mind of the Victorian middle class, the actress was identified with "a collective history of distinctive gender and racial characters, all of which marked [her] as sexually arousing and perverse." Her affinity for the society of men and her acceptance into their social gatherings made her "a grave threat to the social order."<sup>21</sup> For the working class girl in the gallery, there was empathy of achieving success through the characters' lives and envy of the best possible "factory" job as a chorus girl. The twentieth-century New Woman generations of suffragists and Flappers also hailed the female stage performer as a symbol of modern independence: a professional woman, involved with casual and flirtatious relationships, whose focus was career before marriage.

Another view of female performers that perhaps provided a vicarious titillation for the feminine audience was the stereotype of actresses as an intermediate sex, or third gender.<sup>22</sup> The stereotype of stage women who used their sexuality for goods and companionship was perceived as unfeminine because the treatment of sex as an insignificant

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<sup>20</sup> *Rank Ladies*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Berlanstein, 113 and 115.

<sup>22</sup> The work of "sexologists" Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis proposed the theory of a third sex, "the man trapped in a woman's body." Mizejewski, 84.

means to economic or career advancement was considered a masculine trait. French writers explained the phenomenon in this manner: “Being assertive, intelligent, or libidinous identifies theatre women as something other than woman,” or a “woman of talent” was assumed to have manly genitals.<sup>23</sup> This view presents a paradox for the Victorian reformer as a “True Woman” with a dark side of uncontrollable sexuality, according to Kibler. Musical theatre provided a socially acceptable means of keeping woman’s “emotional irrationality” under control by viewing the transgressive performances of illicit women, and enjoying the vicarious thrill of their passions on and off the stage through transference.<sup>24</sup>

### **Marginalized Female Performers**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the question of American identity and the ideal of American beauty that sustained Anglo-Saxon conformity was approached in the theatre by the homogenization of the “Ziegfeld Girls” and the iconic “Gibson Girl.” The chorines were the trademark of Ziegfeld’s *Follies* revues, but they were not the stars. That billing was reserved for the eccentric comediennes outside the boundaries of feminine beauty ideals. These performers represented marginalized ethnic social groups (especially Jews) that portrayed American identity as dynamic, a shifting paradigm in

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<sup>23</sup> Berlanstein, 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Rank Ladies*, 13. Kibler also discussed the contemporaneous medical view that sexuality not channeled into the domestic sphere and child-rearing became a destructive force that could result in disease and insanity.

relation to its reception and historical context.<sup>25</sup> Bruce Kirle succinctly stated the mission of these ethnic Other actresses:

Rather than appropriate the behavior of the white hegemony onstage, they chose to subvert that identity by performing and mixing racial, ethnic, and gendered identities . . . to triumph over perceived, static notions of gender through wit, cunning, will and desire.

Rather than play into Anglo-American notions of identity, they deconstructed them. Their strategy was to show that identity was a performance [not a birthright].<sup>26</sup>

One of the most successful ethnic comedienne of the vaudeville circuit was Eva Tanguay, whose performances were described as “sensual, frenetic, and often insolent.”<sup>27</sup> Tanguay was determined to remain the show’s headliner and the favorite of the gallery gods by always one-upping the elite guest artists of the show. One of her most famous routines was a burlesque ballet in 1915 that lampooned the international ballerina, Anna Pavlova. Kibler described a memorable picture of Tanguay “famous for her chunky physique, frizzy unkempt hair, and two left feet” in a tutu singing “When Pavlova Sees Me Put It Over.” This classic rendition of low brow culture received a “particularly boisterous, enthusiastic reception from the gallery.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Cultural Collaborations,” 95.

<sup>26</sup> Kirle, 109.

<sup>27</sup> Kibler, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Kibler, 14.

Florenz Ziegfeld, reportedly, was quoted that he preferred “young and cute” girls and hated women comics.<sup>29</sup> But, he loved his star comedienne Fanny Brice and the lucrative success she achieved through her “Jewish ghetto” eye-rolling, Yiddish-mangling, “second-hand Rose” persona. A highly versatile actress and singer, her self-deprecating humor was poignantly offset by her emotional pathos in serious numbers like “My Man.”<sup>30</sup> These marginalized performances played an important role in shaping racial and gender identity and social norms during a period of great social and cultural anxiety. They allowed the hegemonic audience to laugh at itself and to recognize the kernel of truth that American identity and culture is a shared trait, no matter how its outward manifestations are perceived.

Another aspect of female gender roles and identity is the implicit expectations regarding theatre character types, particularly in musicals. These gender roles refer to both the stage character and the public persona of the actress identified with that role.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mizejewski, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Brice’s depth of versatility also included “Becky is Back in the Ballet.” This was a satire of *Swan Lake* in the tradition of Tanguay’s earlier vaudeville number, complete with tutu and classical ballet poses. *Broadway: The American Musical* (A Film by Michael Kantor. PBS Home Video, 2004.), Episode 1: “Fanny Brice.” Brice was an exceptional role model as a survivor of abusive relationships and business disasters. See a brief summary of her career and personal crises in the Jewish Women Archive, “Jewish Women in Comedy: Fanny Brice,” <http://www.jwa.org/discover/comedy/brice.html> (accessed 8 October 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Ethan Mordden outlined specific actresses that exhibited traits of the New Woman persona on and off the stage: Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Marilyn Miller, Gertrude Lawrence, and Ethel Merman. Note that Tucker, Brice, and Merman (née Zimmerman) were all of ethnic origin. *Make Believe: Broadway Musical in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chapter 6.

### Musical Theatre Character Types

Every actor who spends any time in auditions understands that one of the pitfalls of the musical theatre profession is being typecast by the production team. Typecasting is based upon physical characteristics, posture, tessitura, timbre, age, and other subjective criteria. A type is a two-dimensional portrayal, easily recognized by the audience through stereotypical motivations and reactions; it is essentially a caricature. Richard Dyer described the necessity of this device in “The Role of Stereotypes.” He defined “type” by its aesthetic function and its ability to represent “recurrent features of the human world.”<sup>32</sup> In her dissertation, Elaine Klein, explained the nature of dramatic growth as a prime distinction between “type” and “character.” A type remains constant through the plot’s progression. If there is any change, it is abrupt and complete, though often temporary. But a character grows through “responses to new situations” and the results of choices; there is an apparent emotional journey by the character through the story.<sup>33</sup>

The most popular lead female character types in early musicals are identified as the ingénue, the soubrette, and the older woman. The third type may be sub-categorized into the lovely lady, the *femme fatale*, or the lead comedienne.<sup>34</sup> Another category is the ethnic woman. Typically African-American or eastern immigrant, she is cast most often

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<sup>32</sup> *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

<sup>33</sup> “The Development of the Leading Feminine Character in Selected Librettos of American Musicals from 1900 to 1960” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1962), ix-x. This dissertation evaluates female lead roles through three criteria: believability, attractiveness and dynamics. Dyer also defines the opposite of “type” as “novelistic, defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us.” The novelistic character draws the viewer’s focus inward rather than to societal norms. “The Role of Stereotypes,” 13.

<sup>34</sup> Klein, xi.

in a subservient role as a domestic. The ingénue and the soubrette both represent young, single girls, usually played by women in their late teens or early twenties. Though the physical characteristics of these two types are similar, their backgrounds, motivations, and goals are markedly different. The ingénue type (usually a soprano) is traditionally part of an affluent family, with no financial worries or the need for a job; Klein describes her as a “sweet, passive member of the nobility.”<sup>35</sup> The ingénue’s sole plot purpose is romance. She is an innocent, with her chastity intact until the final curtain (when she finally gets her man).

The soubrette type (either a soprano or mezzo-soprano) is interested in wealth and social position rather than romance. Frequently a dancer, she is physically active and considered clever as she relies on her wits rather than a potential husband for financial support. As the subordinate best friend or rival to the ingénue she is typically the comedic foil. In the 1920s, the young heroine was increasingly cast as the soubrette type: a flirtatious, sarcastic, and world-wise New Woman who may or may not be a sexual innocent.<sup>36</sup>

The older woman type may be an “old maid,” married, divorced, or widowed, and is often portrayed by a character actor. The lovely lady subtype is a mature version of the ingénue and plays the heroine lead if an ingénue is not required. Like the ingénue, she is usually wealthy and motivated by romance. The *femme fatale* subtype is stereotyped

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<sup>35</sup> Klein, xi. The ingénue is also described as the “Cinderella heroine” in feminist literature.

<sup>36</sup> The outspoken and independent New Woman persona of musical comedies in the 1920s, both onstage and in real life, was represented by Marilyn Miller and then Ethel Merman. Note that musical theatre types are not based upon the vocal categories of the German *fach* system, even though there are shared labels.

with a colorful past and portrayed as a subtle flirt, a sophistication of the “Vamp” from the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Ramona Lucius chose Gloria Swanson’s characters in the 1920s to represent this category with her “sympathetic portrayals of prostitution and extramarital affairs.”<sup>38</sup> When the *femme fatale* is also an ethnic woman, her sexual aura is perceived as even more dangerous to the other female characters because of the ethnic stereotype mentioned in Chapter Three. The third subtype, the lead comedienne, has difficulties in attracting men, which is often the source of her humor and her ultimate failure as a woman. All of these character types, except the ingénue, share the responsibility of comedic situations in a musical comedy.

### **Female Lead Roles in *Show Boat***

Oscar Hammerstein II created a combination of types and characters for his female leads that reflect both their historical and theatre stereotypes, as viewed through a 1920’s filter. Before introducing each role, it is appropriate to understand novelist Edna Ferber’s definition of “Show Folk”:

You could mark them by something different in their dress, in their faces, in the way they walked. The women were not always young. Magnolia noticed that often they were actually older than her mother (Parthy was then about thirty-nine). Yet they looked lively and somehow youthful, though their faces bore wrinkles. There was about them a certain carefree gaiety, a jauntiness. They

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<sup>37</sup> Ramona Lucius described the “Vamp” type as an “erotic exotic,” citing the belly dancer Fatima as the first cinematic sex object. Another sub-category is the “Sophisticate,” an older woman who does not need sexuality or romance for success. Gertrude Lawrence (stage) and Deborah Kerr (film) personified this type. “Women in Film,” *The Guide to United States Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001), 922-923. An interesting point is that “Fatima” as a character was included in the cast of *Show Boat* to portray historical accuracy in the Chicago Exhibition scene of Act II.

<sup>38</sup> Lucius, 922.

looked, Magnolia decided, as if they had just come from some interesting place and were going to another even more interesting.<sup>39</sup>

Ellie's character is the most dramatically revised in the translation from novel to musical show. She represents the society stereotype of the New Woman and the comedic soubrette of the show boat troupe, a modern character in her saucy attitude and quick-thinking solutions.<sup>40</sup> Ellie is also the dance lead, which was a crucial role in 1920s musicals.<sup>41</sup> She dispels the stereotypes of stage folk to a group of young girls in her song, "Life Upon the Wicked Stage." These chorus girl hopefuls believe in a grand and envious life that Ellie reveals as a sham with the lyrics, "Wild old men who give you jewels and sables only live in Aesop's Fables. Life upon the wicked stage ain't nothin' for a girl!"<sup>42</sup> Ellie concedes the allure of playing someone she's not as she represents the nineteenth-century Victorian model of chastity combined with the New Woman's sexual openness in this lyric:

I admit it's fun to smear my face with paint,  
 Causin' ev'ryone to think I'm what I ain't.  
 And I like to play a demimondy role with soul!  
 Ask the hero does he like the way I lure  
 When I play a hussy or a paramour.

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<sup>39</sup> Ferber, *Show Boat* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Page, 1926), 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ferber's depiction of Elly [*sic*] is not so kind. In the novel she is a reluctantly ageing ingénue who is self-absorbed, chronically discontent, and described by other characters as high strung and a shrew. It is her departure from the *Cotton Blossom*, not Julie's, that catapults Magnolia onto the stage.

<sup>41</sup> Originally performed by former vaudevillian, Eva Puck, this role is indelibly linked with Marge Champion (wife of future choreographer/director, Gower Champion) from the 1951 Metro Goldwyn Mayer film adaptation.

<sup>42</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, Act I:3, *Show Boat* Vocal/Piano score (New York: T.B. Harms Co., 1927; reprint ed., Greenwich, CT: The Welk Group, 1970), 86.

Yet when once the curtain's down my life is pure  
 And how I dread it!  
 I got virtue but it ain't been tested.  
 No one's even interested!<sup>43</sup>

Ellie also displays a New Woman attitude in her relationship with her husband, Frank. Although they appear as equal partners in their dance routines, she is the one who makes the family decisions.<sup>44</sup> Ellie becomes a sympathetic character beyond a type when she helps Magnolia find a job after Gaylord abandons her.

Kim, as an adult, represents the Flapper generation of the New Woman that comes of age in the late 1920s. She is a career-oriented woman as a modern ingénue on the Broadway stage. Unfortunately, the songs that define her character type were cut during the out-of-town previews, but the original production included her imitations of the 1890s original and a 1920s jazzed-up version of “Why Do I Love You?” For the 1946 revival, Kern and Hammerstein added the song, “Nobody Else But Me” that typifies Kim’s New Woman attitudes towards casual relationships and equality in sexual gratification:

I want to be no one but me.  
 I am in love with a lover  
 Who likes me the way I am.  
 I have my faults—He likes my faults.  
 I'm not very bright—He's not very bright.  
 He thinks I'm grand,  
 That's grand for me—He may be wrong,  
 But if we get along, What do we care, say we?

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<sup>43</sup> *Show Boat*, Act I:3, Vocal/Piano score, 87-88, 92. The term, “demimondy,” is a slang euphemism for mistress.

<sup>44</sup> The original Frank, Sammy White, was also Puck’s real-life husband and comedy partner.

When he holds me close, Close as we can be,  
I tell the lad that I'm grateful and I'm glad that  
I'm nobody else but me!<sup>45</sup>

Queenie, the stock ethnic character in the show, is the *Cotton Blossom's* cook. She is portrayed as a Mammy type, speaking in dialect and providing the musical excuse for a ballyhoo (“Queenie’s Ballyhoo”) and a spiritual (“Mis’ry’s Comin’ Aroun”).<sup>46</sup> Her character provides a homey atmosphere that was “reputed the best-fed show boat on the rivers.” Queenie’s romantic partner is Joe, described as a “shif’less no-‘count Negro” who spends too much time with his gin and music.<sup>47</sup> This pair, although not legally married, represent a traditional couple relationship with a “fighting affection, deep, true, and lasting.”<sup>48</sup>

Queenie’s character is an important teacher for Magnolia in the art of cooking and what Ferber described as the traditional manner of singing spirituals and “Coon” songs. In Magnolia’s audition at The Trocadero Club, she recalls lessons with Queenie and Joe as she “sits with her guitar across her knees, throws her head back, closes her eyes and

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<sup>45</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, *Show Boat*, Act II:9, 1946 revised script (New York: The Rodgers and Hammerstein Theatre Library).

<sup>46</sup> Sam Dennison defined the Mammy type as an ethnic woman “with an unbounded capacity for love, understanding, and general qualities associated with motherhood.” *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 363. The original actress in the role of Queenie, Tess Gardella, performed under the stage name “Aunt Jemima.” She was actually Italian and performed in black face (a nod back to the vaudeville tradition of white female “coon shouters,” and an accepted stage convention even in the late 1920s).

<sup>47</sup> Ferber, 118. Joe is the character who begins and ends the show with “Ol’ Man River.” This song functions as a unifying leitmotiv for the plot’s fatalistic determinism, depicted by the subtext of the river and racial traditions of Southern life.

<sup>48</sup> Ferber, 118.

starts to sing ‘Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man.’”<sup>49</sup> Queenie transcends her type as a believable woman, a reservoir of wisdom for both Magnolia and her father, Cap’n Andy.

Parthenia Ann Hawks (Parthy Ann) is the quintessential nineteenth-century New England Victorian type. She had been a schoolteacher in Massachusetts and took care of her father when Cap’n Andy swept her off her feet to marry her on the basis of her cooking. She is the moral guardian of the *Cotton Blossom* and a reluctant member of the troupe’s performing lifestyle. Ferber provides richly detailed descriptions of Mrs. Hawks’ Victorian attitudes:

Matron though she was, [she] still was one of those women who, confined as a favourite [*sic*] wife in the harem of a lascivious Turk, would have remained a spinster at heart and in manner.

Life was meant to be made up of crisp white dimity curtains at kitchen windows; of bi-weekly bread bakings; of Sunday morning service and Wednesday night prayer meeting; of small gossip rolled evilly under the tongue. The male biped, to her, was a two-footed animal who tracked up a clean kitchen floor just after it was scoured and smoked a pipe in defiance of decency.<sup>50</sup>

She eventually acquiesced to life as a ship captain’s wife and realized that Andy was solely responsible for any color in her life. But Ferber described her fierce resoluteness against change: “Yet always she was to resent loveliness; fight the influence of each new experience; combat the lure of each new face. Tight-lipped, belligerent, she met beauty and adventure and defied them to work a change in her.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Show Boat*, Act II:4, (New York: The Rodgers and Hammerstein Theatre Library, 1927).

<sup>50</sup> Ferber, 25-26.

<sup>51</sup> Ferber, 63.

In the novel, Parthy Ann is a three-dimensional character and eventually revels in her role as the ship's captain after Andy's death, but the character is not allowed to grow in the musical version. Her stereotype fits the Victorian mother more than the "older woman" theatre role, and she is the only female lead who does not sing in the musical.<sup>52</sup> Parthy's sole focus is the moral and cultural education of her daughter. Her goal is to keep Magnolia pure amidst the distractions and indulgences of the show boat culture. An amusing anecdote of Parthy's maintaining a semblance of normalcy on the boat refers to her daily reminder for Magnolia to practice her piano exercises: "That Mrs. Hawks could introduce into the indolent tenor of show boat life anything so methodical and humdrum as five-finger exercises done an hour daily was triumphant proof of her indomitable driving force."<sup>53</sup> Parthy Ann provides the traditional Victorian view of woman's place in society through her domestic sphere. Her musical theatre stereotype is the older woman comedienne, provoking a humorous ridicule of her old-fashioned morals and stern demeanor.

Julie Dozier is also an older woman type, cast as the *femme fatale* in contrast to Parthy Ann's Victorian matron. She is Magnolia's best friend, much to the disapproval of her mother. In the musical version, Julie plays the ingénue in the *Cotton Blossom*'s stage productions, but in the novel she plays the character actress, "usually cast as adventuress, older sister, foil for Elly [*sic*], the ingénue. Julie was a natural and intuitive

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<sup>52</sup> The revival version, directed by Harold Prince (1994), added a duet for Parthy Ann with Kim as a child on "Why Do I Love You?"

<sup>53</sup> Ferber, 124. Casting Agnes Morehead in the 1951 MGM film was a stroke of genius, especially for the next generation of television viewers who knew her as Endora on "Bewitched."

actress, probably the best in the company.”<sup>54</sup> Ferber provided a subliminal characterization of Julie as an ethnic *femme fatale* when Ellie complained about her own inability to attract men:

Strangely enough, it was Julie who drew them, quite without intent on her part. There was something about her life-scarred face, her mournful eyes, her langour, her effortlessness, her very carelessness of dress that seemed to fascinate and hold them. Steve’s jealousy of her was notorious. It was common boat talk too, that Pete, the engineer of the *Mollie Able* [the *Cotton Blossom*’s tug boat] . . . was openly enamoured [*sic*] of her and had tried to steal her from Steve.<sup>55</sup>

Kern also foreshadowed Julie’s ethnic qualities before her initial entrance with an orchestral leitmotiv that is later recognized as a sequential phrase of “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man.” This musical fragment also establishes her emotional connection with Pete and Steve for it underscores their entrances. After the miscegenation scene in the first act, Julie returns for only one more scene in the second act that summarizes the effects of that episode upon her life. She appears as a headliner at the Trocadero Club, an “uptown” Chicago nightclub, but she is now an alcoholic and completely disillusioned with life on the stage. Hammerstein set the scene:

A woman sits dejectedly in a chair. This is Julie, a hollow-cheeked woman—looking older than she really is—with all the earmarks of one who is down-and-out; marks which she has desperately and pathetically tried to hide by overdressing, by making use of too many odds and ends of finery, by a too-anxious application of rouge and lipstick and by dyeing her hair a wretched red. She sits there, oblivious to all that is going on around her. From time to time she

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<sup>54</sup> Ferber, 90.

<sup>55</sup> Ferber, 114-115. This foreshadows the later revelation by Pete of Julie’s mixed-blood heritage and her stereotyped seductive skills.

opens her handbag and takes out a pint flask—typical of the bottled goods of the time—and furtively takes a drink.<sup>56</sup>

Julie’s brief appearances in the first act (three scenes) and a single scene in the second act do not provide much opportunity for character growth. Her character is established in her two songs (“Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man” and “Bill”), which portray her in stereotypical ethnic fashion as a victim of her romantic circumstances.<sup>57</sup> But Julie becomes a believable character who exerts great influence on Magnolia as she prepares her, as well as the audience, for the ensuing tragedies of abandonment and raising a child as a single mother. Klein considers her both a character confidante and a plot convenience for articulating the heroine’s feelings to the audience.<sup>58</sup> Julie’s departure from the *Cotton Blossom* is right after Magnolia has met Gaylord Ravenal and cast aside her childhood. Julie’s influence is no longer needed as Magnolia falls in love and matures as a young woman. Yet she must later return to help her younger friend at a crucial moment in her life. When Magnolia auditions for the first time as a singer at the Trocadero Club, Julie surreptitiously hears Magnolia singing “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man” and decides to leave so her Nolie will have a chance. One last time, Julie is an unknown influence for Magnolia and fulfills her roles as both *femme fatale* and surrogate mother.

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<sup>56</sup> *Show Boat*, Act II:4.

<sup>57</sup> Both of these songs belong in the category of “bully songs,” according to the definition of Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 408. This song type characterizes strong women who are helpless in their often abusive relationships. The lyrics for “Bill” were actually written by P. G. Wodehouse, interpolated from the Princess show, *Oh, Lady! Lady!* Kern recycled it with additional lyrics by Hammerstein as a show-stopping number for his original Julie, Helen Morgan.

<sup>58</sup> Klein, “Leading Female Characters,” 104-105, 107.

Magnolia Hawks Ravenal (Nola or Nolie) is the true heroine of *Show Boat* and its most nontraditional type. Klein describes her as “the most atypical, attractive, and perhaps most believable of all the heroines of the era.”<sup>59</sup> The primary plot line is Magnolia’s journey to independence as the character matures through the first act from an ingénue into a lovely lady type. She also exemplifies the social type of the Southern Belle in her progression from innocent flirtations through her matronly tenacity to preserve her family, despite external deterministic circumstances. The audience observes her growth in her choices and reactions to life as she becomes an independent woman by taking charge of her own destiny.

The audience learns about Magnolia through dialogue and recognizes that she will play the ingénue type. Kern introduced a musical leitmotiv in anticipation of Magnolia’s entrance, heard from within the boat where she is still practicing the piano.<sup>60</sup> This same leitmotiv is played during Gaylord’s first song (“Where’s the Mate for Me?”). Kern used it for the theatrical device of foreshadowing as Gaylord interacts with the tune, expressing his feelings about his inner conflict between freedom and love. This leitmotiv allows the audience to immediately intuit the connection between Ravenal (the leading man

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<sup>59</sup> Klein, 108.

<sup>60</sup> The piano melody was interpolated from Kern’s earlier Princess show, *The Beauty Prize* (1923). Kern employs other leitmotifs throughout the score, including the previously mentioned “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man” for Julie and the “river theme,” derived from “Ol’ Man River.” See Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990; rev. ed., 2002), 40 and 42. Kern also employs a melodrama affectation by stereotyping the character of Sheriff Vallon with underscoring that is immediately recognized as “villain” music from the silent film era. For more discussion on melodrama effects, see Kirle, “Cultural Collaborations,” 208.

“hero”) and the piano player (the ingénue heroine), though neither he nor the audience has yet to see her.<sup>61</sup>

The first meeting of Magnolia and Gaylord occurs through the duet, “Make Believe.” This scene establishes several of Magnolia’s character traits and ambitions: she wants to be an actress so that she can be an exciting “character,” she has a maturity “beyond her years,” and she has fallen hopelessly in love at first sight.<sup>62</sup> She is socially presented as a traditional Southern Belle and her stage role as the traditional ingénue is reinforced in both her vocal line and the instrumental underscoring from the earlier piano leitmotiv.

By Act II, Magnolia has become a lovely lady type as dutiful wife and mother. In this role she is part of a dramatic trend in the late 1920s in which the older woman heroine is responsible for much of the plot development. She also portrays a new type of leading feminine character, described as “one who doesn’t dominate the stage . . . but whose dramatic purpose is to inspire the leading masculine character.”<sup>63</sup> In the first scene of Act II, Magnolia and Gaylord sing the only new original song of the second act (“Why Do I Love You?”). The song begins as a cute, young lovers’ waltz but foreshadows a deeper meaning and eventual plot turn as Gaylord’s gambling affects the family, evidenced in these lyrics:

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<sup>61</sup> Swain, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Swain, 34, 38.

<sup>63</sup> Klein, 71-72. I discovered a curious point regarding Kern’s treatment of melodic characterization for Magnolia: she sings only duets until she is abandoned by Gaylord and then must sing solo for a living. Thus begins Magnolia’s literal and figurative independence.

RAVENAL: Darling, I have only just an hour to play.  
 MAGNOLIA: I am always lonely when you go away.  
 CHORUS: Hours are not like years, what a pair of lovebirds!  
 RAVENAL: My darling, I'll come home as early as I can,  
 Meanwhile be good and patient with your man.  
 Why do I love you?  
 MAGNOLIA: Why do you love me?  
 (RAVENAL exits.)<sup>64</sup>

Magnolia's character expands the lovely lady type by portraying a three-dimensional person in her reactions to Gaylord's desertion and her choices to take charge of her own life. Ferber explained her new course of action: "She must have been a little light-headed by this time, for certainly no deserted wife in her right senses would have followed the course that Magnolia Ravenal now took."<sup>65</sup> Magnolia's eventual success as a nationally acclaimed cabaret singer and a stage mother for her daughter combines both the New Woman and Victorian mother trends.<sup>66</sup> She dotes on Kim, but she establishes a modern mother-daughter friendship based on her relationship with Julie rather than the rigid Victorian model of her mother, Parthy Ann. Magnolia's character transforms through hardship and success into a believable, lovable, transcendent woman who broke the mold of lead female characters for all successive musicals.

Musical theatre gender role stereotypes were drastically empowered by the lead female characters of *Show Boat*. Kern and Hammerstein provided historical snapshots of

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<sup>64</sup> *Show Boat*, Act II:1. Kern inserted a melodic joke in mm. 75-82 with the "Can't Help Lovin'" leitmotiv for Ravenal's text, "I'll come home as early as I can. Meanwhile be good and patient with your man," Vocal/Piano score, 146.

<sup>65</sup> Ferber, 364.

<sup>66</sup> Norma Terris, the original Magnolia, had a challenging task in portraying this relationship as she also acted the role of thirty-year-old Kim. This allowed her to display her imitation skills of contemporary thespians and her dance skills in current jazzy dances like the Charleston and the Buck-and-Wing.

the nineteenth century's gender roles and humanized them. The New England Victorian was rigidly represented by Parthy Ann; the Ethnic Other was developed by Queenie and Julie; and the Post-Bellum Southern Belle was shown in her youthful innocence and matronly tenacity by Magnolia. Secondly, they portrayed 1920s society and the stereotypes of the New Woman through the modern attitudes of Ellie and Kim. Finally, they created a new type of female lead in the character of Magnolia, a type that transcends both social and theatrical gender stereotypes to become a woman with whom the female audience can empathize and emulate.

**CHAPTER V**  
**GENDER-BASED PERFORMANCE PRACTICE APPLIED**  
**TO SELECT SONGS OF *SHOW BOAT***

*per·form·ance* n. 1. a presentation of an artistic work to an audience, for example, a play or piece of music. 2. the manner in which something or somebody functions, operates, or behaves. 3. the effectiveness of the way somebody does his or her job (often used before a noun). 4. a public display of behavior that others find distasteful, for example, an angry outburst that causes embarrass-ment (informal). 5. something that is carried out or accomplished. 6. the performing of something, for example, a task or action. 7. the language that a speaker or writer actually produces, as distinct from his or her understanding of the language.<sup>1</sup>

“Performance” is a broad, often misused, term that describes behavior and representation. Standup comedienne Joanne Gilbert delineated the definition of performance further as a structural concept that includes ethnicity and culture, history, sociology, politics, aesthetics, ritual, experience, athletics, and popular entertainment.<sup>2</sup> “Performance practice” is an even more challenging term to define with clarity. It is often a stylized attempt to re-create an historically distant musical art in the style of its original presentation. This is frequently accomplished by using “period” instruments or singing techniques indigenous to that era. This type of performance is based upon scholarly research into the societal conditions and resources available to performers and composers

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<sup>1</sup> *Encarta World English Dictionary* (Microsoft Corporation, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004), 1.

of that time. Performance practice may also explain the idiosyncrasies of performers in folk music and jazz, or the cultural expectations of dramatic interpretation in opera and musical theatre. In basic terms, “practice’ becomes the style traditions of performance that are not notated in the musical score.

The power of musical performance cannot be found in historical descriptions or contemporaneous criticisms, but only in its experienced presentation. Performance requires the participation of both performer and audience to create a symbiotic thread of revelation and reflection that is meant to provoke change. In his dissertation, Bruce Kirle explained that this is particularly true for musical theatre. Musicals cannot truly be experienced by reading reviews in the paper, scanning show libretti in libraries, or even listening to original cast recordings; they are “read” by the audience in live performance.<sup>3</sup> Interpretations of this type of reading are based on scripted (or directed) action portrayed through a combination of the individual performer’s gestures, emotional expressions, and vocal personality.

Gender is another type of performance that is comprehended fully in experience rather than in description. The previous chapters have explored the “performance practices” associated with feminine gender roles in the context of societal stereotypes and theatrical traditions, the “manner of behavior.” There are also specific traditions relative to gender and vocal performance that should be investigated as a means to an experienced interpretation for the performer and her audience. In this chapter I will explore the “language” of performance through its traditional practice expectations. These

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<sup>3</sup> “Cultural Collaborations: Re-historicizing the American Musical” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002), 2.

expectations will form a base for creating an original interpretation of a role through the character's songs. The criteria of gender in musical performance will be considered through the traditions of popular singing styles and the power of individuality in the voice. I shall outline a methodology of character and song analysis which will then be applied to preparation for two specific songs from *Show Boat*: "Make Believe" and "Can't Help Lovin' 'dat Man."

### **Gender and Performance**

Gender has always been a subliminal presence in the language of musical performance. Music has been described in connection with a feminine domain since its earliest recorded history. Gender in performance was present in the harem ensembles of singers and instrumentalists that lauded the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, as well as the "Song of Miriam" that praised Yahweh for the successful deliverance of the Israelites from those Pharaohs. The all-female academy of poetry and music directed by Sappho, (sixth century B. C. E.) was a society for gender and performance practice. Another example is the original Greek definition of "musician": one educated in the language of the Muses (the nine daughters of Zeus) and the worship of Euterpe as the goddess of music. The feminine pronoun has also referenced music throughout the history of western civilization.

The ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, wrote of the mimetic quality of music that allows glimpses of Truth, the unobtainable "ideal" of society. They also argued against music's power over the senses (emotions), and the

possibilities for manipulation and abuse by performers. Plato's writings are most vehement in his distrust of musicians to subvert the status quo. These arguments established the debate between cerebral logic (a masculine attribute) and emotional feeling (a feminine attribute) made manifest in musical interpretation and reception that continue today.<sup>4</sup> Feminist criticism argues against this traditional duality of mind and feeling for building social constructs, such as musical performance. According to Wayne Bowman, such "patriarchal thought . . . tends to depersonalize experience" and results in the "binary opposition" of self and other.<sup>5</sup> This debate has already been discussed in Chapter Three regarding societal gender roles.

A modern philosophy of music as feminine and, therefore, subversive to traditional gender roles is found in John Shepherd's *Music as Social Text*. He identified sound as a tactile sensory stimulus that "stresses the integrative and relational"; sound surrounds us and provokes a reaction.<sup>6</sup> This challenges the hegemonic experience for that is "essentially a visual experience." A visual response to art allows distance and separation, with objectivity and contemplative scrutiny. A sound experience, however, requires an embodied response. It is "fundamentally tactile: touching, probing, intruding,

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<sup>4</sup> See Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Chapter 2 is a summary of Greek philosophy regarding music's mimetic qualities and a description of the transformative powers and gendered identity of the "honeyed muse."

<sup>5</sup> Bowman, 361. Sets of binary oppositions that reflect the spiraling associations in building personal reality constructs are listed as male/female, reason/emotion, mind/body, good/evil, and culture/nature. These associations ultimately result in the assessment of "under control/out of control" with its implicit gender prejudices. See *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 11. Another patriarchal binary system is the perpetuation of hegemonic gender roles through musical interpretation and aesthetic. Heide Göttner-Abendroth proposed a counter "matriarchal aesthetic" in *The Dancing Goddess: Principles of a Matriarchal Aesthetic*, trans. Maureen T. Krause (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> "Music and Male Hegemony" (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 159.

and never wholly free of bodily involvement . . . surrounding us and rubbing against us.”<sup>7</sup> Shepherd further identified the voice as the “paradigm of sound [that] cannot help but emphasize the social relatedness of individual and cultural existence. Symbolically, it *is* our existence.” The existence of music then, like that of women, “is potentially threatening to men . . . [as] music reminds men of the fragile and atrophied nature of their control over the world.”<sup>8</sup> The hegemonic reaction to this threat began in the eighteenth century as an enlightened philosophy of formalism. Formalist thought attempts to reduce the analytical elements of music to the objective and the quantifiable (i.e., pitch, rhythm, and form) and to silence the communicative elements that provoke an interrelated reaction (timbre and expression).<sup>9</sup>

The struggle for control between the logical mind and the “feeling” heart is a common dilemma for musical theatre audiences, particularly for those who “hear gender relations through male, bourgeois ears.”<sup>10</sup> Martin Sutton, in his article “Patterns of Meaning in the Musical,” described this struggle as tension between two stylistic modes of the integrated musical format: the plot versus the musical number, or the listener’s “super-ego” versus his “id.” The plot is conventional, predictable, a “realistic” social

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<sup>7</sup> Bowman, 386. Chapter 8 of *Philosophical Perspectives* summarizes current music philosophy from pluralist perspectives, with particular emphasis on feminist writings. In Bowman’s view, Shepherd’s “social text” furthers the view of music’s role as a mirror of its society; it illuminates subversive aspects of culture that the hegemonic ideal denies, 359.

<sup>8</sup> Shepherd, 159.

<sup>9</sup> T. Wishart, “Musical Speaking, Musical Writing,” quoted in Shepherd, 160. Although music is perceived historically as autonomous, gender designations are found throughout music theory, including the use of masculine/feminine melodic themes and cadences in nineteenth-century sonata form analysis. See Marcia J. Citron, “Feminist Approaches to Musicology” in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, eds. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Shepherd, 169.

order while the musical number represents “romance, [a] rogue imagination,” fantasy, and “exercise for imagination and personal freedom.”<sup>11</sup> Martin Sutton described the suspension of realism and the often seemingly superficial need for production numbers as the following:

The [musical] number functions as a narrative interruption, a fantastical tangent that at once frustrates and releases the spectator. The plot . . . surrounds, regulates, and keeps in check the voluptuous, non-realist excesses of the number. Plot thus takes the part of ‘super-ego’ to the unruly ‘id’ of the number.<sup>12</sup>

The hegemonic reaction is to applaud the logic of the plot while feeling “frustrated” (and yet liberated) by the imagination of the music.

It is precisely the provocatively feminine elements of timbre and expression (the imagination) that allows a performance to become an individual interpretation, particularly in the art of singing. Roland Barthes described the “imaginery” in music with its function “to reassure, to constitute the subject hearing it (could it be that music is dangerous—the old Platonic idea? that music is an access to *jouissance*, to loss?).”<sup>13</sup> This almost ineffable quality of performance invokes the *ethos* of music in the combination of language and melody, termed by Barthes as the body or the “grain” of the voice.

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<sup>11</sup> In *Genre: The Musical, A Reader*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 191.

<sup>12</sup> Sutton, 191. Note his use of descriptive words, particularly “voluptuous,” which have a feminine connotation.

<sup>13</sup> “The Grain of the Voice” (1972), reprinted in his collection *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 179. “*Jouissance*” means enjoyment.

### The “Grain” of the Voice

Roland Barthes coined this phrase in his same-titled essay to provide another dimension for explaining the quality of singing without resorting to an inadequate objective analysis.<sup>14</sup> For Barthes, the “grain” is another type of duality: a “dual production of language and of music,” or an innate cohesion of diction and the singer’s physical essence that creates significance.<sup>15</sup> His essays introduce the categories of “pheno-song” and “geno-song.” Pheno-song is defined as “all phenomena: the tissue of cultural values in service to representation and expression.” Geno-song is the “volume” of the singing and speaking voice, “the space where significations germinate ‘from within language and in its very materiality.’” A geno-song is not concerned with the representation of emotions, but the “apex of production where the melody really works at the language . . . the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters.”<sup>16</sup> The “grain” of the voice, then, provokes the listener to react physically, to respond to Shepherd’s theory of interconnected relationships. Barthes declared, “I shall not judge a performance according to the rules of interpretation, the constraints of style, which almost all belong to the pheno-song, but according to the image of the body (the figure) given me.”<sup>17</sup> The geno-song qualities are described by Ben Brantley as a characteristic trait of musical theatre:

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<sup>14</sup> Barthes, 180.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, 181. He expanded this approach to other artistic performance mediums: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs,” 188.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, 182. “Cultural values” refers to the style considerations of language structure, genre rules, interpretation, acknowledged social tastes, critical commentaries, and personality.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, 188. The philosophy of an embodied performance and the “ideology of faithful performance” while losing one’s self-identity has been a focus in the writings of Suzanne Cusick and Susan McClary. See Cusick, “Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance,” *Repercussions* 3:1 (spring 1994): 77-110; and McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

“Finding in that sound all the kinks and bumps and curls that make a person fascinating, exasperating and unique is what transforms a Broadway musical from a cookie-cutter diversion into ecstatic art.”<sup>18</sup>

The “grain” of the voice is also discovered in its timbre. Barthes describes timbre’s role for significance as originating “in the throat, the place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask [where] *significance [sic]* explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*.”<sup>19</sup> The individuality of the voice shines through the color palette available in the geno-song. To maintain the hegemonic balance of power, however, this timbral expression must be highly controlled, according to Shepherd. He makes a point of distinction between the pure, complete timbre of classical music versus the “dirty” and incomplete timbre of popular music. While classical music is considered harmonically complete, popular music invites completion from the outside, “unmediated” by cultural standards or bureaucracy.<sup>20</sup>

Shepherd designates female timbral types that are acceptable to male hegemony based upon the gender stereotype that “men are hard and women are soft.” He labels these types as “woman-as-nurturer,” “woman as sex object,” “little girl,” and “highly

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Brantley, “How Broadway Lost Its Voice to ‘American Idol,’” *The New York Times* (27 March 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Barthes, 183. Music as a means to *jouissance* (enjoyment) is a popular theme in feminist aesthetics. See Renée Lorraine Cox, “Recovering *Jouissance*: Feminist Aesthetics and Music” in *Women and Music: A History*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Shepherd, 165. In his view, popular music types “reflect the situation of proletarianized peoples contained by social institutions that they cannot influence or affect in any consequential fashion,” 163. With its abundance of marginalized constituents as performers, this is one explanation for the proclivity of musical theatre to subvert societal norms.

self-conscious and clearly ironic virgin/slut.”<sup>21</sup> The soft timbre of the “woman-as-nurturer” is acceptable because it represents the male’s childhood. He further describes the sound as richly resonant, with relaxed vocal chords and a predominant use of the heavy mechanism.<sup>22</sup> The “woman-as-sex-object” timbre is more challenging, but still acceptable as a “male image of femininity.” Its sound is described as “closed off with a certain edge, a certain vocal sheen . . . that changes perceptibly when women singers actually begin to occupy male locations in the social structure.”<sup>23</sup> The sexually charged ethnic stereotype is perpetuated in Shepherd’s view of timbre for classic blues singers, for example Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Because black women needed assertiveness and independence for survival skills, blues singers assumed a harder, more masculine timbre. They would “growl out” aggressive phrases and then switch to a gentler, “wan” timbre to keep the audience’s attention.<sup>24</sup>

One other aspect that affects the “grain” of the voice is the modern need for amplification through the wireless microphone. Ben Brantley described it as “the greatest of all obstacles to intimacy between audience and performers.”<sup>25</sup> Amplification changes the vocal timbre and its significance no matter how talented the sound engineer is. Insecure or uneven voices may benefit from the enrichment of amplification, but it

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<sup>21</sup> Shepherd, 167, 172. His chapter at this point is directed specifically at singers of “Top 40” radio or hard rock of the 1970s and 1980s. Madonna is the archetype of the last category.

<sup>22</sup> Shepherd, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Shepherd, 167, 170.

<sup>24</sup> Shepherd, 170. He described this “oscillation between voice types” as a “vocal striptease,” 173.

<sup>25</sup> Brantley, “How Broadway Lost Its Voice.”

often distorts vibrant voices, rendering them “roughened or neutered.”<sup>26</sup> Stage director Michael Bennett responded to why he chose to augment the sound of his company in *Follies* (1971) with a synchronized vocal track by saying, “Ordinarily I abhor this sort of thing . . . but performers aren’t trained to project their singing voices and rarely do they know how to protect them. Audiences, meanwhile, aren’t trained to listen.” His fear of “mechanizing the theatre until it becomes so slick it loses its ‘liveness’” has become a reality in contemporary productions.<sup>27</sup> Both professional and amateur shows are supported by a greater reliance on the sound engineer than on the performer’s solid vocal technique and mastery of articulation.

The process of understanding the “pheno” and “geno” characteristics of a song is a thorough preparation through character and song analysis. This preparation allows the singer to discover her vocal “grain” relative to a particular character. It also encourages the embodiment of performance through a personal emotional expression and specific physical reactions that communicate the essence of the song to the audience.

### **Character and Song Analysis**

The most crucial step to the creation of an original, informed performance for any dramatic role is the one most often delayed, or even ignored, by young singers. That step is the investigation and building of the character’s personality through the lyrics and the

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<sup>26</sup> Brantley.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Michael Bennett (1974), quoted by Stephen Banfield, “Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century” in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, ed. John Potter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77. Another drawback of amplification is that it makes indistinct articulation and diction louder, not distinct. The most common audience complaint, particularly of touring shows, is that the sound is amplified too much to appreciate *any* vocal quality, much less to comprehend the text.

music. This is crucial because integrated musicals, such as *Show Boat*, parallel the operatic musical demands for continuity and dramatic characterization as well as vocal technique.<sup>28</sup> Many sources are available that address procedures for character analysis and development in a musical context, written by expert coaches and teachers. I have adapted the techniques of Fred Silver, David Craig, Mark Ross Clark, Thomas DeMallet Burgess, and Nicholas Skilbeck for my own work with high school and college age students in the preparation of individualized, embodied performances of songs and character roles.<sup>29</sup> The following is a procedural outline of methodology for building a three-dimensional, “living” character in a musical theatre role. This process works for any type of book musical but is particularly relevant to preparation for the operetta style.

An exploration of the character’s motivations and objectives provides an emotional context with specificity to musical decisions and physical gestures. This process should be undertaken even before learning the pitches and musical phrases into the voice.<sup>30</sup> The singer must become an investigator who looks for clues by reading the entire libretto. She should note descriptions of the character in her opening scene and the reactions of other characters in subsequent scenes. From these descriptions she can infer the physical and emotional traits of the character. This detective work should discern

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<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey Block, “The Broadway Canon from *Show Boat* to *West Side Story* and the European Operatic Ideal,” *The Journal of Musicology* 11/4 (fall 1993): 525-544. 540.

<sup>29</sup> Silver, *Auditioning for the Musical Theatre* (reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1988); Craig, *On Singing Onstage*, rev. ed. (New York: Applause Books, 1990); Craig, *A Performer Prepares: A Guide to Song Preparation* (New York: Applause Books, 1993); Clark, *Singing, Acting, and Movement in Opera: A Guide to Singergetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Burgess and Skilbeck, *The Singing and Acting Handbook: Games and Exercises for the Performer* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Many young students are surprised at first approaching songs from the lyrics and libretto rather than the musical score, but that best supports an original interpretation. This exercise averts the typical performance of beautiful singing without comprehension or significance, without the “grain” in the voice.

relationships with other characters and provide a chart of the character's journey, or emotional progression, until the final curtain. For a classic-style musical with an historical context, it is also necessary to research the social milieu of the era and the original source material (such as Edna Ferber's novel). This information then provides a database for a character blueprint that becomes the basis for musical interpretation.<sup>31</sup> The pre-eminent acting teacher and dramatist, Anton Chekhov, asked his students to respond to the following questions about character, which are also relevant for a gender context: "Is it predominantly a thinking character, a feeling character, or a 'will' character? Is the character's mind slow or quick? Are feelings passionate or lugubrious? Is the will cold or fiery?" The musical score also provides clues about the composer's view of the character's personality.<sup>32</sup>

Once the life of the character has become real to the singer, she can focus on the song lyrics as a monologue. This step entails writing out the lyrics as a script and memorizing the words with the natural inflections of speech, rather than the imposed rhythms of the musical phrase. This technique is known as "phrasing from the lyric." The "script" should be charted for breaths, specific word and sound emphases (including alliterations, onomatopoeias, glottal hesitations, and articulation), and emotional resonance. Breath and phrasing choices should also be marked in the music for the accompanist. Text decisions are reinforced verbally by experimenting with different

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<sup>31</sup> Clark's book has an incredibly specific character questionnaire that includes an emotional range list. It even asks what is in the character's pockets. *Singing, Acting and Moving in Opera*, 28-29. The questionnaire form that I use with students to stimulate their character development in individual songs for auditions and show preparation is in the Appendix.

<sup>32</sup> Chekhov in Clark, 29. Clark also quotes opera superstar Frederica von Stade in promoting the method of character analysis through clues in the musical score, 25.

choices for emphasis and phrasing. This process inoculates the “grain” of the voice through the geno-song. The singer must own the lyrics in absolute memorization and comprehension of the text’s meaning. Composer William Bolcom reinforced the importance of text comprehension by writing, “Diction can only convince the audience if the singer understands the text profoundly; otherwise there is no chance to communicate fully.”<sup>33</sup> A paraphrase of the lyrics in one’s own vernacular will aid this comprehension.

The next step of the analysis process is to relate the character’s experiences to one’s own life, to create a subtext of the lyric. Subtext construction begins with a general paraphrase of the entire plot line, then a more specific paraphrase of each song.<sup>34</sup> The singer distills the emotional essence of the lyric to remember an episode or emotional connection from her own life experience. The relationship between reality and character life formed from similar experiences imbues the song with an intentional physicality from an emotional context. Once a subtext dialogue has been determined and acted out, it is then layered onto the original lyrics, fusing text with the internal emotional life. This is the most challenging technique for young singers, but the most rewarding for them in performance.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Clark, 96.

<sup>34</sup> The application of subtext to a song lyric is what separates the amateurs from the professionals. It is also the point where my students typically realize that dramatic singing requires hard work and personal revelation. The most powerful subtext scenes involve an antagonistic partner that provokes spontaneous reactions. The partner provides a specific focus for both visual spotting and emotional connection for the singer. This is a particularly useful approach for the specific art of preparing audition songs.

<sup>35</sup> Craig describes this sequential exercise as “The Two” and “The Three” in *On Singing Onstage*, chapters 12 and 13. The purpose of the subtext is to provide a subjective interpretation and meaningful choices for movement.

Finally, the process includes a musical analysis of the song. After the singer has determined the formal (objective) characteristics, she may then impose her textual and expressive decisions upon the composer's template of melodic shape and rhythm. There are a dozen or so different song types but the most common are the up-tempo and the ballad, each with traditional performance practices.<sup>36</sup> The formal sections of popular song include a short instrumental introduction, an expositional Verse, a "32-bar" Refrain (or Chorus), a possible bridge section followed by a repeat of the Refrain, and a "rideout" ending.<sup>37</sup> These sectional divisions are important guideposts for acting choices such as a change of focus or emotional reaction. The singer should be aware that the function of the Verse is to explain the character's viewpoint or the situation. Performance practice dictates a free, ad lib singing style (similar to recitative). The Refrain is more formal regarding rhythm and phrase structure as it expresses the character's overwhelming emotion; her need to sing what she cannot speak. Some flexibility is allowed for interpretation in musical theatre performance tradition, however, when the spoken phrasing of the lyric is imposed intentionally upon the musical phrasing. "A performer in character is perceived as *generating* musical time, not subject to it," according to Burgess and Skilbeck.<sup>38</sup> Other considerations for analysis include key relationships and harmonic

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<sup>36</sup> In *A Performer Prepares*, Craig provides an outline of thirteen song types with practical advice for the preparation of specific songs within each type.

<sup>37</sup> A "rideout" is the continued emotional thought under a sustained final pitch of the singer, or the subtextual demeanor sustained during the instrumental postlude. The most common form structures for the Refrain are AABA, ABABA, and ABAC.

<sup>38</sup> *Singing and Acting Handbook*, 6.

progressions, tessitura, the accompaniment's relationship to the vocal line, and the structure of the climactic phrase.<sup>39</sup>

Comprehensive preparation of these four steps by the singer before the first rehearsal is a standard expectation of the production team in professional theatre. It also provides a non-professional singer a strong foundation for an original performance that will delight (and probably astound) her director and music director. It should be cautioned that this is only a method. The ultimate goal is to make a physical and emotion connection of the words and the music that best “communicates the story of another human being.”<sup>40</sup> As an example, this analytical method will be outlined as a means to communication for two songs from *Show Boat*.

### **Analysis of Select Songs in *Show Boat***

The songs of Jerome Kern retain landmark status as popular songs for they remain in the standard repertoires of jazz and cabaret performers, as well as in the memories of pre-rock-and-roll generations. Their appeal remains because of Kern's careful crafting of text and music; his ability to capture a universal emotional essence in song. Kern was the first native-born American composer who studied in the European tradition but then departed from it to create a new American type of art song. Alec Wilder described Kern's music in the 1920s as portraying a “native quality . . . a new kind of song, perhaps unlike

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<sup>39</sup> Clark recommends that the singer ask the composer “why?” throughout the score to find emotional clues and personality shadings within the music. *Singing, Acting, Moving in Opera*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Jake Heggie, composer, quoted in Clark, 96. Heggie's expectations of performers are that “every good singer does what the composer does--starts with the text, understands it, and then works on inhabiting it convincingly.” He believes that a “sense of motivation and purpose” is lacking in most dramatic and concert performances. Clark, 97.

any other theater music heard up to that time.”<sup>41</sup> Richard Rodgers, who became the twentieth century’s most popular musical theatre composer, paid homage to Kern by stating that if Kern was not the “number one” popular composer, he was “certainly America’s first one.” He described Kern’s style as an amalgamation of the European and British operetta style with “everything that was fresh in the American scene to give us something wonderfully new and clear in music writing in the world.” Rodgers also compared Kern’s transition of musical theatre compositional style to Beethoven’s status as “the last of the classicists and the first of the romanticists.”<sup>42</sup> Kern’s most enduring popular songs are from his collaboration with Oscar Hammerstein II in *Show Boat*: “Ol’ Man River,” “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man,” “Make Believe,” “You Are Love,” and “Why Do I Love You?” In constructing the tightly integrated musical drama of *Show Boat*, Kern introduced relatively few songs, but each is appropriate to the character or scene, and the styles attempt an historical accuracy that covers all thirty years of the drama, from ragtime and Tin Pan Alley to 1920s jazz.<sup>43</sup>

The songs and lyrics of *Show Boat* were revised with each production, beginning with the out-of-town tryouts before the 1927 premiere through each successive revival and recording. Kern and Hammerstein were responsible for most of these revisions

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<sup>41</sup> *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972; reprint 1990), 29.

<sup>42</sup> “Jerome Kern: A Tribute,” *New York Times* (7 October 1951); reprinted in *The Richard Rodgers Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Block (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 269-270. Rodgers rebuffed claims to Victor Herbert’s title as the first American operetta composer, describing his German-Irish musical style as remaining foreign to culture in the United States.

<sup>43</sup> Julian Mates, *America’s Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 185. Of the 34 musical numbers in the *Show Boat* Vocal/Piano score (based on the 1946 revival version), there are only 14 songs, with several reprises. Lehmann Engel pointed out that even though the songs were conceived in the dramatic context of the show, many of them still have survived as popular standards. *American Musical Theatre*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1975), 11.

through the 1946 revival. Songs were deleted, inserted, or shuffled, and lyrics were changed to reflect contemporary social mores and popular trends.<sup>44</sup> The only songs that remain consistent in every production are “Make Believe,” “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man,” “Bill,” and “After the Ball.” Kern interpolated “After the Ball” as a period “prop” song and “Bill” was interpolated specifically as a showcase song for Helen Morgan.<sup>45</sup> Of the four, the first two songs are the original songs specific to *Show Boat*, so I will focus only on them as examples for analysis. They are also the defining songs of the lead female characters, Magnolia and Julie.

### “Make Believe”

“Make Believe” is a standard show ballad whose function is to introduce the characters of Magnolia and Gaylord to each other, as well as to the audience.<sup>46</sup> Its appearance in the first scene has already been described in Chapter Four. Since the research for Magnolia’s character development and gender type analysis has also already

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<sup>44</sup> Recordings of original theatrical and film versions document the historical progression of “politically correct” lyrics in the opening number, “Cotton Blossom,” that reference the African-American characters “workin’ all day on the Mississippi.”

<sup>45</sup> A “prop” song, a popular operatic device, is sung by a character because the situation demands it, not because of an emotional revelation. See Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, for examples from opera and musical theatre repertoire (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990. rev. ed., 2002), 47. Kern used “After the Ball” as a reminiscent earmark for the 1890s setting of the Trocadero Club. It was composed and self-published by Charles K. Harris in 1892 and is considered the first number one popular song in modern American mass culture. See Sigmund Spaeth’s description in *Read ‘Em and Weep: Songs You Forgot to Remember*, rev. ed. (New York: Arco Publishing Co., 1959) and Charles Hamm’s remarks about its impact on the creation of the “Tin Pan Alley” industry in *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979; paperback ed., 1983), 284ff. Stephen Banfield has provided an excellent analysis of “Bill” regarding its poetic and musical ambiguities in “Sondheim and the Art That Has No Name” in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, 144-146.

<sup>46</sup> Craig subdivides the ballad genre into three distinct types in *The Performer Prepares*: show ballad, narrative show ballad, and dramatic show ballad, 28. He identifies the common features of the show ballad as an “easy, unpushed rhythmic beat,” a general lyric statement that is easily lifted out of the context of the score, the easy “singability” of the melody for it was meant to be recorded and bought as sheet music, and the unifocus presentational style; the song is sung by the boy to the girl, or vice versa.

been presented in previous chapters, I will progress to an analysis of the lyric as script. Gaylord's solo introduces the Refrain and the beginning of the Verse, followed by Magnolia singing the next two sections of the Verse. To focus on preparing Magnolia's character, I will begin the lyric analysis and phrase graph with her opening text.

**Verse:**

Magnolia: We only pretend, (✓)

You do not offend in playing a lover's part. (✓)

The game of just supposing is the sweetest game I know. (✓)

Our dreams are more romantic than the world we see. (✓)

[Ravenal: And if the things we dream about don't happen to be so,  
That's just an unimportant technicality.]

Though the cold and brutal fact is you and I have never met, (✓)

We need not mind convention's P's and Q's. (✓)

If we put our thoughts in practice we can banish all regret, (✓)

Imagining most anything we choose. (✓)

**Refrain:** We could make believe I love you, (✓)

We could make believe that you love me. (✓)

[Both] Others find peace of mind in pretending, (✓)

Couldn't you, (✓)      Couldn't I? (✓)      Couldn't we? (✓)

[Ravenal: Make believe our lips are blending in a phantom kiss,  
or two, or three,]

[Both] Might as well make believe ['] I love you, (✓)

[Ravenal: For to tell the truth, (✓) I do.]<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, *Show Boat* libretto, Act I:1 (New York: The Rodgers and Hammerstein Library, 1927). The performer should underline words to highlight an emphasized inflection. The ['] signals a glottal pause, and the (3) signals a breath in the phrase. These markings are just suggestions without claim to the definitive version. Some variations do occur in performance practice of the verse. For example, the 1966 studio recording of Barbara Cook and John Raitt omits the second half of the verse for Magnolia. Also, the final statement of the Refrain by Ravenal is traditionally sung as a climactic duet even though it is scripted as only *his* revealing statement; the vocal score does include cued notes for the soprano. The definitive operatic recording (1988) of the original version ends with Jerry Hadley singing solo so that it remains in the context of the scene, which then continues.

The phrases are positioned to show grammatically complete thoughts rather than the original poetic phrasing. In the application of “phrasing from the lyric” to Kern’s music it is obvious that he had this technique in mind when he set the melodies to the text; they correspond almost exactly. The few instances where Kern introduces a rest within a phrase group are needed for clear articulation of the ending consonant for the previous word, not for a breath.

Applying a subtext as the next step is a personal choice for the performer. I will offer some suggestions rather than impose my ideas on that process. Some general scenarios include remembering childhood games of “pretend,” or imagining career possibilities after finishing one’s degree, or a reconciliation of any kind. The singer should remember that the goal of the subtext is to relate the essence of the lyric to a personal experience, or emotion, that provokes a physical response.

The formal structure of the Verse is periodic in six sections (A-A’-B-B’-C-C). Kern provides great clues to the naiveté and playfulness of Magnolia’s ingénue character in the contrasting sections of the verse. The first section is set in a slow waltz in the key of C major, as if feigning a sophisticated nobility for the text, “We only pretend.” The “B” section (“The game of just supposing”) is a sprightly allegretto in duple meter, reminiscent of the piano tune that Magnolia was practicing during Gaylord’s previous song. The melody has modulated to F major with a quicker melodic rhythm and an “oom-pah” accompaniment. The final section of the Verse is the most revealing of Magnolia’s innocent, yet knowing sophistication. In the performance practice tradition of text painting, the audience should anticipate a melodramatic musical style for the text,

“Though the cold and brutal fact is.” Kern obliges this expectation with a modulation to the minor mode and menacing harmonic rhythms, but he surprises the audience with the tempo and rhythms. An animated *alla breve* tempo and rapid eighth note rhythms belie the gravity of the text. The melodic rhythms straightens out to quarter-note rhythms for “We need not mind convention’s P’s and Q’s.” The exact repetition of the “C” melodic phrases infers a carelessness rather than “regret.” This text setting provides a clever subversion of traditional gender roles. The woman assumes the masculine trait of defying social dating restrictions.

The Refrain is also periodic in four sections (A-B-A-C).<sup>48</sup> The Refrain challenges the singer to phrase dramatically instead of rigidly relying upon the metrical stress, particularly in the dotted quarter note rhythm formula and in the rhyming phrase, “Others FIND peace of MIND in pre-TEND-ing.” The tempo is retained from the Verse, but it is indicated as *dolce* so it is traditionally sung a little slower. The key becomes D-flat major through a diminished triad on the first pitch, sustained by a fermata on “We.” The accompaniment settles into a fox-trot style that gently undulates under the vocal melody. The tessitura is rather low for a soprano; the range is c<sup>4</sup> (middle C) to f<sup>5</sup>, which is sustained for the climactic phrase. The climax pitch seems higher, however, because of the 1920s singing style of bright, forward placement and excessive vibrato.<sup>49</sup> The musical score provides many clues for character analysis and gender interpretation.

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<sup>48</sup> Alec Wilder labeled it as a rounded binary (A-B-A-B1/A1). *American Popular Song*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Banfield described the typical early twentieth century soprano as a soubrette *fach*, which sounded higher than it actually was. The “belt” voice had not yet become an issue on the stage as both lowbrow and middlebrow audiences accepted the “pure” soprano voice as the heroine standard. “Stage and Screen Entertainers,” 74.

### “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man”

As suggested in Chapter Four, this melody is a unifying leitmotiv for the entire musical (second only to “Ol’ Man River”). The first appearance of the complete song is during the second scene, set in the *Cotton Blossom*’s kitchen pantry. The song’s function is as a “prop” song for Julie, in the strictest sense of the term. She sings it to Magnolia as one of her favorite childhood songs. Queenie is surprised to hear that “Miss Julie” knows this particular “colored” song and joins in on the second verse to describe her relationship with Joe. The duet becomes an ensemble number for the African-American chorus as an accompaniment for Magnolia while she practices her “shuffle” dance steps. The lyrics of this song are revelatory for both Julie and Queenie’s characters. It anticipates the miscegenation scene of Julie’s mixed racial heritage and it shows her vulnerability as a strong woman trapped by her love for Steve, who is not worthy. The song also provides insight for Queenie’s true affection for Joe, even when she harasses him and calls him “worthless.”

Similar to “Make Believe,” the song begins with an introductory version of the Refrain, followed by dialogue underscoring, then Verse and Refrain. I will chart the lyrics of the Refrain first.

**Refrain:** Fish got to swim, [’] birds got to fly, (✓)  
I got to love one man til I die. (✓)  
Can’t help lovin’ ‘dat man of mine. (✓)

Tell me he’s lazy, tell me he’s slow, (✓)  
 Tell me I’m crazy [’] (maybe [’] I know), (✓)  
 Can’t help [’] lovin’ ‘dat man of mine. (✓)

**[Bridge]:** When he goes away dat's a rainy day, (✓)  
But when he comes back, [']dat day is fine, (✓)  
 De sun will shine! (✓)

He kin come home as late as kin be, (✓)  
Home widout him ain't no home to me, (✓)  
Can't help ['] lovin' dat man of mine! (✓)

**Verse 1:** Oh, listen sister, (✓)  
 I love my mister man, ['] and I can't tell yo' why. (✓)  
 Dere ain't no reason why I should love 'dat man—(✓)  
 It mus' be sumpin' dat de angels done plan. (✓)

**Verse 2:** Mah man is shif'less an' good for nuthin' too (✓)  
 (He's mah man jes' de same). (✓)  
 He's never round here when dere is work to do—(✓)  
 He's never round here when dere's workin' to do. (✓)  
 De chimbley's smokin', [']de roof is leakin' in, (✓)  
 But he don' seem to care. (✓)  
He kin be happy wid jes' ['] a sip of gin—(✓)  
Ah even loves him when his kisses got gin! (✓)<sup>50</sup>

It is important to note the use of Black dialect; Hammerstein wanted to represent a true sound of African-American speech in the 1890s. Kern reinforced that decade's musical style by incorporating a blues-tinged melody with syncopated rhythms over a banjo-strummed accompaniment. In creating a role specific to this show, the singer must decide (with the vision of the director) how deeply Julie would betray herself by using the dialect as written. For performance as an audition or cabaret song, I suggest removing the dialect inflections.

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<sup>50</sup> *Show Boat*, Act I:2. The first phrase in the vocal score is “Fish got to swim *and* birds got to fly.” The additional conjunction provides the rhythm that is followed in every other “a” phrase of the Refrain. In performance practice tradition it is usually omitted, following Helen Morgan's original interpretation.

Clues for Julie's character from the libretto and song texts have also been introduced in previous chapters. Although she only appears in a few short scenes, she has a great impact upon those around her, especially Magnolia. Her emotional journey is charted in her two songs—a descent from a wistful co-dependency in her marriage to a shattered self-identity and lack of self-respect after its demise. Miles Kreuger described the enduring identification of songs with original cast members and this song is indelibly connected with Helen Morgan, the original Julie Dozier. Her interpretations are available through a 1928 studio recording and in the 1936 Universal film as she reprised her theatrical role opposite Irene Dunne's Magnolia.<sup>51</sup> Well known for her cabaret performances of torch songs, her extremely rapid vibrato and “delicate, high-pitched soprano,” she provided a unique pathos to both “Can't Help Lovin'” and to “Bill.”<sup>52</sup>

The possibilities for subtext scenarios are wide open beyond the realm of romantic relationships. The gist of the lyrics could relate to a co-dependent family member who the singer is always bailing out of trouble. It could portray the helplessness felt at the inability to kick an addictive habit, a reaction to one's favorite dessert being offered while on a diet, or the exasperation one experiences when a child (or pet) looks up

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<sup>51</sup> Kreuger, *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 53. *American Musical Theater*, vol. 1, February 1928 recording, Victor Baravalle, conductor (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, 1989; distributed by CBS Special Products), compact disc. A brief moment of the pantry scene is also available on *Broadway: The American Musical*.

<sup>52</sup> The newsreel footage of Helen Morgan climbing atop a piano to sing “Bill” was “regarded as one of the symbols of New York during the roaring '20's,” Kreuger, 53. She seems much older than her age of 36 in the film version, which Kreuger explained was a “dissipation from brandy” that gave her a world-weary quality. *Show Boat* was Miss Morgan's first lead role, and her first book musical. Her personal vulnerability blended with Julie's links her irrevocably to that character and to the mythology of *Show Boat*.

angelically while caught in the act of mischief. Again, whatever the scenario choice, the communication of the “grain” is most important.

In the performance practice of jazz and popular singers, “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man” is often presented as a blues ballad or even a torch song, but its original context is a bluesy up-tempo number. The formal structure of Refrain-Verse-Refrain-Bridge-Refrain presents an overarching rondo form (A-B-A-C-A). Kern set the Verse in an irregular form of twelve measures that includes no repetition of melodic phrases. This construct functions as another Bridge rather than a formal section separate from the Refrain. The periodic melodic phrases of the Refrain ([: a-a<sup>1</sup>-b:]) reiterate the inevitability of the lyrics with a descending sequential pattern that is arrested by the title phrase. The Bridge (“When he goes away”) augments the earlier syncopated rhythmic pattern to a march-like “shuffle,” which is reinforced melodically by the repetition of pitches that ends in a “cry” style (a leap of a sixth) on “a-way” and “day.” The climactic phrase (“that day is fine”) ascends by stepwise motion to “fine” on f<sup>5</sup>, and then quickly descends in its resolution (“the sun will shine”) over a sustained dominant-seventh (V<sup>7</sup>) chord.

The key of E-flat major creates a tessitura than dwells in the midst of the passaggio, with frequently repeated b-flat<sup>4</sup>'s leaping to e-flat<sup>5</sup>'s. The range is extensive, from b<sup>3</sup> to f<sup>5</sup>, but still low for a soprano.<sup>53</sup> The “hook” of this song is the title phrase, shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>53</sup> As a reminder of Queenie’s ethnic “Mammy” character with its resonant, nurturing timbre, and as an accommodation to the original contralto Tess Gardella, Queenie’s verse is transposed to C major.

man till I die... Can't help lov-in' dat man\_ of mine.

(Vln.)

*pp*

$I^{2-1/6}$   $vi^{7-6}$   $bVI^7$   $V^7$   $I$

Figure 1. “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man” title phrase.<sup>54</sup>

Kern used an ingenious v-shaped melodic line that descends with angular perfect intervals that ascends by an arpeggiated major triad to g-flat, before it resolves by step to the tonic e-flat. This melodic shape portrays an ambivalent quality to the text. The love is inevitable, but does it make her happy? The c-flat on “lov-in’” is the “blue” note, as well as the lowest pitch of the melody, but it feels higher because of its intervallic relationship to the initial pitch as a major seventh. This placement (and the enharmonic spelling) presents a challenge for the singer to approach it vocally. The harmonic progression of the phrase reinforces the quality of strangeness (perhaps Otherness?) with its delayed resolutions. I find it curious that Kern subverts the status quo of a standard cadential pattern by inserting a chromatic (yet distant) major triad on the text, “lov-in’ ‘dat man.” It provides another ambiguous quality for subversive characterization from a gender context, yet the song as a whole perpetuates the hegemonic standard of woman’s role in relationship to “her man.”

<sup>54</sup> Jerome Kern, “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man,” mm. 5-7, *Show Boat* Vocal/Piano score (Burbank: Polygram International Publishing, 1927; distr. Hal Leonard Corporation), 58.

The song appears twice more as a plot device for *Magnolia*. It is used as a production number for the wedding in the Act I finale and as her audition song at the Trocadero Club in Act II. The audition reprise is sung first to a simple guitar accompaniment as an old-fashioned “coon” song. Then it is modernized with a new ragtime beat accompaniment, as illustrated in Figure 2.

a.  $\frac{4}{4}$  Fish got to swim\_\_\_\_\_ and birds got to fly\_\_\_\_\_

b.  $\frac{2}{4}$  Tell me he's la - zy, tell me he's slow\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2. “Can’t Help Lovin’ ‘dat Man” reprise, mm. 3-4 and 32-33.<sup>55</sup>

The original eighth-note rhythm pattern (a.) is sung in performance practice with a swing triplet feel that adheres to the blues style. This singing approach provides a languid quality to the text that reinforces the inevitability of the text metaphors—the woman cannot control her emotions or desires for they are a natural biological fact. The modern ragged rhythmic pattern (b.) demands a more frenetic, instrumental style of articulation. This approach trivializes the text with a non-committal attitude, like that of the 1920s New Woman. Though it is technically a “prop” song, Kern used it to good effect to summarize the emotional life and hegemonic ties of the two lead female characters to

<sup>55</sup> *Show Boat* Vocal/Piano score, 166, 169.

their respective husbands, and the loss associated with each of those relationships. It is also an excellent example of vocal versatility for a singing actress in its varied musical settings, from “coon” song to a 1920s jazz rag.

Performance practice in musical theatre is built around traditions and expectations based upon the performance and persona of the original actor. Many young performers attempt to emulate the original cast performers, but that approach inevitably re-treads the same stereotyped manner of performance. To create an informed, fresh performance, the actress must prepare her songs through character analysis, subtext, and musical score analysis. She should also research the original culture and audience of a performance to determine a correlation to the present situation and how to relate the character’s significance to current culture and tastes. Finally, an investigation of gender roles and types for that era will provide an embodied performance that effectively communicates the emotion of the text as well as the “grain” of her voice.

## CHAPTER VI

### CURTAIN CALL

The musical adaptation of *Show Boat* by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II has been acclaimed as an original, a boundary-breaking trendsetter since Florenz Ziegfeld heard the opening act and confirmed his financial backing of the show. It established the modern musical theatre precedent and has been recognized for various distinctions. These distinctions include an historical accuracy that portrays a non-apologetic look at the reality of race relations and the inherent class structure in American history.<sup>1</sup> It established a new American version of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with its tightly integrated melding of plot, lyric, and music infused with specific American character traits and musical styles. Other distinctions are its serious message that is lightened with broad comedy at just the right moment, its influence upon every successive musical of the twentieth century, and now, its depiction and expansion of gender role stereotypes in American society and the theatre microcosm. Joseph P. Swain wrote that *Show Boat* influenced the second generation of great musical theatre composers (particularly George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers) because “it revealed what the Broadway stage could create if given the right materials and appropriate vision. It established a new set of

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<sup>1</sup> The depictions of the culture and society in the regional South of the 1890s, Chicago at the turn of the century, and New York City in the 1920s are portrayed through stage sets, historical characters, costumes, and music.

dramatic ideals.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the standard of *Show Boat*’s precedence was also its shortcoming because it could not be duplicated easily, particularly in the immediate economic decline of the 1930s. The carefree, “anything goes” youth culture of the 1920s was replaced with the serious reality of the “Great Depression.” There was little financial capital for staged extravaganzas and experimentation in New York City. Those who could afford theatre tickets wanted escapist entertainment at musical comedies or the movies. Two musicals of the 1930s that came close to the serious messages of *Show Boat* were George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* (1938), but they are both exceptions.<sup>3</sup> The fully integrated musical drama would not appear again for fifteen years, not until the serendipitous pairing of Hammerstein with Richard Rodgers for *Oklahoma!* (1942).

Regarding the subversive aspects of *Show Boat*, I have not found any evidence that Kern and Hammerstein deliberately attempted to further the women’s movement and feminine liberation through their libretto and score. But, I do believe, based on the examples and musical clues discussed in this document, that they did subtly subvert the hegemonic perspective of women’s social and domestic roles through the medium of musical

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<sup>2</sup> *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; rev. ed., 2002), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Many critics and historians, including Swain, argue about whether *Porgy and Bess* should be considered as a musical or as an opera. *Broadway Musical*, 48. Blitzstein’s work, funded by the federal Works Progress Administration, was an overt political statement regarding labor union malpractice. It should also be noted that during the 1930s many successful Broadway composers (including Kern, Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter) were lured to California by a lucrative career in Hollywood. Movie musicals became the new stage for experimentation and elaborate spectacle. The shows gained national exposure for greater profit with less cost to the individual audience member. It is a curious irony that the first movie musicals were recycled from the stage versions (often with the same actors) and now that process has been reversed. The current trend on Broadway is the dramatic musical that is a movie adaptation, or the “Jukebox” musical, a loosely organized “book” of a popular singer’s or group’s *oeuvre*. Examples include *Mamma Mia* (ABBA), *Movin’ Out* (Billy Joel) and *All Shook Up* (Elvis).

theatre performance practice. They allowed the audience to glimpse Truth through stereotypical portrayals of stock characters, and then challenged assumptions of that Truth by humanizing the stereotypes through character growth in emotional journeys and even comical scenes of life.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the work of Kern and Hammerstein is provocative. It challenges the listener to react during the production and to ponder thoughtfully its messages long after the final curtain, as any great musical drama should.

Academic criticism of musical theatre is difficult, according to Bruce Kirle, because the “original audience that ‘read’ the show, along with their social milieu cannot be recreated to adequately interpret.”<sup>5</sup> It is then necessary for the serious young performer to research and re-create the “cultural moment that produced the product,” accomplished by the study of performance practice, its initial reception, and its “historical relativism.”<sup>6</sup> This document has explored all three of Kirle’s criteria. It has provided a framework for an original, historically informed “cultural moment” as a model for preparing character roles for a classic-style musical, with an emphasis on gender-based research. The context of early twentieth-century musical theatre has been traced from its multiple predecessors to the genre’s early culmination in the melodramatic/comedic/opera style of *Show Boat*. Traditional gender roles have been discussed for socio-historical context through the late nineteenth-century societal debate of the “Woman Question,” as well as the moral values in stereotypes of the nineteenth-century Victorian or Post-Bellum Southern Belle

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<sup>4</sup> This is the same approach that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte used in their *dramma giocoso* fusion of *seria* and *buffa* techniques for *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

<sup>5</sup> “Cultural Collaborations: Re-historicizing the American Musical” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Kirle, 2.

woman versus the twentieth century New Woman. The analysis of women in the theatre has provided an important historical knowledge of culture and the assumptions of the original audiences based on stereotypes of character type and sexual promiscuity. The traditions of performance practice specific to musical theatre have been explored in the performance language of gender, the embodied performance possible in the discovery of one's individual vocal "grain," and the unique interpretations of solo artists from the period. Finally, a method outline for character development and musical analysis for songs specific to *Show Boat* has provided a synthesis of gender-based preparation.

An awareness of typecasting potential and the desire to avoid another re-treading of a stereotyped caricature are important for an actress to create a performance of significance through a character role. This significance is made possible by imbuing the role with vocal substance and dramatic integrity gleaned from research of character analysis, historical setting, and societal context. In addition, an understanding of gender roles and stereo-types for the particular era of the show is necessary to provide a layer of originality and realism to the process of "becoming the character." This should be standard practice even for the preparation of modern, rock-influenced musicals. The task is now left to the performer to combine her accomplished vocal technique and personal life experiences with gender awareness and song analysis. This preparation will allow her to embody and transcend a musical theatre character type that is original yet historically accurate, which may become the next definitive performance.

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- Show Boat*. Directed by James Whale. Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, Charles Winninger, Paul Robeson, Helen Morgan, Helen Westley, and Hattie McDaniel. 115 minutes. Universal Studio Pictures, 1936; Videocassette edition, Turner Entertainment Co., 1990.
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## APPENDIX

**Song Character Analysis Worksheet**

Song Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Show Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Lyricist: \_\_\_\_\_

Composer: \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Who is speaking?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (first, middle,  
last)

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Height \_\_\_\_\_ Hair Color \_\_\_\_\_

Birthplace: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Places You've Lived: \_\_\_\_\_

Parents' Names: \_\_\_\_\_

Sibling Order: \_\_\_\_\_

Childhood Experiences: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Background: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Distinguishing Physical Characteristics (5 adjectives):

\_\_\_\_\_

Distinguishing Personality Characteristics (5 adjectives):

\_\_\_\_\_

2. To whom are you speaking? (specific listener; describe with name, physical and personality traits):

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3. What is your relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Where are you? (location) \_\_\_\_\_

5. What time is it? (period and hour) \_\_\_\_\_

6. What just happened? (MOTIVATION FOR SONG): \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What exactly are you saying? (Use another page)

a. Write dictionary definitions of unfamiliar words.

b. Write the lyric/poem out in your own words.

8. What is the tone of voice/attitude of the speaker? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. Is there a dominant mood/atmosphere? Name it. \_\_\_\_\_

10. Is there a subordinate mood/atmosphere? Name it. \_\_\_\_\_

11. What is the climax of the song? (words and bar #'s) \_\_\_\_\_

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12. What emotional experience do you wish to communicate? \_\_\_\_\_

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13. What emotional response do you want to receive from your listener? (OBJECTIVE)

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