

Studies in Musical Theatre
Volume 14 Number 3

© 2020 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/smt_00044_1

Received 1 November 2020; Accepted 20 November 2020

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‘Waving through a window’: Nostalgia and prosthetic memory in *Dear Evan Hansen*

ABSTRACT

Dear Evan Hansen, a popular Broadway musical whose narrative centres on connectivity and the protagonist’s social anxiety, offers a disruptive potential to the otherwise standard nostalgic leanings of the contemporary American musical. Operating dramaturgically, nostalgia offers the audience an opportunity to recall an idealized past that imbues the musical they are witnessing with their own positive affect. *Dear Evan Hansen*’s use of prosthetic memory disrupts the nostalgic tradition of the contemporary musical. Using dramaturgical analysis to identify the narrative operation of nostalgia and prosthetic memory, this article situates the disruptive potential of *Dear Evan Hansen* as an intervention into the American musical theatre canon writ large.

KEYWORDS

nostalgia
memory
Broadway
musicals
dramaturgy
social anxiety

On 11 June 2017, *Dear Evan Hansen*, a critically acclaimed Broadway musical detailing the life of a social outcast caught up in a series of fabricated stories, took home six Tony awards at the 71st annual celebration, including Best Musical. Critics lauded the show as ‘worth every Tony it received’, ‘the musical you needed as a teen’ and ‘inspiring, haunting (these reviews are found in the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Austin Chronicle* and the *Columbus Dispatch*,

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1. As demonstrated throughout and repeatedly since the 2016 US presidential election, social media offers a space for the spread of misinformation. Conversely, it contains subversive potentiality, as seen in mass social movements organized through Facebook, TikTok and Twitter.

respectively). The show's popularity is in part fuelled by its representation of social media and personal hyperconnection in an increasingly mediatized culture. The show's insistence on foregrounding social anxiety and cognitive difference appears to find resonance among fans, or 'Fansens', as they self-identify. Although this musical is not the first to centre such cognitive difference – shows such as *Lady in the Dark* (1941), *Man of La Mancha* (1965) and *Next to Normal* (2008) have similarly taken up this work – *Dear Evan Hansen's* popularity coupled with its use of social media situates it as a potential disruptive force within a small but powerful musical theatre canon that addresses such themes. Stephen Levenson, the musical's book writer, foregrounds the importance of social media and mediatization to the show's very structure:

If we tried to tell our story today without cell phones and social media, there would be a real inauthenticity about the show. And at the same time, we wanted to be sure we're using social media as a storytelling device and we were never interested in exploring social media as a theme or as an idea. We always wanted to make sure it was grounded in the story and part of the grammar of the show.

(DiLella 2016)

The first truly 'digital age' theatrical, *Dear Evan Hansen* deals in the power of web-based social media to spark online connections, sway mass opinion and radically change circumstances. Social media, however, can create both hyperconnectivity and distance, as evidenced by the script's set design notes: 'SET: A blank, empty space, filled with screens' (Levenson et al. 2017: 5). The vastness of the stage imbues the show with narrative distance that the characters must navigate, as they metaphorically clamber through the otherwise crushing weight of the social media posts emblazoned across the projection screens. Now, more than ever, the consequential power of social media is an unavoidable inevitability – a cultural truism that has been demonstrated time and time again.¹

So, what, then, does *Dear Evan Hansen* offer by way of extrapolating social media's enduring presence in our mediatized culture, and what does it offer to larger considerations of contemporary American musical theatre? I argue that *Dear Evan Hansen* is a musical predicated on notions of hyperconnectivity through social media, showcasing its isolating effects via the lens of social anxiety. The narrative focus on hyperconnectivity mirrors the relationship experienced between spectator and performer, highlighting the American musical's insistence on nostalgia as an ideal narrative vehicle and its subsequent disruptive potential in *Dear Evan Hansen*. Indeed, the plot of the musical requires nostalgic manifestations to drive the story forward, calling back to the American musical's use of nostalgia as an affective tool for personal audience engagement. I argue that the theoretical underpinnings of the musical illuminate larger cultural critiques of nostalgia and the American musical vis-à-vis social media's expansive reach into spaces of the personal. Utilizing Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory and Adam Muller's thoughts on nostalgia coupled with a rigorous dramaturgical analysis, I contend that the longing for nostalgia present throughout *Dear Evan Hansen* produces prosthetic memories in the narrative, ultimately undercutting the premise of nostalgia as an ideal narrative driver – a critical component of the American musical.

NOSTALGIA, PROSTHETIC MEMORY AND THE BROADWAY MUSICAL

The American musical operates on a structure of nostalgia that is critical to its cultural resonance. As the prime dramaturgical mode of musical theatre, nostalgia ‘steers [...] the course of audience response by calling upon nostalgia to evoke a particular audience relationship to a particular historical America’ (Rugg 2002: 46). As Adam Muller posits in his essay ‘Notes toward a theory of nostalgia’, that nostalgia’s history

shows it to have been variously treated as a physical disorder, a mental disorder, a ‘mere’ emotion, and a symptom of the modern age. It involves a backward glance through history, but not toward a place or even a time that is necessarily real. It is therefore not *really* historical, although it has been called a ‘historical emotion’.

(2006: 740)

Muller notes nostalgia’s common framing as a harmless longing for an idealized past, but *Dear Evan Hansen* embodies his more pejorative approach to the term, engendering a critical discourse about nostalgia’s affective place in the American musical.

Dear Evan Hansen is certainly no exception to the musical’s narrative use of nostalgia, and it follows a deep genealogy in using it as a narrative tool for audience engagement and self-referential affective responses. Indeed, much of the ‘Golden Age’ musical theatre canon presents idealized moments in American history that encourage what musical scholar Rebecca Rugg terms ‘the fantasy of similarity’ (2002: 46). Such a fantasy can be borne out of personal or cultural nostalgia, by way of an audience member recalling when they first heard the cast recording or in remembering enjoyable ‘bygone’ years, for example. Such a nostalgic longing built into the fabric of the American musical has become so commonplace within the form as to be an assumed ‘prime dramaturgical mode of musical theatre’ (Rugg 2002: 45). Whether audiences are vicariously experiencing the possibilities of new ventures through *Oklahoma!* (1943) or the opportunity for upward mobility in *My Fair Lady* (1956), Golden Age musicals rely upon nostalgia to connect audiences with material in an affectively positive manner. What makes *Dear Evan Hansen* so unique, then, is its use of nostalgia as a tool for *personal* rather than *communal* gain, signalling the musical’s disruptive potential in an otherwise homogeneous positive conceptualization of the term.

In *Dear Evan Hansen*, nostalgia foregrounds circumstances that become prosthetic memories used to manipulate the narrative of others, further signalling the show’s disruptive potential to the otherwise accepted use of nostalgia in the American musical. Alison Landsberg, in her book *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, offers a salient definition of prosthetic memories as those not strictly derived from a person’s lived experience. She explains that rather ‘prosthetic memories are adopted as the result of a person’s experience with a mass cultural technology of memory that dramatizes or recreates a history he or she did not live’ (2004: 28). Mass cultural technologies, as Landsberg shares, occur at the intersection of passive, non-interactive mediums, such as television, with increasingly interactive technologies: multimedia interactive, role-playing games and social media. These prosthetic memories may not circulate publicly; they are nonetheless experienced with a person’s body, ‘as the result of an engagement

with a wide range of cultural technologies' (2004: 26). Landsberg defines prosthetic memories as products of a constructed narrative that circulates by way of technologies that imbue such moments with an embodiment that *never was* but is *intensely relived* and *felt* in its own falsehood. Such prosthetic memories serve as the crux of *Dear Evan Hansen's* narrative operation: the plot hinges on Evan's ability to fabricate narratives that create prosthetic memories for others, relying on their nostalgia to gain access to the most intimate portions of their lives through such falsification. As such, nostalgia and prosthetic memory operate together within *Dear Evan Hansen*, ultimately challenging notions of time, embodiment and memory. Citing the unique temporal paradigm of nostalgia, Muller writes that '[nostalgia] belongs neither to the present, the past, nor to the future, and yet it remains in some way attached to all three of these temporal zones' (2006: 739). Indeed, it is through this temporal coexistence wherein Evan's longing for a past never lived – his nostalgia – highlights his want for a future made possible through his own creation, the origins of which will become the prosthetic memories he creates for others – a narrative divergence from nostalgia's general use in the American musical.

A THEORETICAL AND DRAMATURGICAL COUPLING

External circumstances fuel prosthetic memories that culminate in personal consequences – consequences that ultimately become manifest in *Dear Evan Hansen*. The musical tells the story of outcast Evan Hansen, struggling to control his crippling social anxiety and the subsequent lengths he, inadvertently and deliberately, employs to fill the emotional void of his otherwise ordinary life, one that ultimately spirals beyond his control. As the details of Evan's life come into focus, framed by both his crippling social anxiety and his penchant for self-isolation via his limited social capacities, the audience witnesses an assigned therapeutic exercise from his psychiatrist: Evan must write letters to himself to evaluate his daily circumstances, and journal his experiences with relation to his anxiety. Indeed, one of Evan's self-written letters, signed 'Me', dramaturgically operates to highlight his own social barriers while simultaneously introducing fellow social outcast Connor, who has swiped Evan's letter from the school printer. Connor, described by another character as channelling 'school shooter chic' in his stylings and personality, exists on the opposite end of the outcast spectrum than Evan, with self-isolation serving as a technique to close off from the world rather than a by-product of his inability to connect. When Connor confronts Evan about the letter, Evan lies about its purpose as an assigned therapeutic exercise from his psychiatrist. Connor teases him, taking pity on Evan by signing his cast in print large enough to span the entirety of the otherwise blank canvas.

The show's narrative nostalgic complications begin, however, when Connor's parents find Evan's note to himself on Connor's body after Connor commits suicide. The letter, complete with a salutation intended for Evan Hansen and signatory indicating 'Me', makes it appear as though Connor has written a letter to his 'close' friend Evan Hansen, featuring language oft associated in popular culture with those whose isolation may lead to self-harm. In a turn of events, Evan, unable to break the truth to Connor's parents, finds himself providing comfort to the Murphys by fabricating stories of his alleged close friendship with their son, Connor. In so doing, Evan – at first inadvertently, but eventually quite consciously – preys upon a family in mourning in an effort to forestall their deepening sense of loss. This culminates in a personal

reckoning of responsibility and public accountability for the show’s protagonist, played out on-stage through social media.

A sense of falsehood or, at the very least, an altered sense of reality lays the foundation for prosthetic memories and nostalgic manifestations to flourish in *Dear Evan Hansen*. Such is the case when Evan, under duress and confronted by Connor’s parents about the note found on Connor’s body, lies about its origins. Connor’s parents ask Evan directly why Connor would have written a note to Evan and kept it with him when he killed himself if they were not good friends. Connor’s parents invite Evan over for dinner, and the beginnings of a future prosthetic memory yet to be born take hold – made possible through the story’s trajectory via social media and a penchant for nostalgia from which Evan is hesitant to distance himself. When questioned about breaking his arm, Evan fabricates a story (in the form of the musical number ‘For Forever’) about he and Connor breaking into a long-closed orchard to enjoy a sunny day and each other’s company. Not only is Evan creating a prosthetic memory for himself, but he is also fabricating a narrative for Connor’s family – a prosthetic memory that they are not aware is untrue. As the play unfolds, Evan continues sharing falsities, providing comfort and creating relationships with Connor’s family, a tool of Evan’s own nostalgia, to be sure. The prosthetic memory created is a welcome addition taken on by the Murphys, Connor’s family, who use these (falsified) memories to serve as a utopian longing to carry on, given the false hope that Connor’s life, which they did not know much about otherwise, was filled with wonderful memories.

Although the letter provides but one example of a constructed narrative, Evan uses both prosthetic memory and nostalgia to regain, reclaim and rewrite a narrative never fully belonging to him. Although this usurpation of the truth may not have been his intention at the outset, he doubles down as it produces the kind of connections he has been missing. Connor’s parents, unaware of the allegedly close relationship between Connor and Evan, ask Evan if there are any other documents he can produce so they can better understand their son’s state of mind prior to his suicide. Evan, unable to provide any tangible proof of their relationship in the moment, says that he and Connor communicated via private email accounts so that others would not know about their friendship, and Connor could maintain his outcast image at school. Evan furthers this fabricated narrative and, in the process, broadens the scope of those involved, when he asks his family friend and fellow classmate Jared to help him counterfeit the emails. Jared obliges and begins to create a series of emails, ones he backdates so they appear to have been sent prior to Connor’s suicide.

The theatrical staging of this scene extrapolates the notion of personal nostalgia as well as a dramatic embodiment of prosthetic memory. During the musical number ‘Sincerely, Me’, wherein Jared writes the emails ‘from’ Connor on Evan’s behalf, the actor portraying Connor joins them and interjects with suggestions about what to write. In a self-referential moment, the chorus of the number reminds audiences about the specific crafted nature of Connor’s narrative, highlighting Evan Hansen’s use of nostalgia for his own personal gain: “Cause all that it takes is a little reinvention/It’s easy to change if you give it your attention/All you gotta do is believe you can be who you want to be/Sincerely, Me’. The physical representation of Connor creates a liminal space wherein Connor serves as a spirit guide, a physical manifestation of the falsified authorship taking place and a moving embodiment of prosthetic memory. Connor, himself providing edits to the emails being crafted

by Jared and Evan, imbues each document with a spiritual presence of the past that forces the audience to question the accuracy and reliability of the present narrative being constructed. Jared and Evan create the documents based in falsehoods, and Connor's engagement with their creation challenges the notion of true authorship and highlights the fact that Connor's actual lived truth does not control either the narrative created as a result of his suicide or even that connected to his past.

Although Evan has the opportunity to expose the lies he has taken up, he foregoes the opportunity to do so, instead agreeing to further the falsehoods and give a speech at a vigil being held in Connor's honour at school. Evan's touching speech, more about finding one's self than Connor's suicide, ultimately goes viral with tens of thousands of views from all over the country. The virality of Evan's speech highlights the intense mediatization and falsification of not only Connor's posthumous life but also society at large, for the consumers of this viral information do not know it is created in falsity. Evan, contemplating his own insecurities in 'You Will Be Found', provides a hopeful sentiment: '[e]ven when the dark comes crashing through/When you need a friend to carry you/When you're broken on the ground/You will be found' (Levenson et al. 2017: 89). Evan's conflation of his own self-identity and psychological struggles are intimately intertwined with those of Connor's, as they are truly tied up in the narrative of Connor's legacy – a concept concretized in the staging of the number. Throughout the number, sung portions intersperse with vocal articulations of internet comments thanking Evan Hansen for his words, and reifying the necessity to memorialize Connor given his tragic suicide. These vocal articulations are accompanied by projections of tweets, Facebook comments, texts and self-recorded messages, physically foregrounding Evan in front of his creation while simultaneously creating distance between him and the message he has failed to control. This conflation of narratives, and thus Evan's personal longing as played out through Connor's memorialization, removes Connor as the central figure in the grieving process and allows Evan complete control of the prosthetic memories he creates by way of his own nostalgia. Evan's nostalgic leanings operate here to create an idealized past that Evan himself did not live, but created through his own fabricated narrative, widely distributed via social media's hyperconnectivity. This intersection – between nostalgia and social media – highlights the precarity of hyperconnectivity. Indeed, only through Evan's nostalgic longing does Connor's posthumous narrative find a wide audience and establish prosthetic memories as an unintended and negative consequence to nostalgia's otherwise rosy implication.

Evan's insistence that Connor be continually memorialized furthers his own authorship of Connor's posthumous narrative. Evan enlists the assistance of class president Alana to help him preserve Connor's legacy through 'The Connor Project', with a goal of raising \$50,000 to reopen the since-closed apple orchard Evan told the Murphys meant so much to his friendship with Connor: an idealized nostalgic legacy imbuing significance to Evan's otherwise inconsequential teenage experience. After proposing this philanthropic venture to Connor's parents and gaining their enthusiastic support, Evan furthers his control of Connor's posthumous narrative and ventures into authoring a legacy on behalf of one who is no longer able to speak for himself. Evan's inclusion of others into his fabrication implicates them in its creation without their knowing consent. This manipulation of both the unknowing public and Connor's family makes clear the suspect ethics of Evan's lies. Not

only does Evan make decisions based on his own nostalgic desires, but he also implicates others in his behaviour. Evan’s behaviour could have disastrous consequences for the futures of those to whom he is lying, consequences of which they are not aware because their engagement with the narrative is built on a foundation of falsehood they do not know exists.

BEYOND THE WINDOW

Golden Age musicals rely upon nostalgia to produce an affective response in audience members by reminding them of a familiar time imbued with positive memories. *Dear Evan Hansen* utilizes the American musical’s nostalgic leanings to demonstrate nostalgia possibilities otherwise – possibilities utilized in *Dear Evan Hansen* for Evan’s own personal gain via prosthetic memories. Instead of producing familiarity with an idealized past, Evan complicates his nostalgic longing for a past never lived by rewriting to his own benefit. In so doing, *Dear Evan Hansen* uses nostalgia as a tool to create critical distance between its characters, highlighting such distance through the void of social media, evoked viscerally on-stage by massive screens populated with social media posts. The disruptive potential of *Dear Evan Hansen* lies in its use of nostalgia as a tool for personal gain that relies on falsehoods and prosthetic memories – a stark contrast to nostalgia’s general use within the American musical theatre canon writ large – as presented through the staging, design and dramaturgical construction of the piece.

Dear Evan Hansen builds upon the nostalgic leanings that the American musical so clearly relies upon, but provides disruptive potential by pejoratively using it as a tool to create prosthetic memories, ultimately undercutting the usefulness of nostalgia in the musical and situating it as a disruptive force within the canon itself. Such disruption challenges the usefulness of nostalgia as a connective tool between audience and performers, situating *Dear Evan Hansen* as both a tool to mirror the meta-theatricality of the show itself and a constructed challenge to nostalgia as an ideal narrative driver in the contemporary American musical. In so doing, *Dear Evan Hansen*, as a popular musical heralded for its affective possibility, both works with and against nostalgia as it comments on hyperconnectivity in the age of mediatization to disrupt nostalgia’s place within the American musical – a critical intervention with the possibility to alter our own nostalgic perceptions of the canon writ large.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Barr, Lindsey R. (2020), "Waving through a window": Nostalgia and prosthetic memory in *Dear Evan Hansen*', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 14:3, pp. 313–20, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/smt_00044_1

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