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The Invention of the Satiric Musical

How Can You Tell an American?

The very first musical told of rival criminal gangs, of the joys of the thief and the killer, of whores, of corruption so comprehensive that there is not a single decent character in the entire show. It was a sensation: *The Beggar's Opera*, first performed in London in 1728, as I've already noted, and still vital today.

John Gay wrote the book and lyrics (to use modern parlance), and there was no composer: Gay applied new lyrics to pre-existing tunes. Historians emphasize its spoof of Italian opera, then most popular among the rank and fashion of the town. As well, Gay meant to assail the administration of the country's unofficial ruler, Robert Walpole, the very model of the one per center made of graft and secret sweetheart deals for his cronies.

Even so, *The Beggar's Opera* must have delighted Londoners mainly because it really was their first musical, with a script punctuated by situation and character songs in the popular style. Better, those first audiences must have been tickled to hear innocent melodies wedded to sarcastic and even licentious lyrics, as when this jolly trifle:

Oh, London is a fine town,
And a gallant city,
'Tis governed by the Scarlet Gown,
Come listen to my ditty ...

turned up in the Gay version as this parents' lament:

Our Polly is a sad slut!
Nor heeds what we have taught her.
I wonder any man alive
Will ever rear a daughter!

The dialogue, too, was deliciously shocking, now scathing in irony, as in this bit from a fence and informer:

PEACHUM: Like great statesman, we encourage those who betray their friends ...

and now brutally philosophical on the ins and outs of the social contract:

PEACHUM: The [financially] comfortable estate of widowhood, is the only hope that keeps up a wife's spirits.

In short, the English-speaking musical has been critical of the establishment and its protocols right from the start, not least in its protection of minorities. Women were given great latitude as performers, though it was popularly supposed that all actresses of less than Shakespearean prominence were prostitutes—thus the so-called wicked stage. And Ned Harrigan and Tony Hart's depictions of the Irish in the 1880s followed hard upon New York leaders' destruction of Manhattan's "Boss" William M. Tweed—possibly, some historians now believe, because he was letting the Irish share power in a city till then run exclusively by WASP bankers and the socially consequential Knickerbocker caste. Comparably, Florenz Ziegfeld challenged an unwritten racial-segregation law by hiring black Bert Williams for the white *Follies* throughout the 1910s—and this was not stunt casting, though Ziegfeld was notorious for pulling off PR didoes. What attracted him to Williams was the latter's versatility in both sketch comedy and song, with a gift for dry underplaying cut with pathos and wonder.

We tend to forget how nonconformist the American musical really is, because for its first century (starting roughly in the 1860s) its songs were the national melody—"After the Ball," "Night and Day," "My Heart Stood Still." Storytelling songs, dance numbers, love ballads: the accompaniment of life. How could something so popular be subversive?

Besides, the American musical show's most apparent ancestor was the Gilbert and Sullivan titles, so Victorian in tone, with their switched-babies

plots, their grand dame of a contralto bossing everyone around, their whoopsiedoodle comedian with the funny hopping dance. These are lovable, not revolutionary, works. Yet they quite openly pass remarks about the incompetence or shady dealings of the elites—the pack of idiots making up *Iolanthe*'s House of Lords or the pompous official in *The Mikado* rationalizing his etiquette in the taking of bribes. He even gave his character's name to a type, the self-important grandee, a term still in use today: a Pooh-Bah. "I can't help it," says Pooh-Bah. "I was born sneering."

Granted, there was always a fear of state censorship in those days. *The Beggar's Opera* so offended Robert Walpole that its sequel, *Polly*, was, though published, banned from stage production, and Gilbert and Sullivan, despite a phenomenal popularity, were inclined to self-censorship rather than irritate the authorities *too* much. In their penultimate piece, *Utopia (Limited)* (1893), on the Anglicization of a South Pacific island, Gilbert poked fun at all sorts of aspects of English life. Yet when the local princess, an alumna of Girton College, Cambridge, merrily recommends that her homeland adopt the political party system, Gilbert was crossing a line:

PRINCESS ZARA: No political measures will endure, because one Party will assuredly undo all that the other Party has done. ... Inexperienced civilians will govern your Army and your Navy; no social reforms will be attempted because out of vice, squalor and drunkenness no political capital is to be made. ...

Gilbert and Sullivan expert Leslie Baily tells us that one newspaper called this "the bitterest speech" of Gilbert's career, and in the end Gilbert cut the second half (after my first ellipsis) of the lines quoted above, not only in the stage performances but in the published text as well.

Clearly, some saw a danger in an unfettered music theatre. Yet when we cross the ocean to the United States, we find the enemies of the musical stage concerned entirely with sexual immodesty—ballet girls in tights, women characters expressing unmaidenly interests, or the insinuating maxixe danced (in a Ziegfeld show) by a young lady and her beau, the latter also a woman, dressed as a man. Ministers thundered from their pulpits at these sexy capers, but because the musical was thought to be empty-headed frolic, its *politics* did not truly register.¹

All the same, a progressive worldview kept peeking out from behind the sheer gaiety of musicals. Jerome Kern and P. G. Wodehouse's "We're

Crooks,” in *Miss 1917*, troubles to tell us just where a self-respecting felon establishes his limits:

Our crimes at times are things to shudder at,
But we’ve never been in Congress, for we draw the line at that.

Or, in the title song of Kurt Weill and Ogden Nash’s *One Touch of Venus* (1943), we hear “The world belongs to men and women”—true enough—“but the banks belong to men,” a surprise topper that reminds us who has all the power. And it’s the babbitts, not the sheiks. For, as a lyric in *The Golden Apple* (1953) explains, when war talk is in the air, “Old men always do the shouting” while “Young men have to do the shooting.”

So there is a thread of pungent social observation sewn into the tapestry of the musical’s history. Not till the 1920s, however, did anyone attempt a full-scale narrative musical satire, and on a risky subject, willful militarism. This show was *Strike Up the Band* (1927), with a book by George S. Kaufman and a score by George and Ira Gershwin. An ensemble piece, *Strike Up the Band* gives us the sheik, flapper, babbitt, and salesman figures. It was the ultimate twenties musical—and it founded a line of musical-comedy satires that leads straight to *Chicago*.

The sheik is Jim, a reporter, but true-blue and moral. A hero. The flapper is headstrong Joan, who loves but incessantly bickers with Jim. Joan’s father, Horace Fletcher, an industrialist in the cheese business, is the babbitt, and he drives the plot. It seems that America’s protective tariff has locked Switzerland’s cheese out of our market, so *this means war!* All the male leads get involved, including a certain Col. Holmes. He’s the salesman figure, and what he sells is conflagration:

HOLMES: Costs a lot of money, war does. What do you think we ought to have, a little war or a big one?

Fletcher suggests they get investors to back the war as if it were a theatrical production:

HOLMES: I could see the steel people, Y.M.C.A., all those folks. ... Gives them a lot of advertising.

This look at elites viewing death and destruction as a source of profit was very bold for the era; men were imprisoned during the previous wartime for

saying as much, including the socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, who ran for president while locked up in a federal penitentiary, in 1920. He polled 919,799 votes, not that much less than William Z. Foster.

But that's the real world. In *Strike Up the Band*, Jim, resourceful as all sheiks were, devises the strategy for a decisive battle and peace breaks out. Then, just before the final curtain, Russia protests the caviar tariff, and *this means war!*

As I've said, such debunking was the favorite indoor sport of the 1920s; satire was its ideal playing field. What makes *Strike Up the Band* special (and bonds it with *Chicago*) is the way the score supported the lampoon. This wasn't a satire with songs: it was a fully musicalized satire, a hurdy-gurdy Jeremiad monitored by a zany chorus to echo, converse with, and sometimes defy the principals in spoof-operetta musical scenes. And Ira's lyrics match Kaufman's irony: in the title number, war is called a "patriotic pastime," and if "We don't know what we're fighting for," that's fine because "We didn't know the last time."

Alas, problems bedeviled the show early on, partly because producer Edgar Selwyn didn't assemble a first-rate cast. All the non-sweetheart roles needed comics of particular kinds, not always easy to find. Thus, Kaufman saw Fletcher as the evening's straight man, a dim bulb—but he has too many silly lines to be played straight. And the rest of Selwyn's crew were unfunny or miscast. Here's one example: the Col. Holmes, a behind-the-scenes fixer of deadly authority wearing a folksy mask, was Lew Hearn, neither deadly nor folksy, and known mainly for his outré vocalism suggesting a mad goat singing "Nessun Dorma." Holmes disappears in a crowd; Lew Hearn stood out in one.

Then, too, George S. Kaufman tended to plot chaotically (which is why he almost always wrote his scripts with collaborators). He *was* funny, though. Here's Fletcher and an underling considering National Cheese Week:

UNDERLING: There was a very large celebration in Des Moines, Iowa.

FLETCHER: A very big cheese town.

UNDERLING: The parade was led by a naked girl symbolizing law and order and was followed by the entire male population.

FLETCHER: That shows how popular cheese is.

Still, by the Philadelphia tryout, some of the leads were quitting, because the show was playing so badly. Was it the scathing commentary? Was it because

much of the cast couldn't sing well enough to justify the music? There's a tale, retold in various versions, in which Kaufman and Ira Gershwin are standing outside the theatre when two distinguished older gentlemen disembark from a taxicab and head into the house. "That's Gilbert and Sullivan," Ira tells Kaufman, "coming to fix the second act."

To which Kaufman replies, "Why don't you write jokes like that in your lyrics?"

Selwyn closed the production, but he persevered. He had Morrie Ryskind rework the book, now to build the action around an emerging star-comic duo, Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough. Friends since childhood, the pair maintained an unusual partnership, as McCullough was less a straight man than a participant in the jesting, romping around in outlandish outfits, especially a collegiate raccoon coat. Clark was known for his cigar, cane, painted-on eyeglasses, and extremely fancy duds, and his lines were dotted with allusions to the latest shows and movies, names in the news, and so on.

So the team was easy to write for, as when Fletcher's receptionist bars Clark's way. "Sweet Adeline!" Clark cries, adding, in a reference to Rudy Vallee's newest song hit, "Believe it or not, I'm the vagabond lover." Later, Jim says he has some bad news, and Clark replies, "Don't tell me my tailor died." As so often with this generation of drolls, from Bert Lahr to Eddie Cantor, the laughs inhered in not the lines but the delivery.

But did Ryskind bowdlerize Kaufman's sociopolitics? The new script reconfigured the war adventure as a dream: Fletcher suffers a mild heart attack, is sedated, and falls asleep at his desk as the violins shimmer over a belligerent theme for horns and violas and the woodwinds gush overhead. (Gershwin liked the effect so much he had it included in the show's overture.) Further, Ryskind changed Fletcher's product from cheese to chocolate.

However, does all this really sweeten anything? Because, contrary to legend, Ryskind did not soothe Kaufman's satire. Just for example, the scene I just quoted between Fletcher and Col. Holmes in which they conspire to "stage" a war—easily the most dangerous passage in Kaufman's original book—was tweaked a tiny bit but survived as Kaufman intended it in Ryskind's final script, dated November 8, 1929, a few weeks before rehearsals began. In short, what put this new *Strike Up the Band* (1930) over was a vastly better staging: the two star jesters, more accomplished singers,

and a revised score with two hit titles, “Soon” and “I’ve Got a Crush on You [sweetie pie].”

So here was a satire that didn’t close Saturday night. Thus heartened, Kaufman, Ryskind, and the Gershwins wrote two more political spoofs, *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) and a sequel called *Let ’Em Eat Cake* (1933), respectively on a presidential campaign and ensuing failed impeachment and then on a revolutionary uprising. *Of Thee I Sing*’s working title was *Tweedledee*, on the notion that all presidential candidates are as alike as Lewis Carroll’s Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

True, some do strive to appear unnuanced, to appeal to the broadest possible electorate. “Talk less,” Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Aaron Burr advises the young Alexander Hamilton. “Smile more.” Such is the way upward: “Don’t let them know what you’re against or what you’re for.” Yet we still entertain such personable candidates as Theodore Roosevelt and John Fitzgerald Kennedy. They talk more.

Interestingly, so do virtually all the principals in the American musical. More often than not quixotic and flamboyant, they can’t wait to tell us of their moods, to sing about their plans, to let us know not only what they’re for or against but also how wonderful it feels to be in a musical. Ethel Merman shares joy in “Riding High” or “I’m Throwing a Ball Tonight.” Pal Joey and his soigné protectrice duet in a lightly bragging gavotte on their “den of iniquity.” Puccini’s Rodolpho and Mimi, transported from *La Bohème* to New York’s East Village in *Rent*, re-enact the opera’s dainty meeting scene in more worldly terms that just as eloquently plead the cause of love.

These are rich characters, and it’s worth noting that, once *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* boasted extremely arresting individuals after decades of standard-make sheiks and flappers, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s third show, *Allegro*, failed to please in part because its people, especially its gentle doctor protagonist, were bafflingly earthbound. Even music didn’t lift them.

True, it is less the people in *Of Thee I Sing* than the very funny script that keeps the story popping, as when the French Ambassador marches in with a plot twist and the authors playfully nudge the French war debt:

AMBASSADOR: I have received another note from my country.

PRESIDENT: ... We’ve got a lot of notes from your country, and some of them were due ten years ago.

AMBASSADOR: But this is not a promise to pay—this is serious.

It is the astonishing score, though, that gives the show its tang, for, even more than in *Strike Up the Band*, the music takes part in the satire, as in a spoofy Viennese waltz at an extremely dramatic moment, or in a torchlight parade stippled with worldless vocal bits of familiar old melodies. The Gershwins are doing what Kaufman and Ryskind are doing, something that before them only Offenbach and Sullivan did well and often: creating music that laughs.

Among his innovations, Gershwin cast aside the overture model as a medley of the principal tunes. Jerome Kern seems to have been the first to revolutionize the overture, most notably in *Show Boat* (1927), which presents a kind of tone poem on racial tension. For *Of Thee I Sing*, Gershwin does quote his two prime melodies, the title song and “Who Cares?,” but this five-minute *sinfonia* is really an *étude* on one excited dotted-eighth-note theme from “Because, Because,” a number for reporters covering an Atlantic City beauty pageant and reprised by the show’s villain, Diana Devereaux. The song’s A strain consists of two adjacent pitches relentlessly teetering back and forth; speeded up, they provide a nervous bonding element for the entire overture. It mirrors the restless energy of the show as a whole, as the contest winner becomes the First Lady while the luscious Ms. Devereaux keeps horning in like Katisha in *The Mikado*.² Gershwin seems fascinated by this scatterbrained little riff, using it to irritate “Who Cares?” and then varying it propulsively as if preparing another of the classical pieces like the *Rhapsody in Blue* with which he was changing the history of American concert music. To repeat—and, again, to prepare the way for how *Chicago* makes its points—the truly facetious musical needs a facetious score.

Let’s get our bearings on this important matter by interrupting the chronology to consider a truly fulfilled satiric score that will likely be familiar to my readers, that to Frank Loesser’s *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961). A sell-out hit running three and a half years, *How To Succeed* tilted all its elements toward the goofy idea of a rascal plotting his way to the top of a big industrial firm. The sets, for example, were colored-in line drawings; the workers were screwballs, while the boss, Rudy Vallee, underplayed in a kind of oblivious monotone; the protagonist, Robert Morse, was lovable despite his treacherous persona; and a recorded voice, detailing the title’s do-it-yourself lessons in self-advancement, was Carl Princi, the very model of the suave radio announcer who brings dignity and omniscience to everything, a Stepford voice hovering benignly over the

drastic tizzies of real life. (Revivals have used Walter Cronkite and Anderson Cooper.)

So the staging was excellent—but the main point is that *How To Succeed's* score reflected this mocking craziness, from the musical suggestion of the addict's withdrawal when the coffee maker fritzes out, in "Coffee Break," to the parody of a revivalist rave-up in "Brotherhood of Man." We even get a dopey touch of the classical in a love song, "Rosemary," when the three title notes provoke an orchestral tutti echo worthy of Puccini, followed by the opening measures of Grieg's Piano Concerto. Some of the numbers are simple take-offs—"Grand Old Ivy" of the college fight song and "Love From a Heart of Gold" of the Gilded Age ballad. But "I Believe in You" turns the traditional Boy Loves Girl hymn into Boy Loves Self. Morse sang it in the executive men's wash room, as a group of his fellow suits used their electric shavers to smooth the cheek for an afternoon conference, the shaving scored for kazoos.

In all, a salty intelligence guides *How To Succeed's* score just as it does the book and the original design: all the departments of the production were harmonized. However, this is not always the case in musical satires, as witness Irving Berlin and Moss Hart's *Face the Music* (1932), which arrived concurrently with the three Gershwin political shows.

Face the Music, too, was political, a reaction to the corruption in the administration of New York's Mayor James J. Walker, and Hart is mordant but Berlin is his usual amiable self. He lacks the fantasy of Gershwin's busybody choruses or Loesser's Heckle and Jeckle cutups. "(Castle in Spain) On a Roof in Manhattan" graced *Face the Music* with a Latin number danced in a mirrored setting, the design and choreography by outstanding specialists of the time, respectively Albert R. Johnson and Albertina Rasch. This is beautiful art, romantic art: it doesn't belong in a satire. Yes, *some* of *Face the Music's* numbers second Hart's spoof, as in "Lunching at the Automat," picturing the leadership class, from "the Rock'fellers" to "Missus [August] Belmont," enjoying fast food. Still, the score in general is what Berlin might have written for any musical comedy.

So the very genre of the musical satire was newborn and tender at the time—and that may be why there was no musical version of *Chicago* then. Or was it because of all that "Chicago as the ultimate American city" baggage, the unbridled capitalism on one hand and anarchy on the other? Because while twenties musical comedy seemed almost improvisationally

chaotic in its plotting, it worshipped the authoritarian idylls of love and marriage as givens in every American life. Only villains remained bachelors.

And what about *Chicago*'s murder factor? There had been killings in *Rose-Marie* (1924), by an adulteress no less, but only to save her lover from her enraged husband; in *Deep River* (1926), in a duel; in *Rainbow* (1928), in self-defense. But these were serious musicals; *Deep River* hasn't a single laugh in any of its three acts. *Chicago*, after all, is a *comedy* with a killing.

Nor was Maurine Watkins' assault on that other authoritarian idyll, the American way of justice, suitable for adaptation. When twenties musicals used plays as source material, they were invariably skylarking farces about mistaken identity or the like. Besides, was any musical-comedy star capable of actuating a character as rough and selfish as Roxie Hart?

There was one: Marilyn Miller. An elfin blond dancer and the particular pet of Florenz Ziegfeld in both book shows and revues, Miller had been Broadway's official Cinderella ever since the aforementioned *Sally*, playing a waitress who crashes the *Follies*. Singing in the Victorian heroine's head-voice soprano and adept in both hoofing and ballet (that is, in populist and elite strains of dance) Miller personified the melting maid of the happy stage with infusions of flapper—the bobbed hair, the ambition. We remember her establishing number in *Sally*, “[I wish I could be like] Joan of Arc”: determined yet wistful, a lovely wonder.

But that was the public Miller. Offstage, she was intensely self-oriented and sensually appetitive: a Roxie Hart. And Miller had Roxie's temper. When Ziegfeld brought his little girl, Patricia, to a matinee of *Sally* and father and daughter paid a visit to Miller's dressing room, Patty found the magical star in a highly unmagical mood, and when the Ziegfelds beat a hasty retreat, a jar of cold cream flew crashing against the closed door.

Though only five, Patty caught the contradiction between art and life. “It's different back here, isn't it?” she observed: for she had seen Roxie Hart for fair. So wouldn't Miller have been a sensation in a musical *Chicago*, turning the musical-comedy damsel icon inside out? Or was Broadway ready to see Public Sweetheart Number One turn killer? Would Ziegfeld or Charles Dillingham, Miller's contracted producers throughout the 1920s, have allowed Dolly Dearest onstage in such a predatory role?

The musical simply wasn't that rich a form then. But the narrative satires as such kept coming, two presenting the public with replicas of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a very easy way to dress one's show with an

extraordinary character. The first of the two, *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), was the Absolutely Guaranteed Smash, not because of the second-rate Rodgers and Hart score, but because of a very amusing Kaufman and Hart script and the outstanding star turn of the decade, by George M. Cohan, in a role—everybody suddenly realized—he was born to play. In rimless spectacles and a morning coat over striped dark trousers, Cohan was Roosevelt's double. (The show didn't put the actor in Roosevelt's wheelchair, but then few of the public knew how crippled the President really was.)

Billed as “a musical revue,” *I'd Rather Be Right* was more of an episodic book show: to enable two kids to afford to get married, the President tries to balance the budget, each new attempt creating a new comic or musical “act.” They all fail, but the kids decide to marry anyway. Besides, most of what happens turns out to have been a dream, with FDR strolling through New York's Central Park without a security detail, his actual cabinet materializing in song befitting a Gilbert and Sullivan touring company, the nine Supreme Court judges (all in Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes' beard) popping out from behind bits of the scenery crying, “No, you don't!” when the President tries to pass a law, and captains of industry getting in on one of Roosevelt's welfare-for-work programs by manning picks and shovels to transfer a little twig from one spot to another.

The zaniest bit was the cabinet's radio show, the *White House Jamboree*, with “Franklin D. Roosevelt's Hillbilly Swing Orchestra,” Postmaster General James Farley as emcee, Secretary of State Cordell Hull telling a “Pat and Mike” Irish joke, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins sharing insider D. C. dish while someone tapped a telegraph key in the style of Walter Winchell's radio spots (“Fashion note: Senator William E. Borah [FDR's worst enemy in Congress] sleeps in just his pajama tops”), and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. flavoring “A Baby Bond For Baby” with the vapid honey of the airwave crooner. Clearly, *I'd Rather Be Right* is an unusual work, yet it is as if the score submits to the book rather than matches it.

The librettist-lyricist of the other musical about FDR, Maxwell Anderson, was not a Rooseveltian. On the contrary, Anderson saw the President as a war-mongering fascist, which led the audience to assume Anderson had in mind not Roosevelt but Adolf Hitler. This show was *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938), with émigré composer Kurt Weill, and the setting was old Nieuw

Amsterdam. Anderson's Roosevelt was Pieter Stuyvesant, played by Walter Huston in the first great musical turn by a star not associated with musicals. Reveling in his trick pegleg costume, copping the show's main ballad, "September Song," joining a line of cuties in a "Dutch Dance" of mixed meter, $\frac{2}{4}$ varied by $\frac{3}{8}$, to suggest the clomping wooden leg, and slyly euphemizing to tart up his tyranny (controlling the economy to favor the oligarchy is "a slight financial sophistication"), Huston had a ball. And he knew who his nemesis was almost from the moment he stepped on stage: the show's First Couple boy, Brom Broek. He's what happened to the sheik when he got political; his idea of team sports is revolution.

So this is the beginning of the musical's series of rough diamonds, attractive and powerful men who, in one way or another, refuse to fit into the prevailing social landscape—*Carousel's* Billy Bigelow, *Brigadoon's* Tommy Albright, *The Pajama Game's* Sid Sorokin, *1776's* John Adams, *Sunday in the Park With George's* Seurat. Brom is a conscientious objector, born to exasperate fascists:

STUYVESANT: Democracy? What's a democracy?

BROM: It's—where you're governed by amateurs. It's—a free country.

STUYVESANT: Ridiculous. ... Arrest him!

And there will be no trial:

STUYVESANT: Trial, hell! When a man's guilty what the hell good's a trial!

Knickerbocker Holiday is a funny but secretly bitter piece, for Anderson really did think that power attracted the worst people as a rule. As he explained in his preface to the show's published text, "Government ... must be drastically limited in its scope, because it ... will automatically become a monopoly in crime and devour the civilization over which it presides." As if adducing proof of Anderson's observation, in 2016 the President of Germany, Joachim Gauck, said in a television interview, "Die Eliten sind gar nicht das Problem—die Bevölkerungen sind das Problem." (The elites are not at all the problem—the people are the problem.)

Heretofore, musicals were written to give the public a break from the struggles of life; Maxwell Anderson wrote *Knickerbocker Holiday* to force the public to confront the struggles of life. This gave the show a distinctive tang next to its contemporaries *The Boys from Syracuse*, *Du Barry Was a*

Lady, and *Hellzapoppin*. Further, Kurt Weill was the ideal musician to give Anderson's lyrics music with spice and bite, in that unique Weillian orchestration suggesting the dance band engaged for Sadie Hawkins Night in Mother Courage's bordello. And while "September Song" was the hit, the show's key number was "How Can You Tell an American?," as it aligns with Anderson's belief that we as a people instinctively refuse to obey: because obedience is in itself anti-democratic.

It's the *Chicago* thing, the Prohibition thing: America is anarchy at its best. The libertarian Anderson thought even the Social Security Act (just three years old at the time) "bureaucratic absolutism"—but "How Can You Tell an American?" doesn't go that far. Rather, it says—no, proclaims—that we insist on living "without the supervision of a governmental plan, and that's an American!" Weill gave the lyrics a swinging tune with a healthy undertone of willfulness in it, so the music *sounds* like the words.

And there it is: a musical with politics. The aim of this chapter is to monitor the development of the kind of show that will lead us to *Chicago*: the commentative musical, individualized in not just story and characters but its music as well, singing in its own unique idiom. Up to this point, in the 1930s, virtually every American musical employs the popular song style of the day. Richard Rodgers was different from Cole Porter, yes. Still, even at their most imaginative, such writers use the available forms, which gives the musical in general a shallow texture. We want to hear outlandish music to match the outlandish dramaturgy.

So now we come to a pair from the late-middle 1930s that marked the satiric musical's first absolute deviations from popular-music norms, Kurt Weill and Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson* (1936) and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937). These two very different pieces seem like partners, as both are political and use exaggeration and mannerism. Neither show is entirely a satire, and they certainly cannot be seen as forerunners of the *Chicago* musical per se. Its template is show biz, glamorous and slick. Instead, *Johnny Johnson* and *The Cradle Will Rock* adhere to the line of socially progressive drama that disdained the allure and kicks of the Broadway show shops.

Thus, at one point during *Johnny Johnson*'s rehearsals, when a member of the company made a suggestion to the director about how to pep up the climax of a number that wasn't going over well, the director shut him up with "Don't come around here with your vaudeville tricks!"

Johnny Johnson—and *Cradle* as well—were conceived to adopt performing styles alien to what the public expected of musicals. It was the Group Theatre—progenitor of the American version of Stanislafsky known as “The Method”—that produced *Johnny Johnson*, so its cast would be not entertainers but human beings, startling in their honesty. The very word *musical* meant Ethel Merman, Bert Lahr, and a chorus of cute kids who were Very Happy All the Time. *Johnny Johnson*, however, follows the adventures of a shy and naive—really, an unformed—young man who enlists in World War I and, shell-shocked, tries to pacify the Allied generals with laughing gas. It’s a grim but poignant work, a kind of screwball tragedy, for Paul Green—like Kurt Weill’s next collaborator, Maxwell Anderson—was a playwright rather than a musical-comedy guy. Not knowing the form’s rules, Green breaks them all, creating a musical unlike any other.

For his part, Weill was more or less fresh off the boat from Europe at this point, and, far more than in the succeeding *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *Johnny Johnson* luxuriated in the *Symphonie-mit-Jazz* soundscape expected of an enfant terrible in Weimar Germany. This is deliciously creepy music; the prelude’s first notes suggest an ethnic-cleansing roundup of innocents, and the score as a whole is so drastically imaginative that, watching the show unfold, one has no idea what the next number will be about—a mother confiding fey autobiographical arcana as she works at her sewing machine; an army captain singing a tango about a burglar and his entranced woman victim; the history of psychiatry outlined by a mad psychiatrist. Such surprises never occurred in other musicals, because standard libretto writing called for genre numbers, from love ballads to the New Dance Sensation, and the cues were blatant, as when college co-ed Flo sets up *Good News!*’s title tune:

FLO: I’ve had a dozen omens of good luck, so Good News *must* be on his way.

Johnny Johnson isn’t a “title tune” kind of show, but it does have “Song of the Guns,” as the muzzles of three huge cannons appear in the darkness of no-man’s land, pushing forward over the heads of sleeping soldiers with a lullaby of death. The entire evening is like that: a musical about a nonconformist that must therefore be nonconformist itself.

Unfortunately, the Group, brilliant actors though they were, did not field the necessary vocal talent. Remember *Johnny Johnson*’s director a bit ago, snarking about “vaudeville tricks”? That was Lee Strasberg, a guru of acting naturalism but musically ignorant and professionally stubborn. Worse, the

actress struggling with the song in question was his wife, Paula, and he was giving her no help whatsoever.

And that was *Johnny Johnson*: the most miscast musical in history. Are the intriguing musical satires bound to be this primitive, wary of Big Broadway's ritzy dexterity, its Dream Ballets (for art) and its chorus lines (for beauty)? Yet *Chicago*, arguably our most potent satire, will be the utmost in Big Broadway expertise, as the utmost Bob Fosse musical, exposing the fraud of razzle dazzle even as it revels in razzle dazzle. Because Fosse was Mr. Show Biz; but Fosse had edge.

The edgiest of all the commentative shows is *Johnny Johnson*'s evil twin, *The Cradle Will Rock*, also a product of the independent theatre community, though backed by the state, under one of President Roosevelt's safety nets for the arts, the Federal Theatre. *Johnny Johnson* is a piteous *Bildungsroman* mixed of the comic and the mournful, but *The Cradle Will Rock* is a *carmagnole*: Unionization or Revolution! And *Cradle*'s cast was another gang that didn't really sing, partly because the Federal Theatre's casting pool took in the lowest echelons of the professional acting ranks and a lot of hopeful amateurs as well. Though this is seldom mentioned today, the established Broadway community intensely resented this subsidy for rival productions while seasoned Broadway pros continued to suffer in a Depression economy.

That might be why Actors Equity forbade the *Cradle* cast from playing on a substitute stage when the production lost its theatre, because of *Cradle*'s incendiary look at a Chicago-style confrontation of management versus labor in the fictional Steeltown, U.S.A. In a colorful switcheroo, the company found an empty playhouse and the actors defied Equity passive-aggressively by performing from seats in the auditorium in perhaps the most famous first night of all time.

Thus, *Cradle* flourishes in revival (as *Johnny Johnson* does not), as a historical tourist stop rather than as a beloved classic. It's a purposely off-kilter piece, for author Blitzstein uses stick figures, off-accented lyrics, and comic-book character names³ in a stark scenario with irony rather than drollery and no dance numbers. Further, as the more or less original-cast 78s reveal, Orson Welles, the show's director, coached the decent characters to seem "normal" but Mr. Mister and his minions to overplay in caricature, giving the show a fantastical air even within its true and timeless look at how the rich buy their allies and enslave and murder everyone else. Oddly,

Blitzstein, a lifelong Communist, saw this only in America, though in *Cradle's* 1937 this was exactly how Stalin was running Russia.

Actually, there is an entire Mister family, though Junior and Sister Mister are goons and Mrs. Mister is the sort of ditsy grande dame that *Face the Music's* Mary Boland played in Big Broadway outings and the movies. Blitzstein's dame's chauffeur-driven Pierce-Arrow plays a slight variation on the second theme of Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture (the strings' A flat major figure, at bar 82), and she collects creative talent. "Who says I haven't brought about a union of the arts?" she brags, meeting violinist Yasha and painter Dauber in *Cradle's* most comic scene. A medley of dialogue and songs, it starts with the two mens' duet "The Rich," revealing the sad paradox of arts philanthropists: they're "so damn low" and "far-fetched," but utterly necessary. Yasha and Dauber need even each other, because who else understands them? Blitzstein seethes under the jesting, however. When Mrs. Mister asks the pair to join her husband's euphemistically named Liberty Committee—"You will, won't you?" she asks, meaning "You'd better"—they're enthusiastic:

MRS. MISTER: But don't you want to know what it's all about?

YASHA: Politics?

DAUBER: Cora, we're *artists!*

For perspective, consider Yasha and Dauber's counterparts in Richard Strauss' opera *Capriccio* (1942), the composer Flamand and the poet Olivier. They, too, are rivals for the attention of a powerful sponsor, the Countess, but, as the two men themselves put it, they are "loving enemies," "friendly opponents." *Capriccio* asks which opera values more, the music or the words, and while it never answers the question, it sees Flamand and Olivier bonded in a synergistic energy: the two arts are inseparable. Thus, composer and poet are bonded by the intelligence of music, the lyricism of poetry.

Yasha and Dauber, by comparison, aren't artists: they're money-grubbers exploiting music and painting. But of course *Capriccio* is "sacred" in tone and *Cradle* "profane." Opera treats nobility, beauty, passion. The satiric musical treats hypocrisy, egomania, greed. *Capriccio* longs for the harmony of art, while *Cradle* wants to teach its audience to recognize the damage a professional ruling class does to the ideal of a republic.

We have reached the early 1940s, which brings us to the next chapter in the *Chicago* epic, that of the Hollywood remake with Ginger Rogers. But let us first see how the newish form of “musical play,” building on the breakaway worldviews of Green and Blitzstein, proceeds to the next step, in questioning some of the most deeply held beliefs of its public.

These include especially, one, love guarantees a good marriage, and, two, hard work guarantees a happy life. But Ian Marshall Fisher, who runs the Lost Musicals series in London, noticed that three American shows he revived, all from the late 1940s, seemed to be the first musicals to challenge these beliefs—to deflate, quite deliberately, middle-class ideals. Each of the three titles was an extremely creative endeavor, well out of the traditional formats, and each ran for a while but proved commercially disappointing and is seldom seen even today, in our age of rediscovery: Lerner and Loewe’s *The Day Before Spring* (1945), Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Allegro* (1947), and Weill and Lerner’s *Love Life* (1948).

All three are romantic-satiric pieces, one reason why they baffled some of their audience. *The Day Before Spring* tells women, You may have married the wrong man. *Allegro* tells men, You’re going to be tricked into making choices that will wreck your happiness. *Love Life* tells both men and women, Modern Society will drive you crazy.

What do wives want from their husbands? The hot man? In *Spring*, he was played by Bill (later William) Johnson, a seductive baritone and so two-fisted that, years later, in a tour of *Kismet* with Zero Mostel as the Wazir, Johnson got so fed up with Mostel’s comic ad libbing that he hauled off and decked him, right on stage. *Spring*’s heroine feared this guy’s adventurism. Yes, he’s exciting. But is he safe? Indeed, she had married a safe man, played by John Archer, a B-film Hollywood actor and the essence of humdrum. Now a college reunion brings her face to face with the hot man, and they run off together. The safe man overtakes them, and, in the ensuing argument, Archer hits on his own defense-of-marriage act by crying out that he needs his wife. He *needs* her.

What woman can resist that? But would she have been happier with the hot man? You never *do* know, because hot men need only themselves—and the musical has thus finally caught up with real life. *Johnny Johnson* and *The Cradle Will Rock* were fables. But these three forties musicals tell naturalistic stories containing psychological puzzles. Further, they were all artistically imaginative—*Spring* boasted choreography by ballet’s Anthony

Tudor and a bizarre interlude in which the heroine got advice from Plato, Voltaire, and Freud (with a Jewish accent). The Lerner and Loewe score was typical forties Broadway, from the bouncy waltz “This Is My Holiday” to the graceful boogie-woogie “A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread, and Thou [baby].” Nevertheless, the narrative was unique, asking the eventually eight-times married Alan Jay Lerner’s favorite question: how do we know whom to love?

The artistic choreography of the era enlivened also *Allegro*, in Agnes de Mille’s stylizations of children’s games, a college mixer (with a startling pas de deux by Annabelle Lyon, in toe shoes, and Harrison Muller, in taps), young wives roughing it on a tight household budget, and the neurotic helter-skelter of contemporary life. *Allegro* is famously the first Big Broadway musical without scenery, but there was actually a lot to look at—furniture pieces, two black traveler curtains (transparent and opaque, depending on the lighting), and back projections. The unique staging gives today’s writers so much to describe they tend to miss how much *Allegro* devastates middle-class hopes. Here’s a fine fellow, handsome and ethical and the son of a doctor, imbued with the doctor’s wondrous healing mission. Yet somehow he ends up with a manipulative and unfaithful wife, nursing rich hypochondriacs.

Further risking the audience’s discomfort, *Allegro*’s first act was romantic and its second act satiric. Romantic: the young doctor courts his bride-to-be in “You Are Never Away [from your home in my heart]” as the show’s omniscient chorus sings along in an elaborate vocal arrangement and the girl herself dances. But she does not sing. Is *he* the only one who loves?

Satiric: as social leaders in our favorite location, Chicago, the couple gives At Homes, staged by de Mille with the ensemble crowded together in the center of the stage, singing, “Yatata, yatata” and mouthing eulogies of their empty activities.

Love Life, too, concerned a vexed marriage, here because of external pressures from an ever-changing environment that tests the bond of Sam (Ray Middleton) and Susan (Nanette Fabray) Cooper. It’s money troubles, feminism, business, politics. By the second act, Sam and Susan, separated, were so confused about why their marriage failed that Weill and Lerner seemed confused themselves, because the story didn’t end: the Coopers were last seen trying to reach each other from opposite ends of a tightrope. As we

wonder if they will, the curtain falls and the show is over. Okay, but what happened?

Some of my readers may be reminded of Stephen Sondheim's *Company* (1970), and, indeed, this chapter is concerned with where satire fits into our complex modern musicals that psychoanalyze their characters while opening up a cultural perspective. They may even dare to quiz the evasions and pretensions of the audience—*Follies*, *Nine*, *Dreamgirls*, *A Doll's Life*, *Sunday in the Park With George*, *Marie Christine*, *Parade*, *Hamilton*. These mostly dark shows are not satires, no. On the contrary, even when they deal in part with comic irony and exaggeration, they are romantic, drawing us into a dream of reality.

Satire is the opposite: self-aware, didactic, Brechtian. It's heartless, and the closer we get to the musical *Chicago*, the more we will notice how its first two movie versions emotionalized Maurine Watkins, while the musical celebrates her caustic tone. What does Roxie utter as an exit line after she shoots Fred Casely (three times, no less)? "Good gracious, what have I done"? Or "I must call for an ambulance"? No:

ROXIE: I gotta pee.

Or think of this merry little snippet, between prison inmate June and the matron:

JUNE: If my husband, Wilbur, comes here ... you tell him I do not want to see him.

MATRON: June, your husband is dead, you killed him.

JUNE: Oh well, forget it, then.

Or even this spoken bit in the "Cell Block Tango," as Liz recalls being exasperated at Bernie's habit of popping his chewing gum. She cautions him not to pop it again, he does, and she grabs the family shotgun to fire two warning shots:

LIZ: Into his head.⁴

Strange as it may sound, while the dark, commentative modern musical is as evolved as it could be from the musical's earliest days, the musical satire—and *Chicago* in particular—marks a return to proto-musical comedy. Remember, *The Beggar's Opera*, that mother of the musical, was a satire. Later, Jacques Offenbach, CEO of the French school, *opéra bouffe* (basically

“joke opera”), was very influential in America with his “genre primitif et gai”: silly, loony, irreverent, and sexy, as guiltless as a child and all but lawlessly free. Offenbach’s musicals were fantastical, and satire, too, is fantastical—a war over cheese, an army private merrily anesthetizing warlords, a Pierce-Arrow playing Beethoven. Most of our classic titles are not fantastical—*Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, *My Fair Lady*, *A Chorus Line*. But *Chicago* is: silly, loony, irreverent, and sexy, in the Offenbach manner.

And *Chicago* is political as well, at least subtextually (as we’ll see in due course). *Chicago* says the System is corrupt. And that would be because the Establishment is corrupt, and we can secure our freedom only by voting politicians out of office every generation. As Maxwell Anderson says, “Government must never be trusted.”

But then Mark Twain responds with “If voting made any difference, they wouldn’t let us do it.” And Joseph Stalin tops Twain with “The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything.”

1. Similarly, Margaret Sanger, who pioneered the birth-control movement, was hounded by the authorities, even though her issue was preventing unwanted pregnancies, not aborting them. At the very same time, spokesmen for systems of government antagonistic to our own were generally left alone. Sanger was arrested numerous times, but the Communist Party took part in presidential elections from 1924. In 1932, its candidate, William Z. Foster (nominated at a convention in, not surprisingly, Chicago) polled 102,785 votes.

2. Leonard Bernstein made this comparison before me, on television (on *Omnibus*), as principals and chorus illustrated the relationship between the two shows’ first-act finales. His point was the same one I’m making in this book—that the “popular” nature of the music in musicals is only deceptively simple: it can in fact draw on a sophisticated musical intelligence to make its effects.

3. Mr. Mister and Mrs. Mister run Steeltown through the intimidation of money power; their stooges among the opinion-makers take in Reverend Salvation, Editor Daily, and Dr. Specialist. The good guys bear more naturalistic names—Moll, Gus and Sadie Pollock, Steve, and the union-organizer hero, Larry Foreman.

4. The globally popular 1996 revival has given us many different performers as the killers, with many different ways of putting over their spoken solos in the “Cell Block Tango,” but we often hear this line banged out defiantly. For the original production, however, Fosse had Cheryl Clark deliver it deadpan, apparently to show how nonchalant she *still* is about what she has done. In fact, *Chicago*’s guilty women never show the slightest sense of remorse or even ambivalence. He had it coming; now it’s good.