

Can Musical Theatre and in particular Acting Through Song convey meaning to an audience?

I chose as the subject of my research essay to explore how musical theatre and the performances that derive from it convey meaning to an audience. To support my argument, I made a detailed analysis of three potent examples from the world of musical theatre; my examples being *'The Light in the Piazza'*, *'Company'* and *'West Side Story'*. From my in-depth analysis, I've selected a song from each of these pieces that I believe best represent the profound communication to be found within them and the unparalleled way in which musical theatre can express meaning unlike any other performing art. To further develop my hypothesis I will also weave in research into other artforms, such as straight plays, opera and dance. Furthermore, in my essay I compare these mediums and the way in which they individually convey meaning within their performances. Ultimately, my conclusion is that whilst these artforms effectively communicate and translate meaning to an audience, it is the unique complexity of musical theatre that combines multiple components in order to facilitate groundbreaking stories, tunes and dance as a single entity.

First performed in 2003, **"The Light in the Piazza"** has been referred to as having "the most soul-satisfying score written for Broadway so far this century."¹

Although there are countless songs that represent just how beautiful this piece truly is, **"Say It Somehow"** from the end of Act One truly encapsulates not only Fabrizio and Clara's relationship, but the beauty of communication through song.² Clara attempts to explain that her anxious mother wishes to take her back home, which Fabrizio partially understands, but mostly doesn't. After becoming flustered by both his inability to speak English and sort out this situation, he becomes visibly hopeless and sad. Clara responds, however, with the first lyric of the song, **"why don't you trace it on my hand? Or make a song? Do anything? Say it somehow, I will understand..."** The lyric is incredibly compelling; not only does Clara provide reassurance to her lover, but the music quite literally asks the audience to communicate through song if there's no other option. Fabrizio then responds, singing in pure required English; justifying how emotionally intelligent Clara's words are, despite her disability. A lyric that is both incredibly strong and an indicator of how powerful their communication can be is when they both come together and say, **"I know the sound of touch me... I think I hear the sound of wrap your arms around me."** I love this line simply due to the fact that love has no 'language' that defines it, but much rather its ideas and principles are universal. What's lovely about the lyric, as well, is that it is immediately followed by the two singing elongated "ah"s in synchrony. Even with the language barrier, their voices and hearts are in harmony. The most ecstatic moment of the song is where the two sing harmonically, **"Oh, we'll play a game; you trace it on my skin! Do it any way, but let's begin!"** This communicates not just immense love, but impatience, desperation, excitement and more, all garnered together in this bundle of musical ecstasy. The duet eventually ends with a break of dialogue within the song, which works incredibly well as a breath of fresh air from the music.

¹ Jones, C (2019). "Review: 'The Light in the Piazza' at Lyric Opera is exquisite, starring Renée Fleming". *Chicago Tribune*, 19 December.

² *The Light in the Piazza* by Craig Lucas and Adam Guettel (2003). Directed by Daniel Evans [Royal Festival Hall, London. June 2019].

The music expresses not only the importance of communication through song, but also the simple fact that deep down, no matter where we're from or what we've gone through, we're all the same. The ability of Adam Guettel's music to convey meaning within a musical is similarly received by critic Tim Bano who writes, "*It's hard to define his style... These aren't tunes you'll be humming out of the door, but the cumulative effect is one of sumptuousness and great romance*".³ In my opinion, I believe that there *are* iconic tunes with the show such as 'Say It Somehow' and 'Love To Me', but what Bano writes reaffirms my argument on how meaningful the music truly is.

"Unlike a straight play, a musical's plot points, character arcs, and emotions are often revealed through song. Musical numbers can bring us into the world being depicted onstage or give us access to the inner realm of a character's thoughts".⁴ In his book, *The Musical As Drama*, McMillin explores two opposing theories behind the powerful impact of musical theatre. One such theory is that of the "integrated musical" where "all elements of a show - plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting - should blend together into a unity, a seamless whole."⁵ This theory draws upon the German composer, Richard Wagner's, concept of "*Gesamtkunstwerk*": the organic synthesis of multiple forms of art such as poetry, drama, music, dance and literature.⁶ This theory was first seen in action on Broadway in March 1943, by way of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's "*Oklahoma!*"

As Rodgers later himself said, "when a show works perfectly, it's because all the individual parts complement each other and fit together. No single element overshadows any other... That's what made "*Oklahoma!*" work... It was a work created by many that gave the impression of having been created by one".⁷ McMillin further presents an opposing view to integration theory, which he calls "disjunction theory". He states that "*it is the difference between book and number that gives the musical its potential as a major drama*". This is a view also supported by the ideologies of Bertold Brecht, who similarly challenged the integration theory and aimed to "recognise forms of drama that broke open the assumption of unity as the aim of the action".² Brecht wrote that "the great struggle for supremacy between words, music, and production... can simply be bypassed by radically separating the elements".⁸ I do actually agree with McMillin to an extent, with an example of his argument being the song 'Pretty Women' from 'Sweeney Todd'; although the song itself doesn't necessarily further the plot, it by all means strengthens the characters and their intentions. With that being said, 'The Light in the Piazza' is a prime example of those ideals and concepts being put into practice.

"Being Alive" is the semi-operatic/theatrical final number of the musical, 'Company'. Contextually, 'Company' revolves around the character of Bobby - a romantically-lonesome man living in the 'busy, noisy east-fifties' of New York City - who learns of the complexities, both positive and negative, of marriage from his married friends, and what consequences and responsibilities entail.⁹

³ Morgan, F. (2019) *The Light in the Piazza* at Royal Festival Hall, London - Review Roundup.

⁴ Wollman, E.L. (2017) *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁵ McMillin, S. (2014) *The Musical as Drama*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

⁶ Wikipedia Contributors (2020) *Gesamtkunstwerk*. [online] Wikipedia

⁷ Rodgers, R. (1975) *Musical Stages: An Autobiography*. New York: Random House.

⁸ Lyan, J. K. (1980) *Bertold Brecht in America*. Princeton, H.J.: Princeton University Press.

⁹ *Company* by George Furth and Stephen Sondheim (1970). Directed by John Doyle [Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York City. Nov 2006].

The lyrics are incredibly direct and simple, and that makes its content so much more expressive, such as when Bobby sings, ***“someone to sit in your chair, and ruin your sleep, and make you aware of being alive...”*** All of these aspects of sharing a life with someone; being woken up in the middle of the night, having someone else know your routine and life inside out, or having someone sitting in your chair; these are all reminders that you’re alive, and not wasting anything. You’re feeling something. In many instances, the song shows that in order to feel alive you need to feel both aided and bruised, especially when Bobby sings, ***“somebody pull me up short, and put me through hell.”***

Because music acts as an entirely different language if anything, what would be normal dialogue can be transformed into an explosion of sentimentality, excitement, sadness and more. If the lyrics of “Being Alive” are a boat, then the music is the sea it sails upon; and as such, provides the audience with the ability to feel, estimate and understand exactly what they’re feeling, thinking, hearing and seeing.

Company also contrasts the ensemble trope of musical theatre with its theme of urban loneliness, encapsulated by Bobby. Despite the ensemble nature of the piece, the plot in practice revolves around Bobby and his ultimate decision to associate himself with isolation, knowing that he requires only his judgement as opposed to that of his friends. The climactic number, ‘Being Alive’ is able to embellish this idea by contrasting the ensemble singing of Bobby’s friends with his eventual solo continuation of the song - *“Now there is no ensemble, and their tune has been absorbed into Bobby’s solo”*.¹⁰ The ensemble tune to “Company” is even included in the accompaniment by Jonathan Tunick, the orchestrator.

It is interesting to note that in Anthony Tommasini’s article in the New York Times¹⁰, which reviews modern attempts to fuse opera and musicals, he writes that Sweeney Todd is often considered one of Sondheim’s most operatic pieces. Sondheim’s work has often been said to have operatic elements within it due to the powerful sound of the orchestral tunes and the tremendous vocal power that is required to match them. Opera, however, is more of a display of the human body and its power - it’s a more academic field of performance. Musical theatre ranges in genre, tone and language, but Opera generally retains its original language and classical aspects.¹¹ To summarise the overarching difference between the two performing arts, it can be said that “both genres seek to combine words and music in dynamic, felicitous and, to invoke that all-purpose term, artistic ways. But in opera, music is the driving force; in musical theatre, words come first.”¹²

Upon trying to find the closest thing to a ‘bridge’ between the conventions of opera and musical theatre, I agreed that Sweeney Todd is the production that closes that gap between the two artforms the most. Although, to reiterate, this is more so due to the way in which the dialogue and tunes are structured, as well as the vocal accompaniment that is required in order to support the powerfully orchestral sound.

¹⁰ McMillin, S. (2014) *The Musical as Drama*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

¹¹ Alon, A. (2017) *Musicals vs. Operas*, Professional Development for Musicians

¹² Tomassini, A. (2011) ‘Opera? Musical? Please respect the difference’, *The New York Times*, 7 July.

Having withstood the test of time for over half a century, “**West Side Story**” is widely considered to be Sondheim’s best known work, particularly in the UK “where its constituency seems virtually boundless and where its initial London production still holds the records for the longest Sondheim run anywhere”.¹³ The show delved into more than just the generic tropes of romance, and dealt with more topical issues such as racism, poverty, mental health and more, as well as expressing how young men who found themselves placed in gangs weren’t entirely to blame for their ‘juvenile delinquency’ and reckless behaviour.¹⁴

At this point in the musical, Maria runs onto the scene, badgering Tony with insults whilst crying immensely out of the loss of her brother. In order to comfort her, he holds her and sings to her, **“There’s a place for us, somewhere a place for us... Peace and quiet and open air wait for us... somewhere.”** This single lyric in and of itself represents why this song is so powerful and communicative; it’s simple and to the point. Of course the lyric represents the two characters’ desire to be together away from all of the chaos they’ve been born into, but simultaneously, it speaks for everyone around the world, especially when the ensemble begins singing in unity, **“Somehow! Some day! We’ll find a new way of living! We’ll find a way of forgiving... Somewhere...”** only to be followed by Tony and Maria singing, **“There’s a place for us, a time and place for us... Hold my hand and we’re halfway there... Hold my hand and I’ll take you there... Somehow! Some day! Somewhere!”** The fact of the matter is, not only are two sides of a conflict resolving the troubles between them morally within the show, but a theatre audience is almost always culturally diverse; the ensemble singing of a world deprived of racism, conflict, murder and more are clearly involving the audience. The characters speak to their viewers collectively, reassuring them that whatever’s wrong with the world right now will be resolved in time. It’s the type of song and reassurance that makes you look around at the rest of the audience, reminding you that the hundreds of people sitting around you feel and want the same thing at that exact moment in time. With music, anything is possible.

Whilst I have focused on the singing element of West Side Story, it is just as famous for Jerome Robbins’ Choreography. When asked to describe Robbins, fellow choreographer, Mikhail Baryshnikov said, “there was probably no better choreographer in the history of Broadway”¹⁵. It’s more difficult to compare a single technique such as dance to an amalgamation of concepts such as musical theatre. McMillin writes that “... *dancing materializes the orchestra, gives it body and motion in what i will call the space of vulnerability. The omniscient accompaniment to the musical is being translated into the visible bodies without having to pass through words or through the strophic structures of, song.*”¹⁶ In other words, dance is at its most effective when playing a contributing role with numerous other forms of expression to form the ‘entity’ that is musical theatre.

¹³ Banfield, S. (1993) Sondheim's Broadway musicals. Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press.

¹⁴ Original Broadway Production of West Side Story (1957). Directed by Jerome Robbins. Winter Garden Theatre, New York City.

¹⁵ Fjord Review (n.d.) *In the Studio with Jerome Robbins*. Available at: <https://www.fjordreview.com/jerome-robbins-mikhail-baryshnikov-wendy-whelan-damian-woetzel/> (Accessed: 30 April 2020)

¹⁶ McMillin, S. (2014) *The Musical as Drama*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

To dance's credit, though, to tell a story through the body as opposed to singing a song is incredibly difficult, and one of the notably hardest skills in the world. To back up my perspective, artistic director Antonia Grove had this to say in an interview with The Guardian, "*Dance communicates in a way that no other artform can. In my opinion it has a unique ability to reach people viscerally, energetically and poetically in a way that is both primitive and sophisticated.*"¹⁷ Additionally, this uniqueness in which Antonia mentions is a great example of how dance as an artform is quite isolated from other ones, making it both incredibly beneficial and essential to musical theatre, but perhaps not the other way around.

From a personal standpoint, the importance of story-telling is unrivalled. Going as far back the Tudor ages, theatre and the creative arts have been considered a safe-space for expression, leading to unity between all cultures and people. You only have to look at the extensive works of Shakespeare to see evidence of "the many insights into the nature of the human condition that [his] plays embody".¹⁸ When faced with a political or sociological crisis, the world has relied on stories for both closure and entertainment. In an ever-progressing world, stories are required more than ever to remind society of its humanity that it tends to look over from time to time; by reshaping and interpreting both history and ideas, stories lay the foundations for different approaches, lessons on morality and ethics, and additional perspectives. In other words, theatre is ultimately storytelling, and musical theatre, for the reasons stated above, is the *epitome* of theatre.

From a more practical standpoint, storytelling - especially through the medium of musical theatre - has always provided me with an opportunity to communicate outside of my bubble. Every individual is unique, and due to this, those who go through traumas or experiences which others haven't may never be truly understood, but with song, dance, dialogue and more, a person's soul can inhabit a communicative vessel through the form of a character. This practice truly allows for a performer to become a communicator of a different language, offering not only their ability and entertainment, but a bridge between worlds.

When I had the opportunity to portray Marius, especially considering the fact that 'Les Miserables' is a fully sung musical, I felt as though I was given the chance to express every emotion within my inner-being through my musicality. This is all due to the fact that, to me, music is a conversation in and of itself, delving deep into the thoughts and feelings of sadness, ecstasy, loss, excitement and more. The musicality and lyricism of a musical theatre piece can guide you towards distant, unseen worlds whilst holding your hand in the process.

In conclusion, all artforms have the ability to communicate and tell incredible, life changing stories; whether that be through the silver screen of film, the small screen of television or the ceaseless pages of novels and comics. These artforms live, but in amber. Musical theatre, however, presents itself as not just something more, but a breathing, moving entity. Musical theatre is alive, and is always in a state of flux; immortalising its malleability. Communication, when stripped of its complexities, is a conversation and an exchange... I believe it goes without saying that the ecstasy-inducing emotions and pivotal ideas that musicals present as a collaboration of practices result in the highest form of communicative entertainment.

¹⁷ Caines, M. (2013) 'Arts head: Antonia Grove, Artistic director, Probe', The Guardian, 17 December

¹⁸ Great Thinkers (2020) *Introduction: Shakespeare and Politics*. Available at: <https://thegreatthinkers.org/shakespeare-and-politics/introduction/> (Accessed: 1 April 2020)