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David Poissant

University of Central Florida, David.Poissant@ucf.edu

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lee.dotson@ucf.edu.



What To Do With the American Musical?

By David James Poissant
UCF Forum columnist
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A scene from the musical Chicago. (Photo by Jerry Daniel)

In my favorite Simpsons episode, “A Fish Called Selma,” the family attends a musical adaptation of Planet of the Apes called Stop the Planet of the Apes, I Want to Get Off! The production is parody-perfect, replete with lines like, “I hate every ape I see / from chimpan-A to chimpan-Z.” Partway through the performance, a wild-eyed Bart Simpson says, “This play has everything!” to which an oblivious Homer replies, “I love legitimate theater.”

The joke here, of course, is that anything as crass and commercially motivated as a Planet of the Apes musical can't possibly be art. And maybe it can't be. Then again, in a culture drowning in irony and self-referentiality, in a year when producers have spent \$35 million mounting a King Kong musical on Broadway, is a Planet of the Apes musical really so farfetched?

And if musicals are worth celebrating or imitating on The Simpsons, what makes musicals simultaneously so ripe for parody? Family Guy (another show that would be nothing without a flotilla of musicals to rip off) communicates the conundrum succinctly in the episode "From Method to Madness." "Let's remember our performance hierarchy," a drama teacher tells his students, "Legitimate theater, musical theater, stand-up, ventriloquism, magic, mime."

It's a line that speaks to the false dichotomy we've built as consumers of art, or as artists ourselves, for decades. We believe art comes in two kinds: high and low. In this perceived divide lies the assumption that if you appreciate Shakespeare, you're brilliant, but if you attend a showing of Andrew Lloyd Webber's Cats, you must be a lowbrow dope.

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And, look, I get it. I get why musicals have the reputation they have. As an adult, it's hard to sit through two hours of grown men and women preening, dancing in furry costumes, and singing about whether all cats go to heaven, and still take yourself seriously as a grown human being. Were he alive today, I assume that T.S. Eliot, whose children's poems service many of the Cats lyrics, would squirm in his theater seat.

Still, for every Cats, there's a Hamilton, and for every Spider-Man musical adaptation, there's a Come From Away, the kind of inventive, dynamic work of art that stretches the form and proves what musicals, given their due, can do.

Let me address briefly, then, the chief complaints I hear when I attempt to champion musicals.

1. "They're all spectacle, no substance."

What's worth noting about the Simpsons parody is that it's mocking a specific kind of musical. And that mockery is well-earned. Spectacle is rarely what good theatre needs. (For example, see the Tony-nominated Come From Away, a musical about 9/11 that requires only 12 actors and 12 chairs to move you to tears.) So, when Bart says "This play has everything," he's speaking to the mindset that puts up a show like Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark, the superhero musical nobody asked for, with songs and lyrics by Bono and the Edge, for some reason. This became the most expensive Broadway production in history, as well as one of its biggest box office losers.

And, while you'll always find comparable bloated monstrosities on the Great White Way, along with the occasional jukebox musical that slaps a contrived story onto pop music,

hoping to capitalize on fans' love of the songs, the majority of American musicals actually have something important to say, challenging audiences to exercise empathy and think differently, as all good art should.

2. "The subject matter is silly or shallow."

I get it. Many of Broadway's box office successes have been romantic comedies adapted for the stage (*The Wedding Singer*, *Pretty Woman*, *Ghost*). I share your exasperation at these circumstances. But far more Broadway musicals explore a raft of challenging themes, including immigration, race, war, hubris, and American history (*Hamilton*), the dangers of social media and technology on the developing adolescent mind (*Dear Evan Hansen*), economic injustice and spousal abuse (*Waitress*), the mockery of the American justice system (*Chicago*), suicide and mental illness (*Next to Normal*), and the AIDS crisis in America (*Rent*), to name only a few. Again, for all their weighty subject matter, these are not documentaries. These are musicals.

3. "People in real life don't just break into song."

Nope, they sure don't. But people in real life don't run from velociraptors either, or zombies, nor do people fly, nor do they travel galaxies searching for stones that, once fitted into a giant glove, allow one to control life, the universe, and everything. In short, I don't accept your argument. If you're able to willfully suspend your disbelief in order to enjoy the majority of today's entertainment, I suspect you can handle some singing and dancing woven into your plays.

4. "That singing, though."

Look, for centuries we've praised Shakespeare as a genius. Don't tell me that musicality in contemporary work bothers you if you have no trouble with Shakespeare's upper-class characters speaking in elegant, metered verse. It's blank verse, sure, no rhymes, but it's every bit as rhythmic as what you'll find in a scanned Sondheim line.

Still, as with most things, people typically make up their minds about musicals before they know what they're talking about.

Still, as with most things, people typically make up their minds about musicals before they know what they're talking about. People who hate musicals tend to be those who've never seen one or those who've seen bad productions and assume all musicals are, therefore, bad. But, as with other art forms, bad and good will always coexist. Hotels will never stop hanging bad art on the walls. Libraries will never stop shelving good novels alongside the bad. And Broadway will keep staging musicals, the good with the bad, the ugly with gorgeous. Finding the good is simply an exercise in knowing where to look.

Regardless, the bias against the form will probably prevail. Since 1918, only nine musicals have won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. This is not to mention the fact that musical theater has no category of its own. It boggles my mind to imagine how 2014's judges chose between Annie Baker's Pulitzer-winning play *The Flick* and Jeanine Tesori

and Lisa Kron's musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Both deserve the prize. But comparing the two feels like choosing between poetry and prose.

I submit that one shouldn't have to choose. One can enjoy both. Both, after all, are works of art.

David James Poissant is an associate professor at the University of Central Florida where he teaches in the MFA program in creative writing. He can be reached at David.Poissant@ucf.edu.