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THE LAST 2500 YEARS: DEFINING, DISSECTING,  
AND DIRECTING THE LESS LINEAR MUSICAL

by

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B.A. Weber State University, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

Since the first recorded theatrical events, theatre has been presented in a linear fashion. It is no surprise that the majority of American Musical Theatre also follows a linear plot conception. Musicals that blatantly defy linearity are often called “concept” musicals. However, there is a small portion of concept musicals that do not abandon their linear plot altogether, but instead choose to skew the line in order to give the audience a unique perspective of the story being told. This mass categorization does not accurately take into account the extreme difference in structure of the two types of concept musicals. For this purpose, I explored the notion of a new structural category, the Less Linear Concept Musical, in hopes of identifying the unique characteristics and challenges associated with this type of musical. Beginning with Aristotle’s *The Poetics* and ending in modern day Musical Theatre, I examine key events in the shaping of this musical theatre form, as well as define the form itself.

The application of this research culminated in a classroom presentation of Jason Robert Brown’s *The Last Five Years*, which I directed. I pose the question, “Can sound direction conquer the pitfalls found within the Less Linear Concept Musical?”

For Kathy, who shares my passion for musicals  
and for Easton, who I hope someday will.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The American Musical is one of the few truly American art forms. It has a long history in this country and has gone through many varying stages of development. While the variations range from theme to musical style, my focus primarily is on the dramatic structure of the American Musical. Today, I find there to be three dramatic structures used in musical theatre: the Traditional Linear Book Musical, the Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musical, and the Less Linear Concept Musical. It is my purpose to shed light on the third, and least used, of these three structures. I define the form to properly examine this form of structure in musical theatre. Then I dissect its components by examining *The Last Five Years*, a musical that uses the less linear form. Finally, I directed that musical in an attempt to demonstrate how this unique structural style can better inform an audience of character development and plot progression.

To define anything one must reach far back into its roots. I begin with Greek Theatre and predominantly Aristotle's *The Poetics*, where one begins to see a thrust for linearity in drama. I also examine the Neoclassical Movement, which solidified Aristotle's philosophies into steadfast rules for playwriting and performance. Ultimately, I chart the major structural changes in the American Musical leading up to the Less Linear Concept Musical.

Having dissected Greek, Neoclassical, and Standard Musical Theatre structure, I propose the creation of a new type of musical known as the Less Linear Concept Musical. The culmination of this research was a classroom presentation of *The Last Five Years*, which I directed at the University of Central Florida.

## CHAPTER TWO: GREEK STRUCTURE

### Tackling Structure

To accurately describe the deviation from the linear tradition of musical theatre, it is necessary to first define that tradition. One must understand its roots and the circumstances under which it was formed before one begins to imagine why such a tradition might be broken. One must understand its structure.

It easily could be said the implementation of structure is the spark that creates theatre. Structure separates the world of theatre from the real world. It establishes a means whereby performers can communicate with audience members. It becomes a sort of code that when properly executed needs not be cracked, but instead seems easy, understandable and natural. A play with no form or structure would not represent a play at all. Characters could move aimlessly or with strong purpose, forwards or backwards, or even stand still throughout the course of the play without communicating anything. There would be no means to inform the audience of key plot points or thematic elements; in fact, the addition of an audience itself is a form of structure. The practice of an individual watching another's actions in an attempt to deduce from those actions some sort of story is the basis of structure. It is a give and take; a call and response. Without structural elements, one is merely living, breathing, interacting, or experiencing, but certainly not performing. The act of living is, generally speaking, unstructured. Life is ruled by chance, luck, or happenstance, and one seldom knows what the next moment will bring. The opportunity to communicate one's current personal story does not exist, because that story is spontaneously happening. There are no dots to connect, because the

end result is still unknown. There is no theme to communicate because the compilation of events is unfinished.

### The Festival of Dionysus

In 5<sup>th</sup> century Greece, a festival was raised to the Greek God, Dionysus, who was known as the god of fertility, wine and ecstasy. It was from this festival that dramatic performance was standardized. The festival was an eclectic combination of religious ceremonies, sacrifices to the gods, and dramatic performance which drew thousands of people to Athens. While the festival started in a rather small way, it grew in popularity until it spanned five days. John Kenrick, one of the foremost musical theatre history scholars, described the festival by saying, “Imagine the Super Bowl, World Series, World Cup, and Tony Awards all taking place within five days, and you have some idea of what this annual festival must have felt like” (19-20). This was not merely a theatrical festival; it was a time for entertainment and pleasures of all kinds. However, an important element of the festival was the competition of the tragic playwrights. Tragic playwrights would write a trilogy to be performed over three days at the festival. These trilogies could be related or unrelated at the discretion of the playwright. At the end of the festival, a winner would be selected, and playwrights would begin to prepare for the next festival. These tragic plays were frequently, though not exclusively, based on well-known traditional stories. Audience members had grown up with the stories, which made the playwright’s task more about creative storytelling than creative plot creation.

### Aristotle's *The Poetics*

Aristotle was born near Macedonia, and at the age of 17 began to study philosophy with Plato. After Plato's death, Aristotle continued his research and writings. In what has been called "a defense against Plato's assault on poetry," Aristotle attempted to describe poetry and analyze the elements that made certain poetic works (including plays) more successful than others (Tindemans 1). He focused extensively on the works of Tragedy, which he defined as:

"...a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics" (Aristotle 80).

Six main elements exist within Aristotle's definition of tragedy (or drama). These elements are: plot, theme, character, diction/language/dialogue, music/rhythm, and spectacle ("Aristotle"). For the purposes of this research, I focus mainly on Aristotle's discussion of plot, which he deemed to be the most important of all the elements.

Aristotle describes plot as first needing to be whole, or contain a beginning, middle, and end. He continues to state that the plot need not be too large or too small, but a manageable size. Plot should be unified or revolve around one singular event. Finally, Aristotle suggests that poets have license to change familiar stories in order to make their plots more interesting. Each of these points in some way begins to suggest a linear presentation of drama.

"'Whole' is that which has beginning, middle, and end" (Aristotle 81). This first guideline regarding plot immediately alludes to a linear quality or a structure resembling a line.

Aristotle continues to explain, “Beginning is that which does not necessarily follow on something else, but after it something else naturally is or happens” (81). “Beginning” serves as a point (A) which can be located anywhere in space after which many other things could occur. “End, the other way round, is that which naturally follows on something else, either necessarily or for the most part, but nothing else after it” (Aristotle 81). Conversely, the other point (B) also exists somewhere in space, the difference being that this point logically follows the first point (A) after many other chronological points which comprise a line (C). In Aristotle’s words, “Middle,” is “that which naturally follows on something else and something else on it” (81).

The next guideline states, “For beauty depends on size and order; hence neither can a very tiny creature turn out to be beautiful (since our perception of it grows blurred as it approaches the period of imperceptibility) nor an excessively huge one (for then it cannot all be perceived at once and so its unity and wholeness are lost)” (Aristotle 81). The plot must be of a manageable size. The previously described line (C) can only be defined if we are able to comprehend both of its endpoints. If they are too far from each other, we may miss the entirety of the line. If they are too close together, it becomes impossible to distinguish the difference between the two points. Aristotle’s concerns for plot are based on the same logic. Plot must have “length but such that they are easy to remember” (Aristotle 81). If the work is too large or small for the audience to comprehend and remember, it has failed. Therefore, Aristotle charges the playwright to have an understanding of his or her audience and to plainly lead them through the play. Continuing with the geometric observations, one may note that “the simplest geometric figure of all is the point. A point is a figure with no dimensions at all” and “perhaps the next simplest geometric figure is a line. A line is a series of points. It has dimensions in one direction

(length) but in no other” (Geometry). Structurally speaking, and with shared geometric logic, the simplest way to communicate with an audience is through a form that resembles a line.

The next requirement for plot is that it be unified. “But a plot is not unified, as some people think, simply because it has to do with a single person. A large, indeed an indefinite number of things can happen to a given individual, some of which go to constitute no unified event; and in the same way there can be many acts of a given individual from which no single action emerges” (81). Aristotle adds to this notion by using Homer’s *Odyssey* as an example of a unified plot. In the *Odyssey*, Homer did not chronicle every event of the hero’s life, but only those that would effectively progress the specific plot he chose to share. Aristotle suggests that an audience will have a large enough task in trying to comprehend one line alone, so there is no need to add sub-plot.

The final point Aristotle uses to define good tragic plot distinguishes the difference between the poet and the historian. “...The poet’s job is not to report what has happened but what is likely to happen: that is what is capable of happening according to the rule of probability or necessity” (81). Aristotle continues to explain that “the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that can happen” (81). Aristotle argues good tragic plots need not be founded in history or reality; they only need to be logical and probable. He believed this exploration of what might occur gives universality to the dramatic works. This universality creates a chance for audience members to connect with the story presented on stage. For this reason, familiar stories would be transformed into plays by many different playwrights. Aristotle gives playwrights the liberty to suffer historical accuracy for creative storytelling, as long as it was logical and probable.

Since his writing of *The Poetics*, Aristotle's words have been revered as well as rebelled against. There is great controversy over whether *The Poetics* were prescriptive or descriptive. There are those who view Aristotle's points as rules towards which one must give strict adherence, while others see them as guidelines for reference, and yet others would throw them out completely. I do not reverence Aristotle's views as rules, but believe they should be followed to some extent, because he tends to accurately represent what an audience looks for in a play. Straying too far from Aristotle's principles makes it difficult for audiences to follow the plot.

Despite the controversy, these principles seem to affect the way playwrights write plays and certainly the way audiences view and understand them. Whether or not these basic principles are observed, they will serve as a structural model of comparison for all theatrical styles examined in this research.

### **CHAPTER THREE: STRUCTURE IN NEOCLASSICAL THEATRE**

The Renaissance came after a time of great creative darkness: this period is frequently called the Dark Ages. During this time, there was very little theatre produced and nearly everything performed was regulated by the Catholic church. At the beginning of the Renaissance, artists and scholars began to search deeply into the past to find ideas that might spark creativity and help continue cultivating the human race, two of the key interests of the Renaissance. The preserved works of Greek playwrights and scholars became the philosophical foundation for many artists.

#### The Neoclassical Foundation

Beginning in Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and then quickly moving into France, there was a large movement to codify the writings of Aristotle and create strict rules that would govern how theatre should be written and performed. This time period is known as the Neoclassical period because of the large influence of classical works on artists of the day. Among the front runners of this movement was Lodovico Castelvetro, an Italian scholar who is noted for translating Aristotle's *The Poetics* and being the first to take an extremely strict approach in adhering to its principles. His independent ideas are credited for defining the unities of time and place, which dictate the amount of time a play may span as well as the appropriate use of location. In France, Jean de la Taille also took a very rigid approach to the Aristotelian principles. In 1572, he published *Art de la tragédie*, through which he defines tragedy as being the most beautiful art form. In this work he supported Castelvetro's theories as well as added to them by introducing the unity of action, which defends Aristotle's view that all action on the



stage should progress one main plot. While these philosophers took distinct stances on how *The Poetics* should influence modern drama, it was Cardinal Richelieu of France who made great strides to censor theatrical works. In 1636, he formed the French Academy, a group that would regulate and monitor how plays would be written and performed. The Academy became France's definitive voice on what was acceptable to be presented on stage. The standards they created included verisimilitude, decorum, and the three unities: time, place, and action.

### Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude was the most widely-agreed upon rule among critics of the Neoclassical period. This was the idea that theatre needed to have the “appearance of truth” (Turney 1). Nothing was to be put on stage unless it seemed like it could possibly occur in everyday life. No supernatural events were allowed. The only exception to this rule was made for plays that included supernatural events from the Bible or Greek myth. However, these supernatural events were not to be overemphasized.

Decorum deals with the content being presented on stage rather than the structure through which it is presented. Characters were required to act in an appropriate and moral way. Decorum included moral and idealistic expectations based on social class, age, race, and gender. Playwrights were constrained to write about characters who exhibited the type of moral choices deemed appropriate by the academy. While Neoclassicists argued that this rule presented an appearance of truth, this type of societal press on characters would become the central issue in many of the plots of American Musical Theatre.

The neoclassicists also created a strict rule regarding the two genres traditionally classifying plays: tragedy and comedy. The rule required there be no mixing of the two genres.

Tragedy needed to be solely tragic while comedies solely comedic. Wayne S. Turney, former professor of theatre history at Cleveland State University, summarizes the neoclassical guidelines for tragedy and comedy into four basic descriptions per genre:

### **Tragedy**

1. Draws characters from rulers or nobility.
2. Deals with affairs of state, downfall of rulers or the like.
3. Always ends unhappily.
4. Style is poetic and lofty.

### **Comedy**

1. Draws characters from middle or lower classes.
2. Deals with domestic and private affairs.
3. Always end happily.
4. Style characterized by ordinary speech (Turney 1).

Any mixture of these genres was seen as a great offense.

### The Three Unities

The three unities focused on playwriting structure and were set in place to help audiences believe what they were watching. The first of the three is “unity of time.” This refers to the amount of time the entire course of the play spans. Castelvetro argued that audiences were very aware of how much time they were spending in the theatre; therefore, if a drama tried to portray a period larger than that amount of time, the audience would not believe the action. A perfect observance of the unity of time would mean the dramatic action would span exactly as much time as the performance lasted. This would be like watching the play in real time. However,

most critics in the Neoclassical period would allow the play to span a 24-hour period or, in other words, all the action of the play was to occur within the course of one day.

“Unity of place” follows a similar logical pattern and also was fueled by the philosophies of Castelvetro. He reasoned that since the audience is aware they are in one location, the play should occur only in one place. Extensive travel would once again break the verisimilitudinous nature of the play. The most liberal critics would allow travel to places that could be reached within the 24-hour time period but not to locations which were further away. This rule greatly constricts the choices of playwrights but aids in simplifying the plot, one of Aristotle’s largest prescriptions.

”Unity of action” is lifted directly from *The Poetics*. Aristotle wanted singular action in Greek Drama, meaning that all events in the play should progress one plot, which would revolve around one large action. The neoclassicists changed what may have been a guideline into a fast rule. Every action needed to link directly to the preceding and subsequent action. Sub-plots never were allowed.

While the academy could openly attack playwrights who broke their rules, this did not mean the public did not enjoy these plays. An excellent example is Pierre Corneille and his epoch piece, *The Cid*. Corneille awkwardly tried to fit his story into 24 hours and did not follow rules of decorum dictated by social class. He also mixed tragedy and comedy. The attacks on his work were so great that he swore never to write another play. Despite this critical upset, *The Cid* was loved by theatregoers. This example shows an early desire from audiences to see plays that do not follow all the rules.

The unities may seem hard to understand for a modern audience used to having many things thrown at them simultaneously. However, the popular television series, *24*, is a prime example of the unity of time, despite the fact that many other elements of neoclassicism are ignored. All the action in a season of *24* takes place within the course of one 24-hour period. Each one-hour episode accounts for one of the 24 hours. This type of presentation represents real time so the audience follows the characters as if they are living through the actions with them. This neoclassical approach to a modern-themed action/thriller has helped it gain a great number of followers. To the chagrin of neoclassicists, the unity of time is the only principle that is truly upheld.

#### England and Neoclassicism

This neoclassical movement did not affect the plays being written in England during the same period. William Shakespeare did not follow the unities of time, place, or action. In fact, it seems as if he stridently worked against them. As his plays grew in popularity, Shakespeare's structure, which relied heavily on sub-plots, multiple locations, and characters doing things not customary for their social class, became the standard. This structure would be followed by not only Shakespeare's followers but also his contemporaries.

English Operetta was inspired by the grand operas but encompassed stories that were more accessible, and arguably follow a more Shakespearean or Commedia del Arte structure. For example, in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, Frederick is bound to serve as a pirate until his twenty-first birthday, which happens to fall on leap year, which means he will have to serve until he is very old. This type of comedy created by identity was typical in Shakespeare's writing as well as in the works of Commedia del Arte. Shakespeare would

frequently have female characters dressed as men, which would cause great confusion and identity problems. In Commedia del Arte mistaken identity frequently served as the plays major conflict.

These are the types of theatrical ideas brought from Europe to America during its foundation. Some of the foundation of American Musical Comedy was founded by Operetta, while other sources are more original. Based on the English theatrical influence, it is no surprise American playwrights seldom wrote within the neoclassical approach.

The Neoclassical movement was an important modification on Aristotle's *The Poetics*. It shows Aristotle's philosophies had implications even two millennia after they were written. Today, these same principles are often bent or skewed, but, generally, some elements remain. Audiences like to see the rules broken, but they also like to be able to identify with what they are watching. Modern audiences may not realize they are influenced by these classical philosophies when they are watching a play. But, the truth is enough drama has been produced that has at least followed a few of the principles that audiences have come to expect them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: STANDARDIZING THE BOOK MUSICAL

The history of the American Musical is a huge and in-depth topic. There are countless numbers of events that have shaped and formed the type of musical we are familiar with today. For the sake of brevity, this chapter only will contain events that have had a great impact and influence on the structure of the linear book musical. These key events chronicle a large amount of time and embody a great number of structural fads and changes. It is tantamount to understand the creation of the standard linear book musical for two reasons; firstly, because of its large use in the repertoire of musical theatre, and secondly, it is away from this model that concept musicals stray.

### *The Black Crook*

While there is little consensus on what might have been the first American musical, there is a great amount of attention paid to *The Black Crook*, which premiered September 12, 1866 at Niblo's Garden Theatre. William Wheatley was producing actor-manager of Niblo's Garden and was prepared to open a new melodrama by Charles M. Barras, entitled *The Black Crook*. At this time, musical melodramas consisted of one plot that was periodically interrupted by popular music. The plot and the music did not necessarily have anything to do with one another. *The Black Crook* was no different in this regard. In the words of John Kenrick, "Wheatley must have realized that this four-act melodrama was a cliché-ridden stinker, with a tortured plot that stole elements for Goethe's *Faust*, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, and several other well-known plays and operas" (63). The play was understandably unoriginal and seems to have merely hoped to sell tickets. Despite the mediocre script, Wheatley was determined to produce the play.

Fortunately for the history of musical theatre, tragedy struck Henry C. Jarrett and Harry Palmer, who had commissioned a troupe of Parisian Ballet dancers to perform at the Academy of Music. The Academy burned down whilst the ballet troupe was en route from Paris, leaving Jarrett and Palmer in search of a theatre. It is unclear who first had the idea to combine the two pieces, but this decision changed the course of Musical Theatre in America. Instead of breaking the flow of plot for songs, the plot also was obstructed by dancing. Of course, the dancing had nothing to do with the singing or the story line, nor did the costumes or sets necessarily match Barras' 17<sup>th</sup> Century German plot; nevertheless the play was produced. Interestingly, little was cut from either of the productions, leaving a five-and-a-half hour production on opening night. Despite its length and lack of continuity, "*The Black Crook* became the first stage production in world history to run for more than a year" (Kenrick 67).

Structurally, one notices that *The Black Crook* did not seem to pay much attention to the guidelines and rules that had been presented throughout previous centuries. Aristotle's desire for unity and wholeness was not preserved. While a singular plot was presented, the deviations and detours ran rampant. Each song and each dance served as a distraction from the main plot. *The Black Crook* had multiple sets, and each scene brought a new set and a new location, thus clearly breaking the unities of time and place. The Parisian ballet troupe was costumed in fantastical attire and, for at least one dance, as fairies, which would clearly void any hope of verisimilitude. The American public did not seem to mind the deviation; conversely, they loved every minute of it. The musical instantly became a hit and continually brought in large crowds.

While this form of Musical Theatre may seem to be the antithesis of Aristotle's philosophies and the rules of Neoclassicism, it is important to understand that structure at this

point in Musical Theatre was rather chaotic. Any attempt to return to the singularity of plot suggested by Aristotle would take great amounts of structural change. Further difficulty would stem from the immense satisfaction brought to the public by the musical theatre that was being performed.

### Burlesque

After the sensational success of *The Black Crook*, producers began to cultivate similar types of money-making shows. These types of shows became known as burlesque shows. They were all very similar and featured a unified attracting element: the female figure. Just as in *The Black Crook*, choruses of dancing girls wearing form-fitting apparel were featured in burlesque houses throughout the country. They proved to be very profitable productions.

Edward Rice took advantage of the increased interest in burlesque shows by producing and writing more than 17 himself. One of these productions, *Adonis* (1884), gave a pattern that would be continually used in American Musical Comedy. John Kenrick describes the formula for this style of musical comedy as “a story...one or more extraordinary performers...star vehicles...an abundance of jokes, wisecracks, and sight gags...the score had to be easy on the ear and have no offensive content...any relation between the plot and songs is unnecessary” (72). This type of musical comedy was ultimately about allowing the audience to enjoy themselves and not about deep thinking. While a story needed to be present, it was not the most important element. Unlike the decrees of the French Neoclassicists, burlesque was not focused on teaching moral lessons to audience members. Rice’s formula standardized the Burlesque musical and ruled Broadway for nearly 40 years until a new formula began to be created: the integration of plot, music, and dance was beginning to take shape.



### The Princess Theatre Shows

In 1915, Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse began to challenge burlesque by creating a new breed of musicals to be performed at the Princess Theatre. “In a Princess Show the laughs relied on character and situation, not on one-liners. The songs sat comfortably on the story, and the audience identified with the characters and situations onstage” (Miller 14). The Princess Theatre Shows began shaping musical comedies to look more like book musicals we are accustomed to today.

*Very Good Eddie* (1915) was one of the first Princess Theatre Shows to be produced, but certainly the first commercial success for Kern, Bolton and Wodehouse. Superficially, *Very Good Eddie* was similar to the variety shows being performed in other New York theatres by performers such as George M. Cohan. However, *Very Good Eddie* was uniquely different. It featured a unified plot that did not detour for songs and dances. Instead, the singing was inserted to help develop the characters and progress the plot.

### *Show Boat*

It would be Jerome Kern, of the Princess Shows, in collaboration with a new partner, Oscar Hammerstein II, who would create the next landmark musical along the path towards standardization of the linear book musical. On December 27, 1927, *Show Boat* opened at the Ziegfeld Theatre. The show ran for 572 performances and received acclaim from audience and critics alike. *Show Boat* had a great blend of the old style musical comedy, attractive chorus girls and flashy dance numbers, as well as a newly-found sense of naturalism and an agenda to attack some of the most difficult social topics of the day.

The story is set on the Cotton Blossom, which is a theatrical steamboat sailing the Mississippi river. The characters in the musical are actors on the Cotton Blossom who perform traditional types of melodramas. This convention, as used in *Show Boat*, served as a wonderful transition for the 1927 audience accustomed to seeing melodramas. However, with the bright, flashy and fun-loving performers came dark secrets and social issues never before brought to light in an American Musical. The musical's themes primarily dealt with racism and interracial marriage. Other topical issues included alcoholism, gambling and divorce, all of which were taboo subjects in the 1920s. This emphasis on darker and more serious themes is the main reason *Show Boat* is considered to be the first musical drama, or musical departing from the traditional themes of musical comedy. Musical dramas eventually would be called "musicals" and are what we are accustomed to seeing on the stage today.

Like the Princess Theatre Shows, the songs in *Show Boat* progressed the plot and developed the characters. For example, in the song "Make Believe," the characters sing about making believe they are in love, as opposed to merely stating their love for one another. This subtlety shows Hammerstein's character development through song. He shows the shyness and timidity of Magnolia by her indirect method of speech. Her counterpart, Gaylord, plays along, and without either character ever admitting they are in love, the audience is fully aware of the fact. The music no longer was an avenue of entertainment: instead it was structurally critical. The exclusion of any song from the musical would lessen the audience's understanding of the plot.

Despite the success of *Show Boat*, very few musicals were produced that followed this dramatic structure. It took quite some years for this new form of musical theatre to be rekindled.

The preferred musical theatre performance was still musical comedy. Part of the slow move from musical comedy to musical drama had to do with timing. In 1929, America entered the Great Depression. Americans wanted relief from the stress and suffering of real life, so musicals like Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* (1934), which featured upbeat songs and dance breaks without any real social issues, were very popular. It wasn't until nearly ten years after the end of the Great Depression that the musical drama would be given another chance on Broadway.

### The Rodgers and Hammerstein Collaborations

The collaboration of Oscar Hammerstein II (lyricist and book writer for *Show Boat*) and Richard Rodgers would become arguably the most influential composer/lyricist team in the history of musical theatre. The works of these two men have become known as the standards of the musical theatre world and began the Golden Age of Broadway, which would last from the 1940s to the 1960s. While the two worked as a team, it would be Hammerstein's writing of book and lyrics that would create a standard structural model for musical theatre.

In 1943, Richard Rodgers left his previous collaborator, Lorenz Hart, to start work on a new project with Oscar Hammerstein II. This work would eventually become *Oklahoma!* “*Oklahoma!* came along precisely at the right moment, when a war-torn world was particularly susceptible to its reassuring images of home and young love, and songs that spoke to millions of hearts. Before *Oklahoma!*, composers and lyricists were songwriters; after *Oklahoma!*, they were dramatists, using every word and note in the score to develop character and advance the action” (Kenrick 248). Rodgers and Hammerstein capitalized on the work previously done by Hammerstein and Kern and wrote each song of *Oklahoma!* with forward movement of plot in mind. Strong topical themes were included in *Oklahoma!*, such as pornography and suicide. In

Act One, Curly goes to visit Jud to see why Laurie is upset by him. While there, Curly sees that Jud has pornographic pictures on the wall. In the course of their conversation, Curly and Jud sing “Poor Jud is Dead,” which allows Curly the opportunity to romanticize how people would react if Jud were to kill himself. The song is conditional, meaning it has not yet happened, which gives it a softer edge, despite its rather dark subject matter. In this regard, *Oklahoma!* handled its social themes in a much subtler way than the earlier attempts of *Show Boat*. This understated quality regarding theme and morality would become a key point in the Hammerstein model.

An element unique to the Hammerstein model and premiering in *Oklahoma!* is character-driven dance. Even in Hammerstein’s *Show Boat*, where the plot had become the central focus of the musical, the dance numbers were extraneous and resembled that of musical melodramas and burlesque shows. Agnes DeMille, choreographer of *Oklahoma!*, introduced the use of psychoanalysis in her dance choreography. In her dream ballet, the audience was allowed to see inside Laurie’s thoughts, dreams, and fears. Even more important is that once the dream ballet is finished, the plot has continued to move forward. The audience has more understanding of what has happened and what might happen in the scenes that are left to come.

Hammerstein considered plot to be the most important element in a musical. The music, lyrics, and dance were vehicles to help move the unified story from the actors to the audience. In this regard, Hammerstein was hearkening back to Aristotle’s thoughts on plot. Hammerstein collaborated with Rodgers on six other commercially successful musicals that followed the basic formulas for the standard linear book musical. They were *South Pacific*, *Flower Drum Song*, *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music*, *Carousel*, and *State Fair*. My evaluation of the formula is:

1. A strong story with a beginning, middle and end

2. Inclusion of romantic elements
3. At least one sub-plot with emphasis on supporting characters
4. Songs and dances develop character and progress the plot
5. Social issues and moral themes are present (even if understated)
6. Conflict is resolved at the end of the plot (usually a happy ending)

This format still is used with great success today, despite the many changes in music and social themes that have occurred in the last 60 years. Just like Aristotle's *The Poetics* was key in the creation of the Neoclassical structure, the Hammerstein model remains a crucial element of musical theatre today. With a standardized model to follow, it would only be a matter of time before composers and lyricists began breaking the rules.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: EARLY DEVIATIONS**

Oscar Hammerstein II successfully created a formula for the standard book musical and his model (or some variation of it) is still frequently used in musical theatre today. It is the deviation from this structural standard in linear book musicals that creates what is frequently called the “concept” musical.

### The Concept Musical

In the world of theatre there is an overwhelming use of jargon that can frequently cause miscommunication, contempt, and alienation. If nothing else, this broad use of theatrical terminology causes a great deal of confusion. One such term is “concept musical.”

The following excerpts are two definitions for the ever-elusive term “concept musical.”

- A concept musical, rather than telling the kind of linear story found in musical comedies and plays, is made up of connected series of events centered around and illustrating an idea or concept (Patinkin, 8).
- Musicals less story-driven (*Company*, *Follies*, *A Chorus Line*) tend to be called concept musicals for their lack of a singular rising line of dramatic action...Performing an entire musical in a certain style (*Pacific Overtures*, Japanese Theatre) or even with a certain look (*Fiddler on the Roof*, Chagall’s “Fiddler” paintings) could be called concepts (Finn, 231-2).

In both definitions the idea is presented that concept musicals stray from the traditional linear format of musical plays. While the notion that theme is more predominant than story in the concept musical, it is not, however, the focus of my explorations. The thrust of my research is to define the deviation from a standard linear form into something unique and slightly less linear.

### Less Linear Versus Nonlinear

Why attempt to coin a new term? Doesn’t the term nonlinear satisfy the requirement of a musical straying from traditional linear qualities? The answer is “no.” The term non-linear defined literally means “not denoting, involving, or arranged in a straight line” (dictionary.com). The following musicals have not completely abandoned linearity but instead have chosen to bend or skew the line, and, most importantly, only show the audience very specific portions of the line and in specifically-calculated ways. Where a concept musical can be described as being more focused on theme than story, a Less Linear Concept Musical might be described as being more focused on storytelling than the actual story itself.

### *Allegro and Love Life*

*Allegro* opened October 10, 1947 and was written by Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers. *Allegro* was written in the middle of the Rodgers and Hammerstein collaborative era and proved to be their first failure. It is considered by some to be the first concept musical, because of its unique use of time. Despite its commercial failure, *Allegro* shows a structural attempt to stretch the usual span of time encompassed by a musical. *Allegro* follows the life of one man from birth to middle age, in what seems like defiance to Aristotelian, Neoclassical and the standard linear book musical models. This is a feat never before attempted in a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. While they had established no strict rule about how long the musical's story could span, the majority of their plots lasted no more than a few months. Rodgers and Hammerstein seemed to learn quickly that their audience was not ready for a musical with such a broad scope of time. In contrast to Aristotelian philosophy, this musical required audiences to accept a story too large for them to comprehend. They were not ready to view something with a plot that would encompass so many actions.

*Love Life: A Vaudeville* (1948) is credited as another early concept musical that features music by Kurt Weill and a book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. Not unlike *Allegro*, *Love Life: A Vaudeville* also experiments with the passage of time. However, in this experiment, the characters do not change age. The story is that of a young couple who begin their marriage very happily before wandering through difficult phases of disillusionment and finally finding themselves in divorce. The unique quality presented within the piece is that the couple somehow travels through various eras of American history beginning in 1791 and ending in 1948. This musical focuses on a large passage of time but attempts to keep the primary characters on a

smaller linear track. Just as with *Allegro*, the “unity of time” is broken. Despite the very linear plot, everything surrounding the plot changes at a much faster rate.

### *Man of La Mancha*

*Man of La Mancha* (1965) was written by Mitch Leigh, Dale Wasserman, and Joe Darion and takes place in a prison in Seville. The main character, Miguel de Cervantes, is thrown into prison while awaiting his trial before the Spanish Inquisition. Within the prison walls he, with the help of the other prisoners, enacts the story of Don Quixote before being summoned to the Inquisition. In *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre*, Scott Miller suggests this is the first concept musical, which he defines as, “the kind of musical in which the overarching metaphor or statement is more important than the actual narrative, in which the method of storytelling is more important than the story” (Miller 100). According to his definition, I agree that in a concept musical storytelling can become a greater thrust than that of the story itself. *Man of La Mancha* presents a new and unique convention in musical theatre storytelling.

*Man of La Mancha* contains elements that fall directly in line with the Neoclassical rules of verisimilitude. The “unity of time” is somewhat observed. The musical spans only the several hours that Miguel de Cervantes is awaiting his trial. The play-within-a-play presented covers a much greater amount of time, but it would be arguable that the audience understands that the play-within-a-play is not real and being performed by the characters of the main play, and thus, creates an appearance of truth. The “unity of place” is observed in a similar manner. The prisoners never leave the prison during the musical, and the characters of the play-within-a-play act like they are in many places, but clearly they stay in one place. The “unity of action” is



also preserved. The only action that occurs is Miguel de Cervantes attempting to appease the prisoners so he may keep his manuscripts.

The unique elements in this musical are both the semi-observance of the classical rules of verisimilitude and the convention of a play-within-a-play. While the play-within-a-play convention had been used since Shakespeare's writing, such a convention had not yet been the central theme of a musical. The storytelling used in *Man of La Mancha* is more important than the story itself, which makes it the first musical to truly begin to resemble the Less Linear Concept Musical.

### *Cabaret*

*Cabaret* (1966) had music written by John Kander and lyrics by Fred Ebb and is known as "Kander and Ebb's first and biggest hit" (Patinkin 391). It is a crucial stepping-stone to the fully-developed concept musical, both less linear and nonlinear. Drawing on the vaudevillian and burlesque style shows of the past, Kander and Ebb designed a musical based on plot but added extra characters who did not create sub-plot, but instead contributed to the theme of the musical. Harold Prince directed the show and added greatly to the structure of the musical. The plot follows Clifford Bradshaw, an American writer, as he moves to Germany just on the brink of Nazism. In Germany, he meets a cabaret singer named Sally Bowles, with whom he has a short-lived affair. Inside the cabaret, there are several additional performers and the Emcee. These other characters do not have a plot of their own but instead sing songs that comment on the theme. This break, though it may resemble the disconnected performances of *The Black Crook*, is instead a convention used to help the audience better understand the political and social issues surrounding the plot. In this way, *Cabaret* moves toward the Thematic Nonlinear Concept

Musical. It is apparent this is a large departure from Aristotle's singularity of plot and the Neoclassical unities. The creators deliberately broke the linearity of the musical's plot in order to make the audience experience the theme in a way different from the standard linear book musical. This would continue to be developed over the next ten years.

### *Company*

In 1970, Stephen Sondheim's *Company* opened on Broadway. This musical is traditionally considered to be the landmark concept musical or, as I am defining it in this paper, the Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musical. *Company* revolves around Bobby, a single man, and his relationship with several married couples. It does not follow a linear plot line; instead it revolves around the theme of marriage versus single life. The songs and scenes individually relate to Bobby and to the theme but not necessarily to one another, nor are they arranged in chronological order.

This style of musical is in strong disaccord with Aristotle's view that plot is the most important element. Instead, theme is placed at the foremost view of the audience. The Neoclassical unities have no place in such a musical, because no time is distinguished at all. The scenes take place in a variety of locales, and one action does not inherently lead into the next. Even the Hammerstein model is barely present in such a structured musical. The first point in the Hammerstein formula was a strong story with a beginning, middle and end. One might describe all the events in *Company* as middle events. The second point has to do with romance, which is indeed followed by Sondheim. Thus, *Company* has not thematically strayed too far from the Hammerstein model. The third is the inclusion of a sub-plot emphasizing supporting characters. Nearly each song should be classified as a sub-plot or mini story, but, for the most

part, characters sing isolated songs, and only the audience knows the information being revealed during the song, so there is neither plot nor sub-plot. The fourth guideline is that songs and dances should help develop character and progress the plot. *Company* takes part of this guideline to the extreme in that every song is an incredible push to develop character, but there is no plot to progress. The fifth part of the formula is followed the best: themes and social issues should be presented (even if understated). Basically, *Company*, which set the precedence for other Thematic Nonlinear Musicals, focuses nearly one hundred percent on this quality. Themes are ever-present and social issues are the core of this musical. In the case of *Company*, the issue is marriage and all the other issues that revolve around marriage. The sixth guideline requires resolution and, hopefully, a happy ending. Neither are accomplished in *Company*. The final song, "Being Alive," does not resolve any of Bobby's problems. In fact, it still has a bittersweet feeling to it, despite changes made to the original song through the course of the musical's creation. The final song Sondheim originally wrote was entitled "Happily Ever After" and ended with "Someone to bleed you of all/The things you don't want to tell-/That's happily ever after,/Ever, ever, ever after/in hell" (Patinkin 414). Sondheim's original lyrics obviously resist Hammerstein's desire for a happy ending. The song was changed when director Hal Prince found it too downbeat for the end of the show. Despite the lyric changes, it still is clear that Sondheim's intent was not to resolve *Company* with a happy ending.

*Company* seemed to give other composers and lyricists the confidence needed to try new and inventive conventions when writing musicals. Over the course of the next 40 years, many other thematic nonlinear musicals would be written.

## CHAPTER SIX: DEFINING THE LESS LINEAR MUSICAL

American Musical Theatre today consists of three basic structure types. The first is the Traditional Linear Book Musical. The other two types are typically categorized as concept musicals, but since that term can refer to the structure, the material, or the direction, I have divided concept musical into two structural categories, Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musicals and Less Linear Concept Musicals.

### Traditional Linear Book Musicals

The Traditional Linear Book Musical is based on the Hammerstein model for musical theatre. While there is no doubt that many things have changed in the past sixty years, the basic structural model still pleases audiences today. *Wicked* (2003) is a prime example of a modern Traditional Linear Book Musical. *Wicked* is the prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. It tells the story of the witches of Oz before Dorothy arrives. It has a very definite beginning, middle, and end. Each of the musical's events is spurred by the previous events and, in turn, prepares the audience for the next event. It contains songs and dances that both develop character and progress the plot. For example, Wayne Cilento's choreography of "One Short Day" not only moves the plot forward by introducing Glinda and Elpheba to the Emerald City, it also informs the audience of how characters in Oz move and act differently from everyday people. *Wicked* features a love story and sub-plot. Finally, it ends with complete resolution and even a happy ending. It carries strong themes regarding friendship and acceptance of people who are different. The musical follows the Hammerstein model completely and has achieved great commercial success. The majority of the musicals being produced on Broadway use this type of structure.

### Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musicals

The Thematic Nonlinear Musical is based solely on a theme. Plot is either not included or not of any great importance. *Avenue Q* (2003) is an example of a Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musical. The theme fueling *Avenue Q* is an idea that there should be some sort of *Sesame Street* program for adults. The themes range from sex to racism, and the scenes are performed by puppets. Plot is nowhere as important as the themes presented and the convention by which they are presented. Much like *Company*, this musical's structure does not follow Aristotle's *The Poetics*, nor does it use the rules of Neoclassicism. The setting for *Avenue Q* is a great example of this deviation. All the characters live within the same apartment building, which allows them to do a variety of different things simultaneously. This does not fit Aristotelian philosophy, which wanted unity of action, nor does it fit the Hammerstein model, which supported sub-plot but only in the presence of a stronger story line. The majority of concept musicals fall into this theme-oriented category.

### Less Linear Concept Musicals

The Less Linear Concept Musical is a musical that follows a linear plot but in an altered way. It may have elements in common with both the Traditional Linear Book Musical and the Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musical, but two rules are unique and certain:

- 1) A strong story or emphasis on plot is present. The plot is very important, and therefore events lead the audience to understand the theme.
- 2) Some sort of altered timeline is used. The beginning of the musical does not necessarily coincide with the beginning of the plot, nor the end with the end.

If one is unsure if a concept musical is a Thematic Nonlinear Concept Musical or a Less Linear Concept Musical, one can ask a simple question, “If the timeline of this musical were purely chronological, would it be a Traditional Linear Book Musical?” If the answer is “yes,” then it is very likely the musical is a Less Linear Concept Musical. This being said, it is crucial to note that these musicals are not just Traditional Linear Book Musicals scrambled up. These musicals are created in a specific way to entice the audience to think about the plot in a distinct way.

Stephen Sondheim’s *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) is a model example of a Less Linear Concept Musical. It tells the story of Frank Shepherd, a composer, who has “sold out his moral convictions to achieve success” (Kenrick 346). The story is told in reverse life order, beginning with Frank as an older man who has achieved fame and fortune but no happiness. The chorus continually asks, “How did you get to be here?” (Sondheim 4) and slowly scene by scene Frank and his friends get younger as the time moves backwards. The audience learns in reverse order how Frank sacrifices his art and his relationships for his commercial success. If the timeline of this musical were reversed, it would greatly resemble a Tradition Linear Book Musical, but that is not the view Sondheim intended for his audience. A poignant example is found in the final number of the musical, “Our Time.” In this song, Frank, Charlie, and Mary dream of the wonderful things they will be able to achieve in their lifetimes and speak about the vast number of possibilities awaiting them. The song is full of hopes, dreams and aspirations, but for the audience there is great sorrow and pain associated with this otherwise happy song because they know things will not work out well for these characters. The audience learned in the first scene the friendship will break up and none of them truly will be happy. If this song were the first

song of the musical, audiences would have no way of knowing the fate of these characters and would miss the wonderful juxtaposition of emotion offered by Sondheim's approach.

It is the unique storytelling of these Less Linear Concept Musicals that allows their creators to shape the audience's experience and skew their view of what is happening on stage by giving them more knowledge than even the characters have. It is the necessity to constantly guide the audience and be aware of their perception of the plot that makes these types of shows very difficult to direct.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DIRECTING *THE LAST FIVE YEARS*

### *The Last Five Years*

*The Last Five Years* was written by Jason Robert Brown and opened Off-Broadway on March 3, 2002. The show ran for two months before closing and claimed a \$1 million loss. While its initial failure may seem daunting, the producers of this two-person musical released a cast album, which proved highly successful and created a cult following of theatre enthusiasts. Despite its commercial failure, *The Last Five Years* is a prime example of the Less Linear Concept Musical.

*The Last Five Years* is the story of Jamie and Cathy and their five-year relationship. It spans from their first encounter through their marriage, which ends in divorce. The unique and less linear attribute displayed in this musical is that Jamie recounts and relives the five-year relationship in chronological order, while Cathy does so backwards. The only time the two find themselves in the same place at the same time is during “The Next Ten Minutes,” which symbolizes their wedding. From that point on, Jamie begins to share post-marriage events and Cathy shares pre-marriage events. The less linear quality is used to juxtapose the good parts of their relationship with the bad ones. While Cathy is at her wits end trying to salvage what seems like an unsaveable marriage, Jamie is barely experiencing the first moments of love. Much like Sondheim’s use of the theme “How did you get to be here?” in *Merrily We Roll Along*, the juxtaposition in *The Last Five Years* should make the audience want to know what has created these polar opposites in a couple that should be in love (Sondheim 4).

Critics generally were not pleased with *The Last Five Years*. The negative reviews almost



all point towards the jumbled chronological order of the musical. In his book, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theatre and Beyond*, Barry Singer compares *The Last Five Years* to Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*. "*The Last Five Years*, however, suffered a fate very much akin to that of *Merrily We Roll Along*. Telling a tragic story backwards in time again proved a good way to rob it of all forward motion, as well as a good measure of its essential pathos" (244). Complaints from audience members not connecting to the characters in this Less Linear Concept Musical abound. Thus, a director is presented with a great challenge in directing these types of musicals. How does a director make the characters accessible to the audience? The director must decipher why the musical was written in the form it was. What about the structure aids in the telling of the story?

### Directing

As a part of completing this thesis project, and in order to apply my research, I directed a classroom production of *The Last Five Years* at the University of Central Florida. Taylor Jeffers, a senior Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre student, played the role of Jamie, and Erika Diehl, a sophomore Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre student, played the role of Cathy. Ben Rauhala, a Master of Music candidate, accompanied the production. What follows is a reflection on how the previously-discussed research was used in my directing this musical.

### Cathy's Progression

One of the structural difficulties in this piece lies in smoothly transitioning Cathy from one song to the next. Cathy begins by singing "I'm Still Hurting," which tells of her pain and anguish immediately after Jamie has left her. There is no hope in the song, albeit there is some

level of desperation. Cathy never mentions a positive aspect of the five-year relationship during this song. Even when she begs Jamie to come back to her, she only recounts negative aspects of the relationship. She sings, “Give me a day, Jamie! / Bring back the lies, / Hang them back on the wall! / Maybe I’d see / How you could be / So certain that we / Had no chance at all” (Brown 8-9). Her plead refers to any happiness they once had as a lie. She is the epitome of anger, sorrow, and negativity. This heavy-handed opening number ensures the audience understands the emotional torment she is going through and her overwhelming feelings of loss. While some might call Cathy’s attitude whiney, structurally it gives Cathy a chance to progress, or in this case regress. Starting at the apex of negativity, the addition of any positive elements will change her position and tell the audience things are getting better.

The next song sung by Cathy is “See I’m Smiling,” which adds a level of positivity to Cathy’s character, as well as takes her away from her fairly one-dimensional realm of self-pity. “I guess I can’t believe you really came / And that we’re sitting on this pier / See, I’m smiling - / It means I’m happy that you’re here” (Brown 5). Within the first three lines, we immediately hear the word “smiling”. Compared to the content of the last song, these lyrics abound with hope. Brown allows the audience to see that things are not as hopeless at this point of the story as they were when she first sang. Another change has occurred for Cathy; she is not completely blaming Jamie for their problems, which was her custom in “I’m Still Hurting.” Instead she sings, “I think we both see what could be better - / I’ll own when I was wrong” (Brown 6). This type of admittance of responsibility on her part for their marital problems could not have happened during the first song. Unfortunately, this feeling does not last for very long. As she gets frustrated with Jamie, she sings, “No I’m not, no I’m not! - and the point is, Jamie, / That

you can't spend a single day / That's not about / You and you and nothing but you. / Mahvelous novelist, you! / Isn't he wonderful, just twenty-eight! / The savior of writing (Brown 6-7)!

Allowing Cathy to once again exhibit anger adds to the gradual shift that must occur throughout the entire musical. This type of gradual change continues through each song she sings.

The challenge with this type of structural model is the audience may shut out Cathy after she sings her first song. With the lyrics being completely negative, it is a harsh way for an audience to meet a character. It is critical the actress playing the role find a way to connect with the audience. In conversations with Erika, we came to the conclusion that in order to allow the audience an insider's view into Cathy's emotion, it would be necessary for "I'm Still Hurting" to contain an emotional arc, despite the fatalistic lyrics. We achieved this arc by starting the song as if Jamie had just left, and Cathy was in a state of shock. That shock would eventually lead to anger as she tells Jamie to "go and find something better" (Brown 1). As her anger subsides, she returns to her seat to try and put him out of her mind, but the motif played on the piano serves as reminder of Cathy and Jamie dancing at their wedding, which brings Cathy into a new hysteric plea for Jamie to come back to her. Ultimately, she realizes Jamie is gone, and there is nothing she can do about it. She ends the song with quiet understanding.

Moving through this vast array of emotions and discoveries puts forward motion back into what seems like a dead end of emotional despair.

### Jamie as a Villain

An early encounter with a problem presented by the non-linear structure of *The Last Five Years* occurs at the beginning of the musical. "Still Hurting" is the first song of the musical and sung by Cathy. This is the moment directly after Jamie and Cathy have split up, and Cathy

reflects on what has just happened and expresses her feelings about her current situation to the audience. Aside from the aforementioned difficulties, this song structurally causes several problems. The first is that the audience, who likely is accustomed to traditional linear musical theatre, will assume this first song is the beginning of the plot, as well as the beginning of the musical. This may mean a few different things. The audience might see this song as an inciting incident and begin to wonder what events may follow the obvious break up that has occurred; or because of the inherent finality associated with the termination of a relationship, they may begin to wonder what events led to this break up. In either instance, the audience will be looking for clues to inform them of any needed previous action. Most likely they will try to answer the question, “why did these two people break up?” This is not inherently a problem in and of itself, but the strong perspective and point of view painted by Cathy in the song may give the audience a difficult bias to live with for the rest of the musical.

In Cathy’s explanation of her emotions, she places a great amount of blame upon Jamie. She begins explaining her grief to the audience by singing:

“Jamie is over and Jamie is gone. / Jamie’s decided it’s time to move on. / Jamie has new dreams he’s building upon, / And I’m still hurting. / Jamie arrived at the end of the line. / Jamie’s convinced that the problems are mine. / Jamie is probably feeling just fine, / And I’m still hurting” (Brown 4).

The blame is placed firmly on Jamie by telling the audience the break up is Jamie’s decision, as well as his blaming Cathy. Brown’s use of antithesis in suggesting that Jamie is “building new dreams” and “feeling just fine” while Cathy is “still hurting” begins to paint Cathy as the victim and conversely Jamie as the villain. Other lyrics that coax the audience into believing Jamie is

the villain are:

“What about lies Jamie?...Jamie’s got secrets he doesn’t confide...Maybe I’d see how you could be so certain that we had no chance at all...Covered with scars I did nothing to earn” (Brown 5-9).

Having just heard all these slanderous accusations, the audience has more than likely formed a negative opinion of Jamie and sided with Cathy. This poses a major dilemma when Jamie begins to address the audience as he sings his first song, “Shiksa Goddess.” The deck is stacked against Jamie at this point, and something must be done to try and win over some portion of the audience. Brown has put forth a smart attempt to correct this problem musically. He begins “Shiksa Goddess” with what he describes as a “Latin feel” (Brown 11). This is such an immediate and drastic change from what has just been happening onstage that it proves helpful in shaking off the negative opinions that have been formed. The song itself moves quickly and is comedic and allows Jamie to address the audience directly. These foundational elements hopefully begin to change some audience opinions.

While directing “Shiksa Goddess,” I found I was very aware of the prejudices that could be present in audience members during the song. My attempt to combat those prejudices was by directing Jamie to be uncontrollably love sick. My hope was that the audience would be so taken aback by his radical movements, gestures, and overall attitude, they would have to start questioning what they heard only moments before. I wanted the audience to struggle within themselves to try and imagine how a man this in love could become the villain described in the previous song. I hoped that with this type of direction the audience put together the fragmented pieces that form the complete plot line of the musical.

### Creating a Level of Linearity

The chronological order of events has been skewed through the structure of *The Last Five Years* (see appendices A and B); however, this does not stop a director from finding some sort of linear progression within the piece as it is arranged. I found that Jason Robert Brown repeats similar lyrics from song to song to add a sort of forward motion.

In “Shiksa Goddess,” the second song in the musical, Jamie references his family’s disapproval of his interest by stating, “and my grandfather is rolling/ rolling in his grave” (Brown 3). Kathy sings the next song, “See I’m Smiling,” and she uses a similar expression. She sings, “And we’ll start again this weekend,/And we’ll just keep rolling along” (Brown 6). This type of mirrored use of lyric allows the audience to feel a connection to the previous song, despite the fact it is not chronologically the song’s predecessor. This same lyric is used again in the next song, “Moving Too Fast,” sung by Jamie. As Jamie describes the great success he is encountering in all aspects of his life, he sings, “My ego’s swollen!/I just keep rollin’ along” (Brown 9). Once again, this creates a sort of linear journey for the audience.

Another example of a lyrical progression occurs early in the musical and starts in “I’m Still Hurting,” when Cathy sings, “Go and ride the sun away” (Brown 1). Jamie sings a similar lyric in the next song, “Moving Too Fast.” He exclaims, “I’m riding hot as a rocket blast” (Brown 8). Cathy is commiserating that Jamie has decided to fly away from her, while Jamie is sure that if his luck continues the way it had been going, he will fly away.

Yet another example begins in “Moving Too Fast.” Jamie is singing of the change Cathy is bringing into his life and she will be his inspiration. Cathy sings, only a few songs later in “A Part of That,” about Jamie’s incessant pacing around the apartment. “Then he gets on the/Mule

train to Jamie-land:/Handful after handful of Doritos,/Circling the apartment, logging miles” (Brown 10). This lyrical progression serves as a link between the beginning and the end of the relationship, as well as a juxtaposition between what Jamie had hoped for and what became reality. Jamie was hoping Cathy could break the cycle he has felt repeating his entire life, but we learn this is not the case as Cathy complains about those very circles. I decided to accentuate this particular progression by giving both actors the task of circling stools on those lines. Hopefully, the repeated visual, as well as the repeated lyric, made these moments stand out to the audience.

Towards the end of the musical Jamie sings “Nobody Needs To Know,” after having cheated on Cathy. During this song he sings, “Hold on, clip these wings - / Things get out of hand” (Brown 31). This type of lyric is repeated similarly by Cathy in “Goodbye Until Tomorrow,” but in a much more positive way as she sings, “Finally he can cut through these strings, / And open my wings” (Brown 33). She is putting Jamie in charge of cutting through strings and opening her wings so she may fly, while Jamie is referring to the clipping of wings as a negative thing, a symbol of his lack of freedom with Cathy.

An interesting lyrical progression that spans a larger period of time happens in two of Cathy’s songs, “See I’m Smiling” and “I Can Do Better Than That.” In these two songs, Cathy uses similar descriptions to describe both her frustration with Jamie and how enamored she is with him. In “See I’m Smiling,” she describes how selfish Jamie is by singing, “No I’m not, no I’m not! – and the point is, Jamie, / That you can’t spend a single day / That’s not about / You and you and nothing but you. / Mahvelous novelist you!” (Brown 6-7). She changes the lyric slightly towards the end of the show when she sings, “Finally I’ll have something worthwhile /

To think of each morning - / You and you and nothing but you, / No substitution will do, / Nothing but fresh, undiluted and pure, / Top of the line, / And totally mine!” (Brown 29-30). Brown uses this lyrical progression to show the audience how Cathy’s opinion of Jamie has dramatically changed over the five-year relationship. This repeated lyric in “I Can Do Better Than That” should leave the audience with a tinge of uncertainty, because they have already heard those words used for negativity.

Understanding these lyrical progressions allowed me to shape these moments to reflect the repetition. It also allowed me to work with the actors to ensure that these moments were clear so the audience had a chance to see the structure Jason Robert Brown has put into place. Such connection would hopefully give audience members the feeling that Jamie and Cathy are in some way connected, despite the fact they don’t sing together and their opposing views of each other.

### Rehearsal Process

In preparation for rehearsing *The Last Five Years*, I tried to find the simplest way for the actors to identify with their characters. As has become very evident through the previous research, a linear approach to theatre seems to be the easiest to grasp. Therefore, I decided to approach this musical in the most logical and linear way I could.

As I began to rehearse with Erika, I thought it would be appropriate to begin at the end of the show, which is the beginning of Cathy’s story. We first decided to tackle “Goodbye, Until Tomorrow,” in hopes of understanding where Cathy’s journey begins. It is too easy to think about where she ends, since that is the first part of the show. The positivity is rampant, in direct opposition of “I’m Still Hurting.” Brown has created a span of two polar opposites in the



creation of Cathy's character. Understanding this, we deduced that Erika would need to play this emotional state as strongly as its counterpart in "I'm Still Hurting." This being said, there is still room for Cathy to grow throughout the song. In fact, the text is rather progressive in nature. Extracting progressive pieces from the lyrics one hears, "Goodbye until the next time you call...goodbye 'til I recall how to breathe...goodbye until my feet touch the floor...goodbye until the rest of my life...goodbye until I crawl to your door...goodbye until I'm done thanking God" (Brown 33-34). Her expressions continue to grow in size as her anticipation and emotion does the same.

After this song had been staged, and we moved into combined rehearsal with Taylor, I quickly noticed that if the excitement exhibited by Erika was not nearly over the top, it was drowned out by the feelings of sorrow from the previous song, "Nobody Needs to Know," in which Jamie reveals to the audience he has had an affair. That somber topic seemed to have the ability to stifle the positive energy coming from Erika. She found ways to increase her excitement that included an extra amount of breathing indicative of excitement, slightly quicker physical motion, and even the use of standard colloquial expressions. She declared with great excitement, "Finally, yes!" and added a spoken quality that added excitement to the phrase, before singing "Finally now" (Brown 33).

With Taylor, we began at the beginning of the musical. He first sings "Shiksa Goddess," which is an over-the-top rendition of his first impressions of Cathy and his need to move away from the population of women he previously dated, mostly Jewish girls. The song offers a slew of outrageous comparisons, including:

“If you had a tattoo, that wouldn’t matter. If you had a shaved head that would be cool...if you once were in jail or you once were a man. If your mother and brother had ‘relations’ with each other and your father was connected to the Gotti Clan...If you’ve got a powerful connection to your firearm collection, I’d say draw a bead and shoot...Just as long as you’re not from Hebrew school” (Brown 3-4).

These outlandish lyrics, paired with an uptempo accompaniment, are a solid attempt to allow the audience to like Jamie. Taylor and I discussed this and decided this song would need to be an extreme portrayal of love sickness. As we began to stage the number, I asked Taylor to move somewhat frenetically around the space. At one point, he would jump onto the bench we had placed center stage and at another point fall to his knees and crawl towards Cathy. This staging helped to immediately shake the previous negative image Cathy portrays of Jamie in her first song. The problem with this extreme juxtaposition, not only in this song but also in the first three or four of his songs, is that in comparison to Erika’s somber, sad and angry moments, Taylor began to look like a cartoon character. This really had very little to do with the choices Taylor was making; it had more to do with the contrast between what he was singing and doing and what Erika was singing and doing.

To find a solution to this problem, I asked Taylor to lessen his excitement and his over-the-top movement by a small fraction. This seemed to help immensely. This allowed me to make a large discovery about the structure of the Less Linear Concept Musical. While the songs may be performed out of context and a multitude of actions, emotions and choices will work wonderfully, in producing the complete work, one must carefully craft each of the actor’s

performances to complement each other's work. I directed Taylor to do what I thought would look over-the-top without realizing that the way Erika would perform the previous song would greatly affect the perception of what Taylor would do. When looking at the structure of a Less Linear Concept Musical, I now realize that since the structure is intentionally skewed, I needed to be mindful of the entire picture more than I would a Traditional Linear Book Musical.

### Attempting Resolution

In reading Aristotle's *The Poetics*, one of his suggestions was that a dramatic work should have a clear beginning, middle and end. The Neoclassical Movement, as well as the Hammerstein model for musical theatre, continued this notion. I find that modern audiences still crave, if nothing else, some sort of resolution. *The Last Five Years* ends with a level of resolution in that Jamie has left Cathy, and we are aware the relationship is over. However, Cathy is found at the beginning of the relationship waiting for Jamie to call, in a state of ecstasy. This is a very effective ending and leaves the audience feeling sorry for Cathy. In discussions with Erika, we found a lyric in her first song that proved interesting. Towards the end of "I'm Still Hurting" she sings, "Maybe there's somewhere a lesson to learn" (Brown 2). The question was then posed, "Is Cathy remembering her side of the story in reverse order, while Jamie is remembering his in chronological order?" This question sparked a lot of ideas about how we would treat the beginning and the ending of the musical.

I previously had decided we would show chronological linear movement from left to right. Jamie would therefore begin on the left side of the stage and eventually move to the right, while Cathy would begin on the right and move to the left. However, this idea of recollection spurred an idea to have Jamie enter from the right side of the stage and the cross to the left, while

Cathy would do the opposite. The characters would meet in the middle before changing sides. Cathy entered happily and Jamie entered unhappily, and both actors changed their demeanors to that of the other character when they crossed the centerline. This gave the audience the initial impression of these two characters trading places, which would be continued in “The Next Ten Minutes,” the point where Jamie moves to the right side of the stage and Cathy to the left. At the end of the show, this put each character on the side from which they entered. This staging worked well, but if I were to make a single change, it would be the demeanor in which both would enter. I would have them both enter as if they were meeting at the end of the relationship. Then I would allow the recollection as well as the switching of sides to change Jamie. This would have better encompassed the idea of them both recalling the relationship but in different ways.

At the end of the show, after Jamie has left Cathy figuratively and literally (he left the stage before she did), Erika and I decided she would find the sorrow of “I’m Still Hurting” for the last moment. This was a way to conclude the musical and show the audience that despite the memories and the lessons learned, the marriage is over and it is painful. This sentiment mirrors Cathy’s thoughts in “I’m Still Hurting” when she sings, “Maybe there’s somewhere a lesson to learn, but that wouldn’t change the fact, that wouldn’t speed the time, once the foundations cracked and I’m still hurting” (Brown 2). This ending worked very well in the performance. As I watched Erika playing Cathy in the last moments, she was so happy while Taylor was so forlorn. One has an emotional connection to Cathy and feels terrible for her. Seeing her break from the giddiness and happiness of “Goodbye Until Tomorrow,” even if only for the final moment, gave the audience one final look at the reality of the relationship, and it proved to be

heartbreaking. This added an Aristotelian complete ending to the piece and ensured there was no confusion on the part of the audience: this was indeed the end of the musical.

### Breaking the “Unity of Time”

*The Last Five Years* breaks the linear quality set up by Aristotle, Neoclassicists and Oscar Hammerstein II. It also expressly breaks the “unity of time” in that it takes place over five years. This is a great deal more time than one day, as the Neoclassicists suggested, and much longer than the average several day or several month length used in the Hammerstein model. While the unities have not been upheld in American Musical Theatre, we see that stretching them too far begins to cause audience confusion.

When viewing *The Last Five Years*, it can be confusing to understand the amount of time that has passed between each scene, especially since the gap between songs can be as wide as 5 years. Generally, musicals should have a great amount of forward motion or action that keeps the plot moving forward. *The Last Five Years*, in contrast, begins to feel choppy. One cannot focus solely on Jamie, because his progression is broken by Cathy’s songs and vice versa. It can be difficult to focus on the entire plot, because each song is rather one-sided and shaped as a sung monologue. In order to combat this disconnection between Jamie’s story and Cathy’s story, I broke away from the usual staging of the musical and allowed Jamie and Cathy to interact with each other throughout the entire musical. This way, each song that is normally treated like a monologue was instead treated like a scene, albeit only one person was singing. This staging had a large affect on audience members who commented they enjoyed how connected Jamie and Cathy were.

This choice in staging did not come without its challenges. With this method, both actors had to move from pre-wedding to post-wedding and from good times to bad times. This was fairly easy for Erika and Taylor to accomplish, because both were incredibly familiar with the musical. The problem existed in trying to portray these rapid switches to the audience. It became apparent that some sort of abrupt change would be necessary between each song. Luckily, Jason Robert Brown composed the score in such a way that the transitions are not smooth but jarring. We identified these musical changes and then would add some sort of physicality to portray them. For example, at the end of “I Can Do Better Than That,” both Jamie and Cathy are seated on the bench, because they have been portraying traveling in a car. As the music for “Nobody Needs To Know” began, Taylor would slide off the bench onto the floor and begin talking to an invisible Elise, the woman Jamie has an affair with. Erika’s demeanor would change to a neutral, almost sad, expression as she sat slightly above Taylor during the heartbreaking song. These abrupt changes and strong acting choices communicated clearly to the audience that a change in time and place had occurred.

### Performance

The UCF classroom presentation of the *Last Five Years* occurred on April 10, 2010. It was exciting to see how all of the preparation and the specific choices to try and better inform the audience would be received. There were about 30 people in attendance, and my overall perception of their reactions was a positive one. There was frequent laughter and snuffles throughout the piece.

Erika and Taylor found a way to incorporate the audience into their performance. The small crowd seemed to be getting an inside view of this failed relationship. If the performers

were not singing to one another, then they were most likely addressing the audience, attempting to pull them in. The feedback I received from individual audience members seemed to suggest Erika and Taylor were successful in doing so. Many people said they felt a greater connection between the two characters and to the characters themselves. This was my goal, and I felt it was well-achieved. The performance was successful and enjoyable.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

The Less Linear Concept Musical is a unique and fairly rare type of musical. It is critical that one understands its unique structure before attempting to direct this type of musical.

Audiences are subconsciously influenced by the many critical philosophies that have been introduced into the theatrical world since Greek Theatre. Aristotle's philosophies seem to serve as a measuring point for all philosophies that follow. By understanding some of the inherent difficulties presented by deviant structures, a director can specifically work with actors to attempt to communicate a less linear plot in a way that accentuates its individuality and does not alienate audiences.

Beginning with Aristotle's *The Poetics*, this research established a basis upon which all theatrical structure could be measured against. All further theatrical attempts would either uphold Aristotle's philosophies or work against them. Most forms that strayed from the form did not abandon all of Aristotle's principles but seemed to favor some over others. The Neoclassicists made strict rules out of the principles, while Shakespeare seemed to run away from them. Even the foundation of musical theatre, as chaotic as it was, seems to favor having some storyline, however weak and interrupted it may have been. Essentially, Aristotle noted that audiences yearn to be told some sort of story. All following forms would simply manipulate how that story was to be told.

Having defined, dissected and directed the Less Linear Concept Musical, I have a deeper understanding of its structure. I have seen that skewing the timeline has the ability to give audiences new and unique experiences, but also brings challenges in portraying a clear story.



The Less Linear Concept Musical is a valid form of storytelling, despite the frequent failure that follows its production. Understanding the foundation that these types of musicals fight against a director makes it possible to shape a performance to accentuate key plot points while preserving structure.

An in-depth analysis of the structure of any musical will reveal there are pitfalls of which a director needs be aware. I discovered that by focusing on how structure can enhance storytelling, I was working on a very audience-centered piece of musical theatre. The characters were not only passionate about their lives but also about communicating their story with the audience. Structure is a powerful and persuasive tool. It should be carefully used to enhance the story. In so doing, one produces a rewarding experience for audience, actor, and director.

It is my hope that when others direct Less Linear Concept Musicals, this research and application might be of use in defining structure as well as suggesting examples of how a director might address the problems of the form with their actors. If the goal is communication, I hope this paper may serve as a springboard towards that goal in any production situation.

## **APPENDIX A: ORDER OF SONGS AS WRITTEN**

The following list includes a numerical designation for each song in *The Last Five Years* as well as a designation of which characters sings that song. The songs are numbered according to the order they appear in the libretto, as written by Jason Robert Brown.

1. "I'm Still Hurting" - Cathy
2. "Shiksa Goddess" – Jamie
3. "See I'm Smiling" – Cathy
4. "Moving Too Fast" – Jamie
5. "I'm A Part of That" – Cathy
6. "The Schmuel Song" – Jamie
7. "A Summer in Ohio" – Cathy
8. "The Next Ten Minutes – Jamie & Cathy
9. "A Miracle Would Happen" – Jamie & Cathy
10. "Climbing Uphill" – Cathy
11. "If I Didn't Believe in You" – Jamie
12. "I Can Do Better Than That" – Cathy
13. "Nobody Needs to Know" – Jamie
14. "Goodbye Until Tomorrow" – Cathy\*
15. "I Could Never Rescue You" – Jamie\*

\* "Goodbye Until Tomorrow" and "I Could Never Rescue You" are performed overlapping one another, but are considered two separate songs by composer and lyricist Jason Robert Brown ([jasonrobertbrown.com](http://jasonrobertbrown.com)).

## **APPENDIX B: CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF SONGS**

The following is a list of the songs from *The Last Five Years* in chronological order, as if they were presented as a traditional linear plot. The numbering has been preserved from Appendix A for continuity's sake as well as to show the structural juxtaposition.

14. "Goodbye Until Tomorrow" - Cathy
2. "Shiksa Goddess" - Jamie
12. "I Can Do Better Than That" - Cathy
4. "Moving Too Fast" – Jamie
10. "Climbing Uphill" – Cathy
6. "The Schmuel Song" – Jamie
8. "The Next Ten Minutes" – Jamie & Cathy
9. "A Miracle Would Happen" – Jamie & Cathy
7. "A Summer in Ohio" – Cathy
11. "If I Didn't Believe In You" – Jamie
5. "I'm A Part of That" – Cathy
13. "Nobody Needs to Know" – Jamie
3. "See I'm Smiling" – Cathy
15. "I Could Never Rescue You" – Jamie
1. "I'm Still Hurting" - Cathy

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