HOW THREE 1970S MUSICALS PROBED DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM

By

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ABSTRACT

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Three Broadway musicals from throughout the 1970s – in the intentions of their creators and actors, in the reception by critics and audiences, and in the messages of the book and music themselves – reflected larger social issues of the time. *Follies* (1971) illustrated a narcissistic generation's concerns about marriage and aging, using as its fractured, nostalgic lens the lighthearted entertainment that existed before World War II. *A Chorus Line* (1975) modeled deep comfort with the language of therapy and of coming out, workshopping itself almost endlessly and drawing record crowds with its searing honesty. Although *Annie* did not open until 1977, it was begun in the early part of the decade and reflects the concerns of both eras: debuting during a time of greater hope, looking four decades earlier to make the present seem less dour, and helping New York City reinvent itself. Each musical tried in its own way to come to terms with or reclaim different pieces of an American dream that seemed to be slipping away. The texts and critical responses to the three musicals under study add further insight into the deep undercurrents of the 1970s, a deceptively underwhelming decade that has been reinvigorated by historians in recent years.

To Ken, who suggested I write about something I love

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A Historiography of Writing About Musical Theater

Pushing through New York's Times Square on a summer evening, the space thronged with visitors holding tickets or wishing they held tickets to a show, it is easy to feel that Broadway is the center of the universe. As lyricist and director Martin Charnin put it four decades ago, "There is nothing like opening night in New York. The electricity, the excitement, the glamour, the fear, the noise. It all comes with a rush. People that you have been living with for six years, look at you as though they have no idea who you are. Their eyes glaze over. It's hectic and crazy and wonderful."[1] In July 2016, to give just one moment in time, *Les Misérables* and *Hamilton* performed cheek-by-jowl at neighboring theaters just west of Broadway. Revivals of *Chicago* and *Fiddler on the Roof* ran concurrently with newer shows such as *Kinky Boots* and *Jersey Boys.* The stories-high billboard for *The Lion King* dazzled like sunlight.

Indeed, the Broadway musical is a force unto itself. The format heightens and exaggerates emotions, pulling together in three hours the emotional highs and lows of a lifetime. Love it or hate it, the Broadway musical has permeated American society for a century, from aspiring actors taking over high school stages to adults crowding theaters for holiday sing-alongs to *The Sound of Music.* Musicals traffic in high-octane fantasy that can have welcome and surprising applications to the mundanities of real life. "Musicals in general may be sentimental, mythologized, full of false optimism and showbiz glitz," as musical theater writer Jack Viertel recently observed. "But every now and then one features a moment that manages to be profound. That's what we wait for."[2]

Scholars generally agree that musicals, like popular culture itself, both shape and reflect issues in the larger society. The recent success of *Hamilton* likely just continues a trend which, ironically, seems clear from scholarly analysis of musicals from four decades ago, from the sometimes neglected 1970s: a time when many believed Broadway's heyday had come and gone, a time of dissonance and shifts within a largely post-counterculture America, in a United States in which the postwar American dream seemed elusive if not empty. Despite these bleak views, it was actually a rich period of cultural commentary through musicals. Three shows from throughout the decade – in the intentions of their creators and actors, in the reception by critics and audiences, and in the messages of the book and music themselves – reflected larger social issues of the 1970s. *Follies* (1971) illustrated a narcissistic generation's concerns about marriage and aging, using as its fractured, nostalgic lens the lighthearted entertainment that existed before World War II. *A Chorus Line* (1975) modeled deep comfort with the language of therapy and of coming out, workshopping itself almost endlessly and drawing record crowds with its searing honesty. Although *Annie* did not open until 1977, it was begun in the early part of the decade and reflects the concerns of both eras: debuting during a time of greater hope, looking four decades earlier to make the present seem less dour, and helping New York City reinvent itself. Each musical tried in its own way to come to terms with or reclaim different pieces of an American dream that seemed to be slipping away.

With a handful of notable exceptions by cultural and social historians, the vast majority of the current critical literature covers musicals from a dramatic, choreographic, or musicological perspective. Even this kind of analysis has come largely in the past several decades, as Fordham music professor Larry Stempel wrote in 2010 in his seminal

Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater: "Since the 1980s, an explosion of *Wissenschaft* in the field has crystallized in the form of articles in scholarly journals, academic monographs, and, indeed, doctoral dissertations."[3] Notably, the humanities canon has expanded to fit modern theoretical frameworks, thus leading to a wider variety of cultural artifacts' being taken seriously. "Moved by the force of postmodern awareness," Stempel observed, "with its inclusionary sense of what constitutes culture and its suspicion of cultural hierarchies and historical 'metanarratives,' scholars no longer find only 'highbrow' subjects appropriate for study, but also 'lowbrow' and even 'middlebrow' ones – Broadway musicals among them."[4]

Even with this explosion of material about the Broadway musical, there is still much ground to cover, as the introduction to a 2011 book on *West Side Story* highlighted: "Despite [its] notoriety... *West Side Story* has yet to earn a serious, full-length musicological study. Surprisingly, it is not alone. Musical theater in this mold (involving a strong directorial or choreographic element) falls more naturally within the purview of theater or dance studies, and it is these fields that have contributed most to the scholarly literature on this work."[5] And most of the omnibus studies of musicals being published today – such as Jack Viertel's *The Secret Life of the American Musical* (2016) or Ethan Mordden's *Anything Goes: A History of American Musical Theatre* (2013)[6] – have focused on the theatrical rather than the historical side. All of this is to say that the field of musical theater history is ripe for historians of all stripes to mine and analyze.

Indeed, while social and cultural historians have written extensively about the popular culture of the 1970s in terms of film and music, with books such as government professor Jonathan Kirshner's *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society and the*

Seventies Film in America (2012) and articles such as "Dead Man's Town: 'Born in the U.S.A.,' Social History, and Working-Class Identity," by Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm in the June 2006 issue of the *American Quarterly*,[7] historians have barely written about the Broadway musical as connected to social or cultural issues of its times. Following in the footsteps of social and cultural historians who have written about a variety of artifacts and sources, a fresh analysis of 1970s era musicals reveals important insights. By digging through newspaper reviews of the time, as well as looking at interviews with the creators of the musicals, one can find a trove of primary sources that sheds light upon what we already know about the scripts and the shows themselves. The hallmark of much of the writing about film and music is that the authors argue that popular culture reflects larger social concerns, such as second-wave feminism and Carter's economic malaise, and these find reflection in the three musicals chosen.

Many approaches to how musical theater reflects American culture and society have applied a more artistically interpretive than strictly historical lens. For instance, David Walsh and Len Platt's thoughtful *Musical Theater and American Culture* (2003), written from a sociological perspective, initially gave straight historical background on a time period, such as race relations during the Cold War in a postwar chapter called "Broadway and After: The Transformation of the Musical." Then it launched into an analysis of the period's musicals themselves – in this instance, in a section on the 1970s called "From Social Realism to Concept in the Musical." During the 1970s, Walsh and Platt argued, "the musical becomes integrated not just by the song and dance but, crucially, by the book [script], which turns it into musical drama. It is a musical drama that typically takes the form of realism and, specifically, of 'social realism,' the classic

form of bourgeois tragedy as Raymond Williams" described it in his 1966 book *Modern Tragedy.*[8] *West Side Story* scholar Elizabeth A. Wells called Walsh and Platt's approach a "sociological and cultural critique."[9] For Walsh and Platt, the historical background served as prelude to a quasi-literary analysis of various musicals' elements.

One survey of how musicals embody quintessentially American themes, by a UCLA professor of musicology, went into depth on a number of shows to illustrate the synthesis between music and society. In Raymond Knapp's *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005), Knapp emphasized that he "steered very wide of attempting to be encyclopedic,"[10] as other books have done. For instance, in the 826-page *Showtime*, Stempel wrote that his "comprehensive" survey "does not mean exhaustive or encyclopedic," but the book did provide intensive details on a huge number of shows, with primary sources from advertisements to ~~to~~-orchestrations.[11] Knapp, on the other hand, honed in on and "engaged intimately with particular songs and shows so as to illuminate the broader strokes of the historical narratives I delineate."[12] Although Knapp did not focus on any of the three musicals that this thesis analyzes, his approach to *West Side Story* was illustrative. After mentioning immigration and racial tensions, he contrasted the Latin sound of the Sharks' "America" with the modernist "twelve-tone" basis for the Jets' "Cool." This chromatic scale "perfectly captures the edgy emotional detachment through which the Jets seek to control the volatility of their situation – and is thus quite opposed to the exuberance just heard in 'America.'"[13] For Knapp, the actual melodies and harmonies of the songs reflected the emotional and cultural messages that musicals can send.

Some recent scholarship about musicals has become more historically specific, tackling the subject through various theoretical frameworks. In Stacy Wolf's intricate *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (2011), Wolf investigated how female actors and characters are involved in every aspect of musicals' performance, "from singing together in duets to dancing alone center stage, from participating in a community's formation to becoming a cog in the theatrical machinery."[14] Wolf took a historiographic perspective by emphasizing the evolution of musical theater as it reflected the evolution of American society, noting that "the specific issues that are sources of struggle and debate have changed in U.S. society since the 1950s, and the musical theatre, too, has changed, continually revising its representation of gender and of heterosexual romance to navigate social ills and conflicts."[15] This synergy between how musicals tackle complex social issues – such as homosexuality in *A Chorus Line* and urbanism in *Annie* – has produced some of the most fascinating points of interpretation as one looks at musicals of the late twentieth century. As with my topic, which focuses on the 1970s, Wolf structured her study by the "convenient organizing" principle of decades, a convention "at once useful and also deceptively and inaccurately clear-cut."[16] Finally, Wolf privileged the original Broadway reviews, "especially from the influential *New York Times,*" a compelling decision. As she argued, "Reviewers fill in production details and situate the musical in context, often unconsciously revealing unspoken cultural and theatrical expectations, since they write from their historical moment. In fact, the most illuminating and provocative comments are often those expressed nonchalantly."[17] In looking at the early reviews of all three musicals, it can be

astonishing to see how often these hastily written paeans or screeds intuited and foreshadowed a musical's future direction and impact.

In a critical vein similar to Wolf's approach, Warren Hoffman in his brilliantly titled *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (2014) urged scholars to acknowledge and illuminate latent messages about race in a variety of musicals from the past century. Hoffman argued that the musicals that have changed the trajectory of Broadway are precisely those that have talked about race, and that the musicals that feature mostly or nearly all white characters are important precisely for their "silence" on the issue: "In fact, if you make a list of the key shows that are said to have revolutionized the American musical theater – *Show Boat, Oklahoma!, West Side Story,* and *A Chorus Line* – each one is about race on level or another."[18] As an example of such analysis, Hoffman recalibrated the standard analysis of *A Chorus Line*'s impact. Yes, the show "is about what it means to be a performer on Broadway," but, just as much if not more so, it "imagines a world in which everyone has an equal chance to succeed in life and where one's racial or ethnic background is not a hindrance to that success but an identity to embrace and a reason to celebrate."[19] Approached with this multicultural lens, the iconic 1975 musical's broad-based appeal becomes even clearer, not simply because of its psychological undertones but also its racial and ethnic ones. Throughout the book, Hoffman likened the glossing over of race in American musicals to the glossing over of American musicals in the country's history: "So often we simply ignore or write off the musical, but it's an art form that demands our attention and scrutiny. We must continue to make the musical, like whiteness, visible, as it is a significant contributor to this country's rich cultural and social history, especially as matters of race are concerned."[20]

Hoffman's book asked audiences to unearth subtle racial messages in order to better understand not simply the musical form but also the history of race in the United States.

Other books have dived into the specific by looking at one particular musical and its cultural ramifications, the narrow scope giving authors latitude to consider the shows' transmutations through time. Wells with *West Side Story* hoped to see how the musical could "reflect and refract American culture,"[21] a noble goal in that it analyzed both how this groundbreaking 1957 musical echoed and complicated the nation's cultural sensibilities. She acknowledged the work of those who had come before and expressed that she "cannot hope to explain what has made *West Side Story* a great musical, nor retrace completely its tortured history, nor analyze its music to prove that it is organic and unified (others have done this already and better)."[22] Instead, she brought together "different lenses so that we can see [the show] as a product both of its time and of ours," with chapters that included topics such as "the work's relationship to Hispanicism, in New York and beyond" and "the musical's relationship to juvenile delinquency, one of the most pressing problems in American society in the 1950s."[23] This focus on particular themes arising from the musical is something worthy of an historian's attention – connecting the social mores of the time to their expression in the script, music, authorial intentions, and audience reactions.

Like Wells with *West Side Story,* Alisa Solomon's *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of "Fiddler on the Roof"* (2013) linked the content of *Fiddler* to social and cultural themes beyond it. Her research into culture and history demonstrated that the musical "is a global touchstone for an astonishing range of concerns: Jewish identity, American immigrant narratives, generational conflict, communal cohesion, ethnic

authenticity, and interracial bridge building, among them."[24] In addition, Solomon took this 1964 musical's impact even farther chronologically, from the 1960s to the present day, investigating "how a work of popular culture can glow with a radiant afterlife, illuminating for different audiences the pressing issues of their times."[25] Herein lies one secret of musicals that endure: Their messages can develop over time into something that each generation wants to hear. Finally, Solomon tweaked the idea of one of the show's main themes, the importance of tradition, by pointing out that, "in the five decades since *Fiddler* premiered," through postmodern constructs "we have learned that tradition is 'invented.'" Thus, "the show can be invoked both to confer Jewish bona fides on bar mitzvahs and to invite American rapport with Hasidim."[26] Smash musicals develop their own cultural biography as they are interpreted by each new generation, each with its own concerns about identity and social customs.

One other serious plunge into a musical, and a magnificent one, came in Ellen Noonan's *The Strange Career of Porgy & Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (2012). Noonan treated the Gershwin musical not only on its own terms but – in its inception, original performance, and many revivals afterward – as an entry point for a discussion of race in the twentieth century and beyond. Noonan used extensive archival sources to "tell this story of how American expectations about race, culture, and the struggle for equality played out through the invention and reinvention of a single story,"[27] with extended vignettes from the history of Charleston, South Carolina, interspersed throughout the book. From DuBose Heyward's fascination with African-American life that led him to write the novel that inspired the musical, to a 1964 New York City Center Opera performance of the show that ill-advisedly put on stage some

white actors in blackface, to a modern tour of Charleston that attempted to fill in African-American histories not always told,[28] Noonan's monograph both examined the ripples that led to the 1935 production and followed the ripple effects since. Rather than trace the impact of each of the three musicals to the present, this thesis focuses on the critical reactions in the time in which the musicals were originally performed and, occasionally, on the Broadway revivals and notable performances that have shed light on original intentions (such as the 1985 Lincoln Center concert of *Follies*, the 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line,* and the 2012 Broadway revival of *Annie).* With such sources, one can take use visceral contemporary reactions to understand larger social and cultural trends.

Cultural historians have looked at dramatic and literary texts to understand the societal influences that produced them. Historians' use of popular literature, music, or film as cultural artifacts has revealed important themes and meaning in the social history of the periods they study. Applying such methods to musical theater promises similar insights into the 1970s.

Two notable cultural history books have showed the deep political implications of music on both a global and a local stage. Penny M. Von Eschen's *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (2004) added complexity to a sometimes innocuous-seeming government program. Through analysis of the State Department's international "jazz tours," which featured leading African-American musicians in the 1950s through 1970s, Von Eschen overlaid "the American exceptionalism implicit in this nostalgic notion of the effectiveness of American culture as a Cold War weapon."[29] *Satchmo Blows Up the World* pinpointed the intersection of culture, race, and politics at a

time when the United States government lacked "a coherent cultural policy." The State Department ended up forming an almost improvisational one through the desire to showcase America's best talent and music to the world.[30] Another book exploring the political contradictions and ironies inherent within African-American music was Suzanne Smith's *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (1999). In her more localized work, Smith, too, focused on the power of music as an intentional or inadvertent communicator of cultural values. For Motown in Detroit, as Smith noted, "the 'artistic form' is popular music and the 'social location' is an industrial city with a strong black middle class and a long history of racism."[31] Again, the power of the history described simmered because of the interplay of culture, art and race. *Dancing in the Street* also provided a useful reminder of the heft historians can bring to digging through the veneer of nostalgia surrounding popular artistic products. Such going beyond the common understanding of a piece of art is something I have kept in mind in looking at three musicals – two extremely popular *(A Chorus Line and Annie)* and one less commercially successful but renowned for its experimental qualities *(Follies).* As Smith reflected:

> Nostalgia, after all, obscures the past more than it reveals its true complexity. The Motown sound has become one of the most powerful instruments to evoke nostalgia about America during the 1960s. At the end of the century the music does more to help people forget the real struggles of that era than to bring them into sharp focus. History, however, is nostalgia's worst enemy. The history of Motown and its origins in Detroit vividly recall those struggles of the past, even the ones that failed, and *these* memories can inspire the work required to create a more egalitarian future.[32]

Artistic successes, as Smith observed, can gloss over the work endemic to achieving reform and social change. One of the jobs of historians is to unearth that work so that we

can remember the past not simply nostalgically but analytically, thus perhaps paving the way to replicate such "struggles" in the future.

Interpreting music as cultural trope is one of the most common ways of connecting art, culture, and social history. For example, many of those who have written about Bruce Springsteen (including, now, the man himself, with the release of the autobiography *Born to Run* in 2016[33]), have mined a rich intersection among lyrics, biography, and social commentary. One scholarly article compared Springsteen to "Reagan and Rambo..., a white hard-body hero whose masculinity confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism, the work ethic and rugged individualism," appealing to white working-class men in the 1970s and 1980s.[34] Similarly, Jim Cullen in his *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (1997) synthesized research into lyrics, political history, contemporary films, and even Abraham Lincoln's stature as a heroic figure to make an argument about how Springsteen's music relates to culture: "*Born in the U.S.A.* is not a biography. Instead, it explores a series of myths, symbols, and words in American culture, and the ways in which Springsteen's music clarifies, revises, and reinterprets them."[35] Cullen organized his work thematically, with chapters focusing on topics such as the American dream, manifest destiny, and the American ethics of work and play. As with any art that shapes our understanding of what has come before, in the hands of Springsteen "national identity" seemed new. According to Cullen, Springsteen did not simply "restate" the history that comes before, but in fact he caused the listener to see it differently, by "applying the lessons of the Civil Rights movement to Asian immigrants" or "recognizing the homoeroticism that has always animated 'normal' friendship." From the perspective of the Boss, "history is not an inert mass that weighs us

down. Rather, it becomes the raw material for making history anew."[36] Examining 1970s musicals, how their scripts – their "raw material" – emerged from and connected to the social currents surrounding their authors and actors, uncovers the uncertain and often disenchanted reactions to unprecedented social changes.

Film also provides a literal lens into culture, making social and political trends visible in characters' actions and settings. In *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* (2012), government professor Jonathan Kirshner argued that "[t]here *was* something happening there" in the interplay between the arts and social change in the 1970s. The very structure of the best films from that period, of which Kirshner intensely explores twenty, echoed the time's ambiguities: "The era of the seventies film reflected a shift away from the pristine exposition of linear stories with unambiguous moral grounding, and toward self-consciously gritty explorations of complex episodes that challenged the received normative structure of society."[37] Kirshner arranged his book chronologically and often found thematic connections among different movies. A typical chapter, "White Knights in Existential Despair," began, "The war was finally over. The last U.S. troops quit Vietnam in 1973. Nixon quit the White House a year later," before going on to dissect the cynicism of Robert Altman's 1973 noir film *The Long Goodbye,* based on Raymond Chandler's 1953 novel.[38] Throughout *Hollywood's Last Golden Age*, the social and political narrative ran parallel to the cultural one. Sometimes Kirshner described historical events for several pages before jumping into film analysis, and sometimes he collapsed history and film into the same paragraph. For instance, in a chapter called "Crumbling Cities and Revisionist History," he reflected that the late 1960s and early 1970s "were difficult times for the

country; its armed forces were fighting halfway around the world, and often, it seemed, there was a war on home as well, with struggling cities on the cusp of devolving into lawless urban combat zones. In 1971 a flood of movies suggested this fate."[39] Kirshner's scholarly and deeply historical approach to the context of films, supported by nuanced film criticism, made for a book that treated cultural artifacts with historical weight.

Two cultural histories of the 1970s provided excellent models for doing research on thematic topics with multilayered sources. Jefferson Cowie, in his *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010), drew on sources as diverse as *Time* magazine, the *New York Times,* the television show *Dallas,* Robert Altman's movie *Nashville,* the Woodstock music festival, and Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run" to build the thesis that, for working-class stalwarts such as Dewey Burton, "a republic of anxiety overtook a republic of security" during this shifting decade.[40] With one comment about *Nashville,* for example, Cowie argued that the film "attacked the faux folksiness and artificial grit of the seventies Southern cult and revealed the Nixonesque manufacturing, commodification, and broadcasting of a Warholian festival of the people."[41] Cowie transformed a variety of sources into different lenses on the decade so that readers could understand the working-class predicament from not just one perspective but many. In *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (2007) , Sam Binkley similarly interwove advice from a multitude of "lifestyle publications," which "provided the ideal medium both for the transformation of a lifestyle ethic from an underground fringe to the middle-class mainstream, and for the shaping of traumatic change into the purposeful narrative of self-loosening."[42] The publications included everything from *The Whole Earth Catalog,* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to *Celery Wine: Story of a Country*

Commune in 1973.[43] Although Binkley focused largely on one type of source – printed self-help tracts, for the most part – in the incredible range of these publications, Binkley, like Cowie, creatively brought together many voices of the era.

Such scholarly and critical treatments of cultural artifacts recast the 1970s. What emerges is a decade historians that historians have found interesting as a topic of study, regardless of whether one starts the clock in 1968, 1970, or 1974. Rather than seeing the era as a time when not much occurred, recent books such as Kevin Mattson's *"What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?: Jimmy Carter, America's 'Malaise,' and the Speech That Should Have Changed the Country* (2009) and Edward Berkowitz's *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural History of the Seventies* (2006), to name only two, considered the decade as important both in its own right and in leading into the politics of the 1980s.[44] The creators of the Emmy-nominated CNN documentary series *The Sixties* (2013) and *The Seventies* (2015) observed that the latter era "was filled with diverse, sometimes contradictory trends, making it much harder to define than the 1960s. But in the end, we discovered that it was the diversity and contradictions that made it such a compelling time – Archie Bunker but also Kunte Kinte, Donna Summer as well as Sid Vicious, the Munich Massacre but in addition, the Camp David Peace Accords."[45] Even at the time, commentators who were living through the 1970s marveled at the sense of instability they felt. "It was called the lost decade, the un-decade, or the decade that got away," mused a retrospective piece in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 16, 1979. "The '70s were a psychic holding pattern. At the end of the decade, it's hard to understand that we're 10 years older than when we started."[46] Or as Peter N. Carroll entitled his early study of the decade, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened* – a perspective

that only a very privileged person could have had. The texts and critical responses to the three musicals under study add further insight into the deep undercurrents of the 1970s.

The decade's musicals tried both to acknowledge the fissures in society and to make people's lives seem glossier than they were. This was the time of the exuberant *Grease* (1970) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), but it was also the era of the darker visions of *Chicago* (1975) and *Sweeney Todd* (1979). Ethan Mordden, prolific chronicler of Broadway musical history, has observed in *One More Kiss: The Broadway Musical in the 1970s* (2003) that the golden age of musicals was done and gone, having lasted from approximately the 1920s to the 1960s. By the 1970s, producers were not always willing to front the money required for a blockbuster show, audiences were not growing in the numbers needed to fuel huge numbers of hits, and "music itself" had evolved "from Tin Pan Alley to rock," not always a match for the conventional style of a Broadway musical.[47] The content of 1970s theater in general also reflected a sense of malaise, especially toward the end of the decade. At the cusp of the 1980s, on December 30, 1979, one observer looked back on "a time of spiritual fatigue," noting that plays in the 1970s "tended to be a bit wan, especially as the decade wore on."[48] Stacy Wolf attributed changes in Broadway during the 1970s to the willingness of playwrights to tackle problems now embedded in the national discourse: "In the 1970s, issues that were radical in the 1960s became a part of mainstream culture," adding that, "In a decade during which Americans became more self-centered as well as more community-oriented, musicals of the 1970s reflected these two impulses."[49] The tropes from *Follies, A Chorus Line,* and *Annie* showed that the fast-moving changes in society – even when they seemed liberating and appealing – were not always easy to incorporate into one's world

view. The Broadway musical, often stereotyped as lighthearted and superficial, was anything but when applied to this conflicted decade.

In the blockbuster musical *Hamilton* (2015), John Laurens asks his revolutionary eighteenth-century compatriots, "What time is it?" Full of energy and ready to introduce themselves, the fighter Marquis de Lafayette and the spy Hercules Mulligan reply, "Show time!" in a tribute to "the amazing subway breakdancers of NYC circa present day, who start their shows this way."[50] To borrow a page from Lin-Manuel Miranda – it's show time! By returning as if in a time machine to 1971, to one of Stephen Sondheim's first major works, to a musical that looked backward in order to avoid too much looking forward, one can begin to see key themes emerging in the musical theater of the 1970s.

Chapter 2

Follies' Bleak View of the Cultural Shifts of the Late 1960s and Early 1970s

Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* (1971) underwhelmed at the box office, with a "cumulative loss of $792,000" after 522 performances in a little over a year.[51] In some ways it is easy to see why. What there is of plot is fragmented: A coterie of former Ziegfeld Follies performers, decades after their last shows, reunites in a crumbling theater that is about to be demolished. As one contemporary critic alliteratively described it, "A bevy of slightly battered beauties holds a reunion, bringing along their hang-ups and husbands."[52] What there is of character is shattered: Two central couples, both dissatisfied in their marriages, try to relive the carefree heyday of their youth. A book about economic success on Broadway observed that, while *Follies* now occupies a spot as a "classic" of musical theater, at the time its "brittle, cynical tone left audiences cold."[53] What there is of music is schizophrenic: The show combines "book" songs that further the action along with "pastiche" songs – "fond imitations," in Sondheim's words – that harken back to Tin Pan Alley's golden age of musical theater.[54] The numbers sung by the characters as they are now, in 1971, "are full of lies and fantasies," while the pastiche songs "show us what the characters are really like," according to a notable musicologist.[55] And what there is of optimism? Absolutely nothing.

Yet the show has achieved an almost legendary status among aficionados of musicals for precisely its tackling of the themes of what it means to be human, housed in a brilliantly disjointed structure that represents the lack of cohesion of the characters' lives – what the message of the 1970s seemed to be to upper-crust whites. At the time, some reviewers did see magic. As an April 1971 critic observed, "*Follies* is a triple-edged

title. It means the Ziegfeld Follies, the follies of people in love, and the follies one commits by not fully knowing who one is or what one wants."[56] A month after the show opened, *Time* magazine enthused: "The newest hot ticket on Broadway these days—$55 a pair from scalpers —is an admission to a haunted house. Elegiac strains of the '20s, '30s and '40s hover in the wings. Ectoplasmic chorines, all beads and feather boas, wander across the stage like Ziegfeld girls come back to life. Characters are at once 19 and 49. Time bounces off the walls, like sound and light brilliantly altered and distorted."[57] Such kaleidoscopic staging lent the musical fascination even on a national level. Alexis Smith, who played Phyllis to scintillating reviews, appeared on the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek.* Given that "musicals didn't get a lot of magazine covers by 1971," "to have both of the biggies focus on *Follies* was extraordinary."[58] Even an opening night *New York Times* reviewer who thought the show "carries nostalgia to where sentiment finally engulfs it in its sickly maw" also called it "stylish [and] innovative," with "some of the best lyrics I have ever encountered" – "a serious attempt to deal with the musical form."[59] Even as *Follies* provoked disgust, it also inspired interest.

The show came during a prolific period for Sondheim in the early 1970s, when he established himself as an indisputable master of the American musical form. Many critics place both *Follies* and *Company,* which opened the year before, in the category of "concept musicals," which make up for in stream-of-consciousness self-discovery what they lack in conventional plot. A concept musical "doesn't simply tell the story; it dissects the story," according to Sondheim expert Ethan Mordden. "Thus, the public gets two Sondheim shows in one – what happened and what it means, complete with startling theatrical gestures and the characters' occasionally revealing that they know they're in a

play."[60] In 1985, the year of a Lincoln Center concert staging of the show, one observer noted that *Follies* "played a pivotal role in the historical progression from the linear 'book musical' pioneered by Rodgers and Hammerstein in 'Oklahoma' to a more atmospheric, conceptual musical." Musically, a number of the show's songs were "sung by a character who knows that she is singing, and it implies that the characters onstage know it too."[61] Such extreme self-awareness allowed the audience both to be transported by the pizzazz on stage and to reflect on what lay underneath.

Of the three musicals this thesis tackles, *Follies* is the most complex by several degrees because of the intricacy of Sondheim's lyrics and music. As Mordden wrote in 2016, "Sondheim is, after all, the man who intellectualized the American musical, much as Eugene O'Neill intellectualized American drama and William Faulkner intellectualized American fiction, and Sondheim should – where it is relevant – be viewed as much in the broader perspective of the arts as in the more limited survey of the musical per se."[62] Sondheim himself spoke of lyrics almost as poetry, with their need for sparseness and clarity: "Lyric writing has to exist in time. The audience, the listener, cannot do what the reader of poetry does. He cannot go at his own speed, he cannot go back over the sentences. Therefore it must be crystal clear as it goes on. That means you have to underwrite. You have to lay the sentences out so there's enough air for the ear to take them in."[63] Looking at the lyrics of *Follies* written out, it is clear that Sondheim was thinking as a poet, going so far as to insert enjambment within a single word by separating over two lines the four syllables of "cornu-/Copia," in the medley of "You're Gonna Love Tomorrow" and "Love Will See Us Through" at the end of the show.[64]

Sondheim's mastery of the musical form in *Follies* inspires thought about the show not only as a conventional Broadway musical, but as a piece of art in its own right. In 1989 a seasoned critic of the musicals of choreographer Michael Bennett observed that *Follies* "addressed the idea of the American dream as strongly as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*."[65] Similarly, Frank Rich, in a now-legendary review of *Follies* from the *Harvard Crimson* in 1971 when he was an undergraduate, said that "*Follies,* the new Harold Prince musical trying out in Boston on its way to New York, is about what has happened to these women since their golden moment and, more importantly, what has happened to the American dreams they symbolized for a generation."[66] A reviewer of the 1985 concert version insisted that "[e]ven amid the Stephen Sondheim canon, 'Follies' stands apart as a show of huge dimensions - in ambition, in execution, in reaction" and referred to the original 1971 show that "united the three contemporary titans of American musical theater, Mr. Sondheim, Harold Prince and Michael Bennett," with "a cast of 50, costumes by the score and the staggering sets of Boris Aronson."[67] Ted Chapin, a college gofer for the 1971 production who penned the definitive book on the making of the show, remembered that choreographer Bennett, who would go on to make the stellar *A Chorus Line,* was "most proud" of *Follies.*[68] And a review of 1970s theater from December 30, 1979, pinpointed Sondheim's genius even then: "None of Sondheim's musicals hit like 'A Chorus Line' but by the end of the '70s it was clear that this was one of the great American theater composers, not just a superclever lyricist.... In the '80s he'll make it."[69] Indeed he did. And the actors with whom Stephen Sondheim and director Hal Prince worked believed that *Follies* was special from the moment they started putting it together,

demonstrating "intense loyalty" to the show and seeing it "as one of the great experiences of their lives."[70]

Why did this show strike so many chords, both resonant and dissonant, among theatergoers and critics when it appeared in the early 1970s? *Follies* echoed the uncertainty many felt about the times in which they lived – politically, nostalgically, and especially socially. The show describes a ghostly, rattling world, moving from the aerial view of politics to the ground level of protagonist Ben Stone's unfulfilled life:

> The present is haunted, the four leads are haunted, show biz is haunted, America is haunted, and *Follies* is haunted: by the recollection of bygone days. Days before – depending on which level of the *Follies* dig one excavates – the Vietnam War soured us on the American mission to democratize the world. Or before the entertainment platform of Ziegfeld and his beautiful girls was compromised by rock and gay. Or before Ben realized that free will doesn't necessarily make you happy.[71]

The staging of the musical itself was littered with ghosts, the younger versions of the older protagonists now soured on life. The layers of the Follies archaeological "dig" inhabit all at once the diplomatic, the aesthetic, and the psychological worlds of their characters. As one "thorough sociopolitical analysis" of *Follies* argued, "Even the poster design for the original production, depicting a Follies girl looking like a cracked Statue of Liberty, underscores the socio-political dimensions of *Follies*."[72] The cracks on the *Follies* poster, marring the face of a noble female bust, could easily have symbolized the developing fissures in American society. This chapter will first examine the malaise-like sense of disillusionment and tainted nostalgia that runs through *Follies* and then focus on specific sensitive topics of the early 1970s that relate to the show, particularly marriage and aging.

Such psychological topics are ones that Stephen Sondheim has long been known for probing, often cynically, as a lyricist and musician. One original review of *Follies* drily panned the plot, summarizing simply: "Years ago, in 1941, Buddy loved Sally, Sally loved Ben, and Ben loved Ben. Buddy married Sally, Ben married Phyllis, but their marriages are not working out. (They rarely do in Stephen Sondheim musicals)."[73] Indeed they do not. More broadly, "Sondheim's interests draw him to gifted, intense, or damaged figures," as one critic noted in 2016,[74] whether these people are the pairs of despairingly married couples in *Follies*, the title character in *Sweeney Todd,* or the witch in *Into the Woods.* Reflecting in 2014 on his career, Sondheim himself said, "Nobody goes through life unscathed, and I think if you write about those things, you are going to touch people." Sondheim continued by articulating his philosophy of musicals, that they should elicit introspection rather than delight: "A lot of people have gone to musicals historically to 'forget their troubles, come on, get happy.' I'm not interested in that." [75] For Sondheim, watching a musical should not be about ignoring troubles but rather confronting them.

Even given this penchant for writing about broken people holding out hope for something better, Sondheim has asserted that *Follies* went well beyond the personal to the political, suggesting that the late 1960s and early 1970s fell short of his and others' expectations. As Sondheim said in an interview in Craig Zadan's *Sondheim & Co.*, "The show was not about failing marriages." Instead, the Ziegfeld Follies motif "represented a state of mind of America between the two world wars. Up until 1945, America was the good guy, everything was idealistic and hopeful and America was going to lead the world. Now you see the country is a riot of national guilt, the dream has collapsed, everything has turned to rubble underfoot, and that's what the show was about – the

collapse of the dream."[76] The crumbling lives of the characters, full of dreams that tantalized but never materialized, echo unrepentantly in both the about-to-be demolished theater surrounding them and the world suffering around them. As Sondheim observed in an interview with *New York* magazine, "In the thirty years since they've seen each other, their lives have fallen apart, just as the Follies have, just as the country has. What was hopeful and promising and naive and innocent back there is now cynical and lost and bitter."[77] At the beginning of the musical *Follies*, a character modeled on the original Ziegfeld Follies announcer kicks off the reunion by narrating, "Every year, between the wars, I staged a Follies in this theater. Since then, this house has been a home to ballet, rep, movies, blue movies and now, in a final burst of glory, it's going to be a parking lot."[78]

The most successful character on the face of things is Ben Stone, political statesman who is "a ruthless achiever in the world of ruthless achievers – the Nixons and Kennedys."[79] The stage directions introducing Ben and his wife, Phyllis, read, "*You feel as if you've seen them in* Vogue *and you probably have.*"[80] Director Hal Prince did compare Ben and Phyllis to the Kennedys, but one historian of the show proposed that "Ben, a foundation president, particularly evokes Nixon. A political and social icon wearing a mask of public propriety, Ben cannot completely believe in himself in this role."[81] Even Ben, with his high-art paintings on the walls and his success in what seems to be international diplomacy, finds himself so conflicted by the end of the show that he breaks down during his grand finale, "Live, Laugh, Love."[82] Ben, "without the spiritual or emotional resources to survive,"[83] represents not only his personal failings but the country's.

Follies gave a perfect structure for such stymied promise, with built-in nostalgia for the pre-war period embedded in its very concept and staging. A 1985 critic writing about the original show reflected, "'Follies' aspired to nothing less than an examination of American disillusionment after World War II, adopting as its metaphor the reunion of song-and-dance girls in an abandoned theater."[84] For Americans looking back on the decade today, as Thomas Borstelmann has observed, "the 1970s are an era of ill repute." As high an official as President Gerald Ford put a formal imprimatur on the decade in 1975 by announcing to the nation in bald political language, "I must say to you that the state of our Union is not good," acknowledging America's economic and political malaise.[85] In putting together *Follies,* director Prince cast back to seemingly simpler pre-war times while also realizing that the treacle of such nostalgia may have sweetened those times beyond recognition. During one of the rehearsals close to the 1971 opening, one eyewitness recalled, "Hal Prince wandered around, showing everyone an article by Loudon Wainwright in the current issue of *Life* about the 'nostalgia boom' that he felt spoke to exactly what he was trying to get across with the show."[86] In an on-camera interview in 1985, Sondheim himself also noted the disappearance of a certain naivete that the earlier-century Ziegfeld revues had captured. Sondheim believed that *Follies* "implies something about America between the wars because that kind of entertainment disappeared – not just because of the explosion of media..., but it's a whole kind of innocence that...giggles out when we see these things... a giggle with a kind of nostalgia."[87] The interpolation of songs from the present – 1971 – with "pastiche" songs from the pre-war past kept "the ear accustomed to shifts in the timescape from the present to the past and back again," with the musical "built upon the juxtaposition of what we

were and what we are, asking, How did we become so unsatisfied?"[88] In addition, according to a historian of musicals, the "twenty-one-song score was deliberately 'schizophrenic': About one third were book songs, the rest constituted a pastiche of theater song styles of the 1920s and 1930s. But it was a pastiche that engaged in a tug-of-war between outright nostalgia for the musical tropes of the Golden age of theater songs and skepticism over the past they represented."[89] The back-and-forth in the music itself seemingly implied an uncertainty about the path the United States had taken since World War II.

Follies, though more fatalistic than most shows, was in line with a trend on Broadway in the late 1960s and early 1970s that painted a dark picture of current culture, especially compared with what had come before. As Stacy Wolf wrote in her feminist analysis of musicals over time, "Social changes of the [1960s] – the civil rights and women's liberation movements, the Vietnam war and attendant protests – rendered many of the topics of earlier musicals, like *The Music Man* and *The Sound of Music,* quaint and their optimistic tone sentimental."[90] Revivals of such life-affirming musicals, including 1971's reprise of the 1925 "No, No, Nanette!" were still pulling in audiences in the early 1970s. However, as one contemporary critic warned, "Customers anticipating a trip down 'No, No, Nanette' lane should be advised that 'Follies' is set in 1971, the songs have been written by Stephen Sondheim and the drama staged by Hal Prince and Michael Bennett – the same three iconoclasts who were behind the carbolic 'Company.'"[91] A critic looking back from 2011 emphasized that *Follies* "was very much of its time and a breathtaking departure. Broadway was then specializing in nostalgic musicals (like 'No, No, Nanette') and dramas of middle-aged disenchantment (paging Edward Albee) — a

dichotomy appropriate to the sour years of Vietnam and Watergate. 'Follies' took on both sides of the equation."[92] *Follies'* addressing of social problems pushed it far from the escapism of earlier musicals. Such honesty resonated with many, such as Jack Viertel, current creative director of Jujamcyn Theaters who, as a Harvard student, saw *Follies* five times during its Boston previews in 1971: "It really did feel like the end of an era, like it was giving the lie to the idea of musical theater as pure entertainment with sunny values. And for people of my generation who were about to be drafted, this really resonated."[93]

Sondheim and Prince were not alone in their frustration about America's thwarted promise in the 1970s, a concern voiced over and over at the time in the popular media. In a 1971 essay appearing in *Time* magazine a month after *Follies*' Broadway debut, biographer Gerald Clarke asserted, "No one in his right mind would argue that 1971 – with its recession and its exhausting and hateful war – is the best year this country has ever seen. Given a choice, many Americans would put on a blindfold and pick out of a hat another year in which to live – any one of the past 500." It was especially the younger generation who would suffer, Clarke lamented, a generation "cheated for being given their maturity in the sad and sinister world of the '70s."[94] On the other side, the freedom movement which seemed so salient in the 1960s continued to fascinate this younger generation. Looking back on 1971, author Tom Wolfe remembered that in an Italian lecture series he gave, "Everywhere I went, from Turin to Palermo, Italian students were interested in just one question: Was it really true that young people in America, no older than themselves, actually left home, and lived communally according to their own rules and created their own dress styles and vocabulary and had free sex and took dope?"[95]

Wolfe used this example, however, to further his argument in a 1976 essay that panned the self-absorption such freedom had engendered.

Follies came on the heels of *Company*, a concept musical that tackled relationships with a cynical flair rarely seen before on Broadway. In *Company*, five couples orbit the world of Bobby, a lively bachelor, with songs and scenes that riff off Bobby's thirty-fifth birthday party. A magazine article of the time commented that, "[a]s with *Follies, Company* audiences (and critics) were divided into those who felt it was a sociological musical, a comedic commentary on urban ills, and those who believed it only signified that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw parties."[96] Yet, unlike the light-hearted jabs of *Company,* the emotional underpinnings of *Follies* required audiences to take it seriously. One critic writing in 2010 called Sondheim "the poet of domestic tragedy" and observed that the composer's affinity for writing about marriage is unparalleled in musical theater: "A lifelong homosexual who in *Sondheim on Sondheim* says he didn't find lasting love until he was 60, he is still the great chronicler of married life in all its ambiguities ('Sorry Grateful' from *Company*), cynicism ('Now You Know' from *Merrily [We Roll Along]*) and bitterness ('Could I Leave You?' from *Follies*)."[97] And Sondheim did not necessarily see the abject cynicism in his writing that others pointed out. He talked about *Company*'s positive approach in a 1971 interview, just after *Follies* debuted: "'It's the most pro-marriage show in the world,' protests Sondheim, who has never been married himself. 'It says, very clearly, that to be emotionally committed to somebody is very difficult, but to be alone is impossible.'"[98] In the tumultuous context of new standards about marriage and divorce in the 1970s, such words resonated.

Regardless of whether one believes going through life solo is "impossible," to watch *Follies* is to be saturated with the belief that the institution of marriage has little hope. Both star couples inhabit deeply flawed unions, even though they reluctantly, inertially return to them in the very last scene. As an unimpressed *New York Times* reviewer observed in April 1971 about Ben and Phyllis' and Buddy and Sally's marriages, "Ben has made a fortune and he and his wife bask in Braques, Utrillos and Georgian silver. Their lives though are empty. The other pair's are also empty but in a smaller size."[99] *Time* magazine a month later noted several painful decades of "naivete swallowed by facts" for Sally and Buddy and a sense of "glamour gone dry, a wasteland with wedding rings" for Phyllis and Ben.[100] Later, writing about a 2001 Broadway revival of *Follies*, a reviewer pinpointed the tensions inherent in the plot, with its "panoramically bleak take on marriage":

> This is, after all, a musical in which two, maybe three of the four main characters at some point go mad with regret. These defeated middle-agers might want to flame floridly into violent action, but the propriety bred into them allows only clenched spite and self-hatred. Kill themselves? Kill someone else? They haven't the guts or the flair. And maybe they don't believe that the bilious emptiness inside them justifies a melodramatic act. So, at the end, each wife returns to her husband. The revival makes clear that the two couples have exactly enough strength to live together in mutual disappointment.[101]

Such insidious "mutual disappointment" in *Follies* left audiences wondering what purpose marriage serves in modern times, a feeling exacerbated by the erosion of the institution in the 1960s and '70s.

Views on marriage changed enormously in the decades after World War II, rendering a once-inviolate institution more disposable and malleable than some had previously imagined could be possible. Although a Harvard psychoanalyst reflected in a

magazine article in 1970 that "[t]he one thing which neither grows old nor diminishes is the need for love and affection. These drives, these wishes never change,"[102] the form of such drives and wishes was shifting in tectonic ways. As historian Stephanie Coontz wrote in *Marriage: A History* of the years following World War II,

> In barely two decades marriage lost its role as the 'master event' that governed young people's sexual lives, their assumption of adult roles, their job choices, and their transition into parenthood. People began marrying late. Divorce rates soared. Premarital sex became the norm. And the division of labor between husband as breadwinner and wife as homemaker, which sociologists in the 1950s had believed was vital for industrial society, fell apart.[103]

The ideal of lifelong partnership, with inherent compromise and sacrifice for a larger good, did not always endure in a society that focused on individual choice and gratification. Indeed, "[a]ll the old norms seemed up for grabs," noted Coontz. "In 1972, Nena and George McNeil's bestseller *Open Marriage* suggested that some couples might choose to tolerate extramarital affairs as part of a frank and open relationship. Popular women's magazines discussed the pros and cons of introducing 'swinging' and spouse swapping into a marriage."[104] Attempting to explain a new kind of midlife crisis, dozens of newspaper articles from the time cited the concept of "male menopause," a time during which, "if the man is reasonably happy in his marriage and in his work, then his 'menopause' will be short-lived and and amount to nothing more perhaps than 'a period of stock-taking.'" On the other hand, continued a psychoanalyst quoted in a June 1972 *Los Angeles Times* piece, "if there is marital strife, this is the sort of thing that can trigger all kinds of problems"[105] – as with all four main characters in *Follies*, with problems writ large.

Even some women who appreciated marriage were trying to rewrite its rules. In 1970, second-wave feminist Alix Kates Shulman wrote a seminal article, "A Marriage Agreement," that appeared in a small feminist journal and then in *Redbook, Ms.,* and other wide-circulation magazines within the next couple of years.[106] In the compact that Shulman and her husband created, they asserted: "As parents we believe we must share all responsibility for taking care of our children and home – not only the work, but the responsibility." They proceeded to divide up household duties into categories such as "Transportation," "Sickness," and "Laundry"[107] – giving a new twist to the traditional marriage vow "in sickness and in health."

Divorce became far more prevalent in the 1970s for both economic and emotional causes. Coontz noted that "[t]he divorce rate more than doubled between 1966 and 1979," and, after California became the first in the nation to pass a no-fault divorce law in 1969, the trend spread rapidly to other states in the 1970s and '80s.[108] As one Los Angeles lawyer reflected in 1979, "Divorce has become part of the American way of life.... People used to stay together in the old days, even though they were desperately unhappy. That doesn't happen anymore, and so the law has had to change."[109] In addition, economic and social changes led to many wives' wanting more independence. Over the decade of the 1970s, a woman's relatively recent new rights within a marriage, such as the ability to get a credit card on her own and to purchase reliable birth control in the form of the pill, overhauled "the whole legal, political, and economic context of marriage... Suddenly divorce was easy to get."[110] With that ease came risk, however. Taking care of oneself and one's dependents within the structure of marriage was no longer a given, creating both freedom and uncertainty. One scholarly article from 1980

titled "'The Love Crisis:' Couples Advice Books of the Late 1970s" observed that "[h]igh divorce rates, especially since the 1960s, make marriage look less and less like a permanent structure for the support of wives and children."[111] And traditionalism still existed, according to a poll from the decade that "reported that more than three-quarters of married women under age forty-five said the best marriage was one in which the wife stayed home and only the husband was employed"[112]– the structure of both primary marriages in *Follies.*

Many publications of the time linked the decline in marriage to to the rise of narcissism – to the sense that people owed it to themselves to fulfill their lives entirely and consistently. In a 2009 book reflecting on the rise of narcissism, two psychologists mused that "if we had to place a date on the beginning of the narcissism epidemic, it would be sometime during the '70s."[113] Christopher Lasch lasered in on the trend as it was happening in his seminal 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism,* in which he argued that a focus on such self-fulfillment had led to much more hostile relationships between the genders: "Formerly sexual antagonism was tempered not only by chivalric, paternalistic conventions but by a more relaxed acceptance of the limitations of the other sex. Men and women acknowledged each other's shortcomings without making them the basis of a comprehensive indictment."[114] In the culture of divorce that developed during the 1970s, and certainly in the insults scattered pell-mell by the principals in *Follies,* such "indictment" of the opposite sex was a given. Furthermore, marriage sometimes suffered from the strain of sky-high expectations, according to a 1980 article on couples' advice books: "Marriage has become saddled with unprecedented ideological burdens. It has become the framework for couple relationships supposedly based on perfect mutuality,

intimacy, sexual ecstacy, and mutual growth. Most marriages fail to fit this description."[115] In *Follies,* Ben's wistfulness about wanting to know what real love is echoed this desire for marriage to provide endless and complete happiness to those in it:

> BEN: God, I see lovers on the streets - it's real, it's going on out there and I can't reach it. Someone's got to love me and I don't care if it doesn't last a month. I don't care if I'm ludicrous or who she is or what she looks like, I don't care.
>
> PHYLLIS: You haven't got a clue what love is. Hell, you've had it all your life. I should have left you years ago.[116]

What Ben does not or cannot realize is that Phyllis' imperfect affection has been love all his life – that his ideals were unrealistic except in the first blush of a new romance.

With such a focus on unattainable perfection – combined with an increased focus on the self and a desire to maximize all opportunities to satisfy oneself – any flaws in one's partner could be grounds for moving on. With the phrase "wife-shucking," Tom Wolfe memorably described the link among midlife crisis, divorce, and narcissism in his "'Me' Decade" article in *Time* magazine:

> The right to shuck overripe wives and take on fresh ones was once seen as the prerogative of kings only, and even then it was scandalous. In the 1950s and 1960s it began to be seen as the prerogative of the rich, the powerful, and the celebrated (Nelson Rockefeller, Henry Ford, and show-business figures), although it retained the odor of scandal. Wife-shucking damaged Adlai Stevenson's chances of becoming president in 1952 and Rockefeller's chances of becoming the Republican presidential nominee in 1964 and 1968. Until the 1970s, wife-shucking made it impossible for an astronaut to be chosen to go into space. Today, in the Me Decade, it becomes *normal behavior,* one of the factors that have pushed the divorce rate above 50 percent.[117]

The normalization of such previously scorned behavior became a hallmark of the 1970s conversation about marriage and divorce, a conversation *Follies* jumped into feet first.

One could analyze virtually every song and dialogue in *Follies* for its acerbic commentary on marriage. For the purposes of this section, we will look at two songs that epitomize a theme each couple shares: the bitter tone of Phyllis and Ben's union, as shown in "Could I Leave You?" and the yearning, disappointed tendrils of Sally and Buddy's pairing, as shown in "In Buddy's Eyes." We'll close with a look at the manic anger of the show's desperate finale, "Loveland," and then hear a few more audience reactions about the show.

Phyllis and Ben's caustic interaction in *Follies* shows their desire for self-protection, in line with the 1970s' focus on self over partnership. As Lasch reflected in 1979, "Personal life, no longer a refuge from deprivations suffered at work, has become as anarchical, as warlike, and as full of stress as the marketplace itself. The cocktail party reduces sociability to social combat."[118] Phyllis and Ben's interactions in the musical are combative at best, decimating at worst. One of the first lines we hear from Phyllis about her husband comes after Ben admits he is not thrilled to be at the reunion. The witty Phyllis replies, "I love the way you hate it when I'm happy and you're not."[119] In Lasch's view, such "protective shallowness" was endemic to the 1970s – "a cynical detachment [people] do not altogether feel but which soon becomes habitual and in any case embitters personal relations merely through its repeated profession."[120] The musical continues in this vein, with the script only briefly alluding to the warmer, more open person Phyllis used to be before she shut down such memories to avoid the heartbreak underneath, admitting that "I make a point of not remembering."[121] In the breathtaking "Could I Leave You?", Phyllis itemizes all the elements of marriage she would miss if she no longer stayed with Ben. Yet every mention – in ironically peppy three-quarter-

time – drips with sardonic humor, from a blatant mention of adultery already committed ("Could I bury my rage/ With a boy half your age/ In the grass?... But I've done that already –/ Or didn't you know, love?") to a hilarious sendup of diplomatic life:

> Sweetheart, lover,
> Could I recover,
> Give up the joys I have known?
> Not to fetch your pills again
> Every day at five,
> Not to give those dinners for ten
> Elderly men
> From the U.N. –
> How could I survive?[122]

The song ends on a jagged, uncertain note, as Phyllis wildly asks, "Will I leave you? Will *I* leave you? *Guess,*"[123] nearly spitting out the last word. Sondheim's relentless waltz music in this faux-romantic song drives home the message that marriage is something to be endured and fought through, not enjoyed.

Sally and Buddy have outwardly held onto more illusions about their marriage, but they still know it has crumbled. Buddy acknowledges this tension between reality and yearning when he admits his extramarital affairs and yet still wishes for Sally when he returns home: "I come home feeling great and touch you and you look at me like I've been living in some sewer."[124] Sally confirms this distaste when, after Buddy says he'll "try harder" and asks for Sally to "go home" from the theater with him right then, Sally says, "I wouldn't leave here for the world."[125] After thirty years she is still longing for Ben, the real reason she came to the reunion. This longing permeates a song supposedly about how much Sally appreciates the quiet daily life she lives with Buddy in Arizona. "In Buddy's Eyes" begins with Sally's singing, "Life is slow, but it seems exciting/ 'Cause Buddy's there" but occasionally takes off the varnish, as when she confesses,

"And, yes,/ I miss a lot/ Living like a shut-in." This song is a prime example of subtext in a show that one theater historian asserted is "virtually *all* subtext."[126] In a 1971 lecture reprinted several years later, Sondheim called out the song as an exemplar of what is and is not spoken:

> *Follies* contains a lesson in sub-text, a song called 'In Buddy's Eyes.' It's a woman's lie to her former lover in which she says that everything is just wonderful.... Nothing...tells you maybe it isn't true... although there's something in the orchestration... every phrase in that song which refers to Buddy, her husband, is dry, it's all woodwinds. Whenever she refers to herself it's all strings again.[127]

A noted musicologist who quoted this analysis in a 1993 book quibbled slightly with Sondheim's interpretation, pointing out that "the distinction breaks down at 'On Buddy's shoulder.'"[128] However, the theme of implicit versus explicit statements remains, and with it the contrast between what Sally and Buddy's marriage is and what they wish it would be.

The conclusion of *Follies* provided little consolation for audiences about marriage, except for the notion that it is difficult to leave it. Toward the end of the show, the couples excoriate each other in a four-way breakdown – or eight, if we count the ghosts of their younger selves. *"With mounting rage, as if they meant to do physical violence to the memories,"* as the stage directions read, they attack each other simultaneously with verbal grenades, such as Ben's insisting to his younger self, "You can't spend your life with someone you don't love" and Buddy's telling his younger counterpart, "She never loved you and you knew it."[129] Then, *"eyes wild, and half-demented,"* the principals sing their swan songs in jolly pastiche form while the show transforms in a full-color "Loveland,/ Where everybody loves to live."[130] Ben breaks down during his number, "Live, Laugh, Love," unable to fulfill the expectations placed

upon him to remain cheerfulness and optimistic in the face of his existential despair. After the Loveland scrim falls apart, just before dawn, both couples surprise the audience by returning to each other, albeit uncertainly. Phyllis' penultimate line has an almost tenderness to it, in response to Ben's heretofore unseen vulnerability:

> BEN: I've always been afraid of you. You see straight through me and I've always thought, 'It isn't possible; it can't be me she loves.'
>
> PHYLLIS: *(Still hot with the intensity of what she feels)* Well, think again. Come on. We're going home."[131]

Underwhelmed by this conclusion, during the February 1971 previews for the show in Boston "[o]ne disgruntled patron was overheard at the very end saying, 'You just have to sit there for so long hearing about four people who don't like each other.'"[132] Yet, on the other hand, the ending's spent vitriol also provided a moving commentary on how difficult it seemed for many in the 1970s – and perhaps since – to keep hold of what was important in a relationship while notions about marriage were transforming. Actor and tenor Mandy Patinkin, who played Buddy in the Lincoln Center concert version of Follies in 1985, described his journey to the heart of the characters by musing, "I never saw 'Follies' and I hadn't even read the book when I said I'd do the concert. But when I did, I was overwhelmed. I began to understand the complexity of these people, the fury and pain in their hearts. When you hear some of these songs, even in rehearsal, they just blow you away."

If *Follies* portrays marriage as entirely disheartening, the show's depiction of aging adds still more to the melancholy of the reunion by showcasing the ugliness, the regrets, the illusions we can carry with us as we grow old. True, *Follies* did provide a platform for refurbishing and even burnishing the reputations of older stars such as

Alexis Smith (Phyllis) and Dorothy Collins (Sally) – particularly with Yvonne De Carlo's showstopping "I'm Still Here," which asserted the indomitability of age. However, at the same time, the musical commented acidly on the vagaries of growing old, most famously with "Who's That Woman," also known as "the mirror number." Ultimately, the bravado of all of the characters dissolves in not only Ben's literal collapse but in each of their own "follies" during the final Loveland sequence. As a May 1971 review mused about the the underlying themes of the play: "If youth knew, if age could: the theme resounds in the crossfire between past and present until, in a series of anti-nostalgic metaphors, each of the stars takes off the public mask and appears in his own Folly. It is a vaudevilification of their benighted circumstances, in which the truth shines like a spotlight."[133] This truth, the show implies throughout, is that American society is tempted to cast off the aged in favor of what is young and dazzling.

Aging was a topic at the front of the minds of those who created the show. *Follies* "was me getting scared about getting older," said director Hal Prince in 1976.[134] The entire physical structure of the show, set in a down-at-heels, about-to-be-razed theater, communicates the dismal weathering process that age can bring. Prince acknowledged in a 1971 interview that he was the one who "discovered what came to be the show's essential conception in Eliot Elisofon's picture of Gloria Swanson amid the ruins of Manhattan's Roxy Theater, a barococo movie palace that was demolished in 1960." For Prince, "That sparked the whole notion of rubble – how it relates to the past and present"[135] – the detritus of the movie palace and of the characters' dismal lives. As a result, the whole show feels haunted, not simply by the younger ghosts of the principal characters – who "tentatively perform their old routines" while "the sequined and plumed

phantoms of their past selves hover nearby" – but also by the tiers and friezes of the nearly obsolete stage.[136] Such echoes permeate even more levels, according to one critic who asserts that "the party is haunted: the present by the past, the age of Sondheim by the age of Jerome Kern and Cole Porter, the central quartet by the realization that they all experienced absolute free will yet are miserable, and the Prince-Bennett staging by spooks, moving and parading and stalking through the action."[137] In the show's music, Sondheim himself focused more on the travails of the older principals than on their younger ghosts. As a scholar of Sondheim noted, "Sondheim points out that, in the 1971 *Follies,* the fact that they were portrayed surrealistically and idealistically, seen only through the eyes of their older counterparts, made him 'never want to write anything in the least bit *real* for the younger people.'"[138] The challenges of the aging actors were richer and more interesting. Somewhat eerily, choreographer Michael Bennett, in his late twenties while working on *Follies,* also worried about aging. According to Ted Chapin, who in 2003 published the definitive book about the process of putting together *Follies*, "To discover Michael Bennett's fear of growing old expressed in a comment in which he all but predicted that he would be dead by the time he was forty-five was chilling."[139] Bennett, of course, died of AIDS in 1987, when he was forty-four.[140] For Prince, Bennett, and Sondheim, *Follies*' focus on aging related to concerns they already felt in their own lives.

Such concerns appeared also in books, magazines and periodicals of the day. *Time* magazine's cover from August 3, 1970, featured a close-up shot of an elderly man's face underneath a diagonal banner reading: "GROWING OLD IN AMERICA: The Unwanted Generation."[141] The issue's main feature story lamented the state of the aged in America:

"One of the poignant trends of U.S. life is the gradual devaluation of older people, along with their spectacular growth in numbers. Twenty million Americans are 65 or over. They have also increased proportionately, from 2.5% of the nation's population in 1850 to 10% today."[142] The article went on to sound alarms about the rise of ageism in hiring and even in obtaining "bank loans, home mortgages or automobile insurance."[143] In addition to these pragmatic examples, the article also discussed the evolution of the inner life as one grew older. While most psychologists had until that point "simply ignored the process of aging," some, such as Erik Erikson, were investigating this phase of life more. Quoted in the article, Erikson reflected, "It is astonishing to behold how (until quite recently and with a few notable exceptions) Western psychology has avoided looking at the whole of life. As our world image is a one-way street to never-ending progress, interrupted only by small and big catastrophes, our lives are to be one-way streets to success — and sudden oblivion."[144] This fear of oblivion permeates all the main characters in *Follies*, especially as they see their dreams unrealized.

In his book on narcissism published nine years after *Time*'s cover piece, Christopher Lasch called out the "terror" of such irrelevance at the beginning of a chapter called "The Shattered Faith in the Regeneration of Life" and a section titled "The Dread of Old Age." Reflecting on the rise of self-absorption during the decade, Lasch observed, "In some ways the most characteristic expression of the times is the campaign against old age, which holds a special terror for people today."[145] Such fear was more pronounced, Lasch argued, because a narcissist is not comforted by the thought of children or meaningful work propelling his legacy into the future:

> He takes no interest in the future and does nothing to provide himself with the traditional consolations of old age, the most important of which is the

> belief that future generations will in some sense carry on his life's work. Love and work unite in a concern for posterity, and specifically in an attempt to equip the younger generation to carry on the tasks of the older.[146]

Tom Wolfe had put forth a similar perspective several years earlier, when he wrote, "Most people, historically, have *not* lived their lives as if thinking, 'I have only one life to live.' Instead they have lived as if they are living their ancestors' lives and their offspring's lives and perhaps their neighbors' lives as well.[147] For Lasch, without a meaning that can be passed on, when youth flees, so does relevance: "People cling to the illusion of youth until it can no longer be maintained, at which point they must either accept their superfluous status or sink into dull despair. Neither solution makes it easy to sustain much interest in life."[148]

This dark portrait of an aging narcissist who has found little meaning in his life fits main character Ben Stone perfectly. He and Phyllis do not have children, and Ben sees even his famous diplomatic work as worthless, given the loneliness of his days. At the beginning of the play, he tells Phyllis that he appreciates the authenticity of the dilapidated theater and wishes his regrets would similarly slip away: "I like it: it's the way nostalgia ought to look. I sometimes wonder why our memories don't go the way these walls have gone. Our bodies do: our plaster flakes away and yet the fool things we remember stay as fresh as paint."[149] If Ben could abolish his memories, he would. When talking with Sally, just before they launch into a number in which he sings to the girl he remembers Sally as being ("Too Many Mornings"), Ben remembers aloud – *"watching the memory,"* according to the stage directions –

> I made love to a girl this afternoon. I do that now and then; it happens. Plain girl, no conquest there to brag about. And after it was over, guess what? I began to cry. Now, I haven't cried since childhood, and the noises

> that I heard come out of me... I would give – what have I got? – my soul's of little value, but I'd give it to be twenty-five again.

In the show, Ben generally does not acknowledge his emotions until they overcome his ability to function, as when he describes crying in the quotation above and when he breaks down during his star moment in the Loveland sequence. Such reluctant acquiescence to disappointment was not unusual in men going through their 40s and 50s, said one article about male aging in 1972: "At this point a man might admit to himself for the first time that he is not immortal or he might realize that he is not going to achieve all of his youthful goals or, having achieved them, he might find that they are not as fulfilling as he might have expected."[150] One 1973 *Los Angeles Times* article titled "The Reason Men Go Off the Deep End at 41," in a passage that could have been written for Ben Stone, quoted geriatric psychiatrist Alvin Goldfarb defining "the Male Menopause 'simply as that malaise that descends on a man when he reaches that point at which he knows he either has a chance or no ghost of a chance to be President.'"[151] For Ben, the presidency may be close, and his wife may stick by him, but little appeals except the thought of wiping clean the slate and returning to a more carefree time in his youth.

Women's fear of losing their beauty and pizzazz, a trope that shoots through the show, also appeared in poetry and newspaper articles of the 1970s. Howard Nemerov, in a poem titled "Near the Old People's Home" from 1975, limned grotesquely the elderly of both genders by writing, "When they open their mouths, there are no teeth,/ All the same, they keep on talking to themselves/ Even while bending to hawk up spit or blood/ In gutters that will be there when they are gone."[152] Nemerov's choice of brutal diction, such as "hawk up spit," and his painful alliteration, with "gutters" and "gone," implies a desolate end game for the old. Similarly, in a 1969 poem called "miss rosie," Lucille

Clifton observed with both disgust and determination a "wet brown bag of a woman/ who used to be the best looking gal in georgia/ who used to be called the Georgia Rose."[153] Like the *Follies* women filled with memories of their lovely former selves, the "you" in Clifton's poem has little but memories to succor her. As Frank Rich wrote in 1971 about the opening number of the show, when the women proudly parade their sashes with their Follies years imprinted on them, "These are old women coming down the staircase. They are dumpy, their hair is dyed, they don't exactly keep time with the music. They are not very secure, and, for that matter, neither is the staircase they are descending. It is ratty. But it doesn't make any difference. The staircase is on the stage of a theatre that is about to become a parking lot, and the women – well, the women don't have much farther to go before they die."[154] This notion of older women inhabiting sagging, about-to-expire bodies also appeared in a 1968 *Chicago Tribune* article about female menopause, delicately and perhaps euphemistically titled "Turbulent Years Can Be Success." The piece thoroughly described "the effects of aging on physical health and appearance – among them, declining energy, physical illness and disability and threats to the body image following breast surgery and hysterectomy, so common in middle age."[155] To watch *Follies* and to read such commentary was, perhaps, to want to take to bed and clench into a ball, wrinkle cream and foam curlers firmly in place.

One of the most-loved songs in the show[156] – "Who's That Woman?" – plows deep into the chasm between the youth these women once cherished and the dimmer lives they inhabit now. Even as former showgirl Stella Deems puts a strong face on a just-for-fun performance before she and five of her compatriots take the stage, she also realizes that dancing full-out could reveal untold flaws and insecurities: "I'm not making an ass of

myself alone. I do it, we all do it."[157] This song, also known as the "Mirror Number," features six older women, including Sally and Phyllis, dancing together. As the music goes carnival-crazy halfway through, their younger ghost selves join them – at first, almost tentatively, and then exuberantly mirroring the steps of their older counterparts.[158] In the middle of this jarringly upbeat anthem of fatigue and aging, Stella sings,

> Who's that woman
> That cheery, weary woman
> Who's dressing for yet one more spree?
> Each day I see her pass
> In my looking-glass –
> Lord, Lord, Lord, that woman is me![159]

While the lyrics become still more maudlin and morbid, asking, "Who is she who plays the clown?", the women rotate in a circle in the middle of the stage before dancing with each other in an almost manic frenzy.[160] Sondheim tipped his hat to choreographer Bennett in a reflection on the number almost four decades later:

> Michael went on to devise one of the most brilliantly staged numbers in Broadway history (and very Broadway it was). His idea: have the six older ladies start their routine and then be joined by the mirror-costumed ghosts of their younger, beautiful selves, true reflections of their pasts. What Michael did was to take a lightweight, semi-camp pastiche lyric and mine it for all its emotional resonances as well as its imagery.[161]

The synthesis of the near-bravado of the lyrics, the various levels of dancing ability the women have at this point in their lives, and the audience's realization that these women are past their dancing prime makes this piece both joyful and painful to watch. As Ken Mandelbaum wrote in a book about Michael Bennett's musicals, "Who's That Woman" gives both "a reflection of the show's theme of self-confrontation... and another scary reminder of the ravagement of time."[162] Frank Rich went one step further toward the painful when he noted in 1971, "The contrast between the two images of these characters

and their times (as well as the unexpected double meaning of the trivial lyrics they are singing) produce an effect that is not nostalgic, as one might guess, but harsh and pathetic."[163] Much as popular literature of the time vacillated between exhorting women to power through the "turbulent years" of menopause[164] and implying that getting older was terrifying, this song celebrated these women's dancing prowess while softly cluck-clucking through subtext that they should not even be trying to dance at all.

To be sure, part of *Follies* also betrays an admiration for age, especially for those former chorines who do not let the years' passing undermine their confidence. A reviewer from 1971 asserted that the show signaled "how much more verve, authority and presence the older stage professionals possessed than do many of their flaccid present-day counterparts. A campy show might have mocked the old stars, but *Follies* shows an un-American respect for age by honoring their skill, valiance and tenacity."[165] The song "I'm Still Here," a now-standard performed by Carlotta, heralds survival as success. In what Sondheim has characterized as "a potted social history of the U.S.A. between the Depression and the 1960s," Carlotta lists everything she has endured, from "bread lines" to "reefers and vino," not to mention the difficulties of being an aging actress:

> First you're another
> Sloe-eyed vamp,
> Then someone's mother,
> Then you're camp
> Then you career
> From career to career.
> I'm almost through my memoirs,
> And I'm here.[166]

With "self-deprecatory humor and eventual optimism," as Sondheim noted[167] – as well as her refusal to capitulate to anyone or anybody – Carlotta wins the moment. Of course,

however, she is not one of the four major characters, and this song falls as more of a magnificent interlude to their infighting than as any kind of salvation.

Although *Follies* only occasionally reflects the positives of growing older, some writers at the time did place aging in a context of affirmation rather than despair. In a memoir published in 1968, playwright and psychologist Florida Scott-Maxwell painted age as something to be proud of: "We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high."[168] For Scott-Maxwell, navigating the field of old age required not resignation but energy and anticipation. Anthropologist Margaret Clark was interviewed in 1970 about her findings from "analyzing length interviews with 600 aged San Franciscans." She too found that openness to "engagement" predicted contentment in old age,

> but not when that engagement included acquisitiveness, aggressiveness or a drive to achievement, super-competence and control. To cling to these stereotypical traits of the successful American seems to invite trouble, even geriatric psychiatry. The healthiest and happiest of the aged people in the survey were interested in conserving and enjoying rather than acquiring and exploiting, in concern for others rather than control of others, in "just being" rather than doing. They embraced, Dr. Clark points out, many of the values of today's saner hippies.[169]

Of course, the principals in *Follies* likely would have found the notion of "conserving and enjoying" at least unfamiliar, if not antithetical to their desire for status and newness. The ability to "just be" appeared beautifully in an article by noted psychiatrist and writer Robert Coles in the *New Yorker* in 1973. The year before he had interviewed a New Mexican couple, Domingo and Dolores Garcia, each eighty-three years old. At one point, Dolores mentioned a conversation with her ten-year-old grandson Domingo in which he wondered "what it is like to be one hundred," and Dolores responded that "it is good to

be young and it is good to be old. He didn't need any more explanations. He said when you're young you have a lot of years before you, but when you're old you have your children and your grandchildren and you love them and you're proud of them."[170] Such unsullied pride and love allowed Dolores to live comfortably in her octogenarian skin, to "wear...old age like a bunch of fresh-cut flowers," as her husband described. At the end of Coles' piece, Domingo continued, "I think that is something one ought to hope for and pray for and work for all during life: to grow, to become not only older but a bigger person."[171] In contrast to a society that sometimes saw old people "as unpopular luggage," as poet W.H. Auden wrote in 1970,[172] the generosity of spirit and magnitude of understanding in Coles' interview cracked open a glimpse toward the possibility of aging with triumph.

Later versions of the show attempted to mitigate its depressing aspects. In 1987, Cameron Mackintosh staged a revival of *Follies* in London, and this producer of such 1980s blockbusters as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* expressed his thrill in an interview just after the opening that the ticket sales were "going bananas." The musical did not reach nearly the success of some of Mackintosh's other shows, but it had a respectable run of 644 performances[173] – more than the original 1971 run on Broadway. How did Mackintosh achieve this success? As sociopolitical critic James Fisher wrote a decade later, "the London production, with the cooperation of Sondheim and Goldman, seemed to give in completely to the sort of camp and nostalgia the original production had savagely debunked. Rather than confronting the political and social realities of the day, as the original version of *Follies* had done, the new *Follies* embraced the *status*

quo."[174] With a somewhat rewritten book and libretto, this new version eschewed ambivalence for some kind of certainty.

Yet it is exactly in its *un*certainty that *Follies* succeeded as a commentary on its time. The conflicts *Follies* unraveled about nostalgia, marriage, and aging resonated with the conflicts on these topics that the country was facing in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. A 1974 *Hartford Courant* article by a noted psychiatrist, Raymond Veeder, headlined itself as an analysis of "The Stress of Changing Values in Family, Culture, Morality." The piece went on at length to analyze the factors that led to feelings of instability among all generations in the early 1970s, ending with a reflection on youth and aging: "America has always tended to worship youth, and in consequence we see anxious, uncertain adults pathetically searching for answers from the young."[175] *Follies* channeled this trend of unfortunate "searching" that Veeder described. One could even argue, as Ted Chapin has, that the very existence of fissures on controversial topics within *Follies* pointed toward the imperative for multiple perspectives. As Chapin wrote in his conclusion to his 2003 book describing the 1971 genesis of *Follies*, the musical "is a timeless piece, for in a democracy there are always new roads to not take and always ghosts of our former selves looking on."[176] *Follies* inspires us to think more deeply about how we make all of our choices. That's not to say that it's a show that elicits unbridled affection, however. As Nancy Franklin wrote about the musical's 2001 revival on Broadway, "It's possible to think that *Follies* is a great show and yet not entirely love it; to think that it's invaluable and yet not feel embraced by it. You may walk out of the theatre feeling a little mixed up inside, as though you had just received the most unforgettable parting kiss of your life."[177] And Sondheim himself has reflected that

Follies is a show that stands up to, in fact benefits from, revision and reexamination. In an annotated collection of lyrics published in 2010, he mused, "*Follies* is a show that's a bit crippled by its size, ambition and mysteriousness and thus always worth the effort of experimentation – if only it were produced more often."[178]

Chapter 3

A Chorus Line: Identity Politics in Action

Follies was a critical success but a commercial flop, but *A Chorus Line* – also a backstage musical that focused on the lives of actors, their dreams and disappointments – was a stunning success on both fronts. Michael Bennett's choreography linked the two shows, and at least one 1975 newspaper writer saw the final number of *A Chorus Line* as a throwback to the world that *Follies* resurrected: "The grand finale, with the stage aglow at last and the cast strutting about in gaudy formal attire, must surely be deliberately nostalgic, a bittersweet reminder of what the heartbreak and backache so often lead to."[179] Regardless of whether the culminating performance of "One" in *A Chorus Line* was intended to elicit nostalgia for a vanished age of glitz, the positive emotions stirred up by the musical resonated with theatergoers enough to keep the show running on Broadway for fifteen years, with a 2006 revival that lasted a couple of years more.[180] And, as one prolific musical theater critic noted in the early 2000s, "it is interesting that the metaphorical aspect of *Follies* somehow eludes many of its audience, while fifteen years of ticket buyers managed to take in the symbolic aspect of *A Chorus Line.*"[181] Its symbolism made real the wistfulness that can accompany anyone's dream, dancer or not, along the way communicating the newly embraced power of the language of therapy to lead to self-actualization. Simultaneously, *A Chorus Line* expressed empathy for the frustration of those listening and watching: the frustrations toward the barriers, both social and economic, that thwarted those dreams. As a result, it straddled two major historical currents of the early-to-mid 1970s – the bleak outlook of the economy and the tenacity of psychological self-examination. Interestingly enough, then, *A Chorus Line*

acts as an ideal interpretive bridge between the unrelenting defeatism of *Follies* and the equally strong optimism of *Annie.*

Unexpectedly, audience reaction to the previews was at first angry because Cassie, the aging Broadway star who is reduced to auditioning for a slot in the chorus, did not ultimately get the job. Although Bennett at first resisted the neat ending of rewriting the show to let Cassie into the ensemble, he ultimately went with the audience's sense that Cassie deserves more, partly inspired by Neil Simon's wife Marsha Mason's desire to "offer at least some glimmer of hope to the audience," Donna McKechnie remembered. "I was proud of Michael for having the courage to show that kind of compassion and to give Cassie her second chance."[182] As a result, by the time the musical opened on Broadway in July 1975 after several months of tryouts at the Public Theater, the show's emotional openness and catharsis left audiences on a high note.

The critics' acclaim was immediate and overflowing. The show "opened with virtually unanimous critical huzzas" at the Public, and, from the moment the show's actors and producers read the reviews, they realized they had a hit on their hands.[183] Walter Kerr, writing in the New York Times of previews at the Public Theater in June 1975, effused, "The show is obviously destined for Broadway," where playgoers "will want to be as close as they can be to the breathless, ebullient, slaving, smiling, all-too-knowing innocents who can't cross the painted line."[184] Sylvie Drake, a Los Angeles Times critic writing several days later, extolled the show's "high level of craft and the scrupulous degree of honesty" which "saves it from its own sentimentality" and "raises it to the realm of objective art." Drake went on to call the musical "an act of pure love" on Bennett's part.[185] Even Alan Jay Lerner, the legendary lyricist for *My Fair Lady* and a

panoply of other shows, averred that "if there be anyone who disdains it, he should immediately return to the sea and spend the rest of his life among the crustaceans," in a book of musical theater reminiscences that appeared in 1986, the year Lerner died.[186]

Even by the end of the 1970s and in a much later revival in the 2000s, *A Chorus Line* still dazzled as a repository for hopes and disappointments – a metaphor for the individual voice stymied by the expectations of a theater director or, more broadly, any unsympathetic boss. As one critic wrote in a year-end synthesis of theater in 1979, "The musical of the decade was 'A Chorus Line,' its gold-hatted zombies apt figurines for the overextended 1970s."[187] These "zombies" in the last number of the musical are those actors who had made it into the chorus during this two-hour show about an audition, intensified by the lack of an intermission. Earlier they spilled their life stories to Zach, the director, thus becoming inescapably individual to themselves and to the audience. Yet in the finale, they find themselves back in a line: nameless figures with jazz hands making the business of Broadway dazzle. The 2006 revival left viewers similarly impressed. As Ben Brantley wrote that year of "I Hope I Get It," the first number of the show, "Light, music and a mass of bodies in motion combine to allow you to exist both in 1975, when this musical was first staged, and 2006. This *is* what 'A Chorus Line' was when I saw it in 31 years ago, and yet it feels so fresh that you stop to catch your breath."[188]

Director and choreographer Michael Bennett achieved this fresh honesty by design, intending for the show to be an antidote to what he saw as the rampant hypocrisy in American politics in the early 1970s. One of the first reviewers in 1975 highlighted this candor, positing, "What makes 'A Chorus Line' so devastatingly effective is its

honesty of subject matter – so that even its faults can work for it."[189] As a *New York Times* reporter wrote in June 1975 about Bennett's response to an interview question:

> What was the genesis of 'A Chorus Line'? Bennett smiles. "You may not believe this," he says, "but the show grew out of my feelings as I watched the Watergate hearings; it's my reaction to the falsehood and apathy that seemed to grip the country during that period. I was sick of it. I wanted to do something on stage that would show people being honest with one another."[190]

With the Watergate hearings of the summer of 1974 leading to Nixon's resignation in August, many Americans felt disillusioned by the presidency and by public figures in general. An illustrative *Los Angeles Times* article from August 9, 1974, the day of Nixon's resignation, sent out two dozen reporters to hear predictions and reactions. One reporter in Orange County turned to the library in Nixon's hometown for an understated metaphor: "At the new Yorba Linda District Library, down the street from Richard M. Nixon Park, there is only one copy of the President's book 'Six Crises.' It is shelved between 'Essentials of American Government' ... and 'Despoilers of Democracy.'"[191] In such a fraught political climate, Bennett's desire for transparency echoed the zeitgeist of other cultural commentators at the time, including the influential psychotherapist Carl Rogers. In November 1973, in an article about how to live the "good life," Rogers described a world in which "a growing number are deeply opposed to sham, to hypocrisy, to wearing a facade. We feel contempt for political leaders who say one thing and act very differently."[192] Presenting introspective numbers such as "Who Am I, Anyway?" and "At the Ballet" – before which hard-bitten Sheila asks if Zach wants the truth and Zach replies, "Sure, you're strong enough"[193] – *A Chorus Line* tried to remove all such facades, ironically ending with the mask-like golden top hats at the end of the show. A yearning for openness pervaded not simply the show's plot and script but also the

intentions of the actors, according to Michael Gruber, who played Mike Costa ("I Can Do That") in the original Broadway production. As Gruber reflected in an interview in a book published a quarter-century after the musical opened, "When I was in the show, the whole thing was 'just be you.' They were really hip on that and tried to come from a truthful place."[194]

With such unflinching honesty, *A Chorus Line* tackled many hot-button issues of the 1970s, not least economic. Through the conceit of putting hard-pressed actors through an audition, the show commented on how hard it was to find a solid job, and the numbers supported this interpretation. "Where there was 'malaise,' there was 'stagflation,' a new term for simultaneous inflation and unemployment," historian Charles S. Maier wrote in a book he also helped edit about the the 1970s. "In the United States, at least, economic difficulties seemed most preoccupying to many policymakers and ordinary citizens. The pollster Daniel Yankelovich wrote in 1979: 'For the [American] public today, inflation has had the kind of dominance that no other issue has had since World War II.'"[195] According to a chart accompanying Maier's essay, which was titled simply "'Malaise,'" GDP growth dropped from 4.4% in the 1960-69 period to 3.4% in the 1970-79 period, and unemployment rose by approximately half, from 4.5% in the 1967-73 period to 6.7% in the 1974-80 period.[196] Sources from the time corroborated such statistics both statistically and narratively. At the beginning of the decade, an article from late 1970 titled "Consumers' Gloom Casts Long Shadow" suggested that difficult moments lay ahead for the American shopper. According to a poll conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, "46 percent of the 1,400 family heads interviewed nationwide said that on the whole they expect 'we shall have bad times during the next

five years.'" The survey's leaders surmised that these attitudes stemmed from "a spread of general malaise – dissatisfaction with the social climate as well as with economic conditions."[197] Four years later, nine months before *A Chorus Line* opened on Broadway, and two months after Richard Nixon resigned and President Gerald Ford took office, a New York Times article called "Jobless Up, Market Down, President on Spot" noted a similar trend in public opinion: "[A]ll polls show the economy as the overriding national issue, preceding even Watergate, at least overtly. It is [Ford's] worst inherited problem."[198] Although *A Chorus Line* is famous largely for its social commentary, the economic realities of the 1970s informed the characters' need for a job, starting from moment one of the show with the yearning, drumming of lyrics "I Hope I Get It."

The musical focused on social issues through a variety of lenses. It highlighted race and ethnicity through characters such as Connie Wong, who says she was born in Chinatown in The Year of the Chicken, and Diana Morales, a Puerto Rican woman from the Bronx who skewers a former theater teacher by saying, "They don't have bobsleds in San Juan."[199] It spotlighted aging with older characters such as Greg and Sheila, who sarcastically tells Zach in her first lines, "And I'm going to be thirty soon. And I'm real glad."[200] In its very process of workshopping lyrics in downtown New York, the show broke ground: "This was the Broadway musical at its slickest, and it was a sign of the times that it started in Michael Bennett's workshop well south of 14th Street."[201] Weaving through its lyrics are also commentaries on conformity, narcissism and feminism, mirroring contemporaneous trends and movements.

Interviews with actors, reviews from critics, and reflections by later commentators highlighted two particular social issues of the 1970s: an acceptance of homosexuality,

which Michael Bennett brought into the light with sympathy and heartbreak, and a penchant for the language and methods of therapy that permeates the entire show. With both topics, the importance of communicating one's inner self and identity comes through, meshing with the 1970s belief that setting free pent-up emotions would improve relationships with others and with the world.

Indeed, the 1970s brought broader acceptance of gays on many fronts. The inclusion of gay and lesbian rights under the broad umbrella of the period's social movements gave a more formal stamp to demands emerging from the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York. As historian Thomas Borstelmann wrote in a chapter titled "The Rising Tide of Equality and Democratic Reform," the "egalitarianism and inclusion that characterized the 1970s lifted homosexuals as well. In a crucial sense, the pursuit of full citizenship for gay and lesbian Americans had nothing to do with sex, but only with all individuals simply being treated respectfully."[202] Such respect extended to gays from the medical profession when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in December 1973 reclassified homosexuality so that it was no longer considered a "mental disorder."[203] The decade also saw strides in politics, with Harvey Milk elected in 1977 as the first openly gay supervisor of San Francisco, bridging the "tremendous and vital difference between a 'friend of the Gay community' and an avowed Gay in public office," as he said in his "Hope" speech in June of that year.[204] In the mid-to-late 1970s, New York City and other major urban areas saw increased recognition of groups formed to help gays and lesbians, such as the Gay Yellow Pages, the Gay Teachers Association, and the Gay Men's Health Project.[205]

At the same time, being a gay or lesbian in the United States was still deeply challenging, and the gay rights movement faced legal and social hurdles. San Francisco Supervisor Dan White shot both Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone on the same day in 1978.[206] In 1973, in a poll taken by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, 70 percent of those surveyed believed that two people of the same sex being in a relationship was "always wrong"; this percentage actually increased to 75 percent in 1987 before going down to 54 percent in 2000 and 43.5 percent in 2010.[207] Throughout the 1970s, police raids in San Francisco and other major cities continued to target gays simply for being gay.[208] Florida singer Anita Bryant and California state senator John Briggs put together a nearly successful 1978 campaign to pass Proposition 6, which would have allowed California to discipline any teacher who was homosexual or spoke in favor of gay rights.[209] And even while the APA declassified homosexuality as a mental problem, Columbia College psychiatrist Robert L. Spitzer alluded to the period's common practice of conversion therapy, through which some assumed that gays could be "cured." In a newspaper article reacting to the APA's 1973 decision, Spitzer suggested that, now, "many more homosexuals who need psychiatric help for reasons other than homosexuality would seek professional help because the homosexuals would know that the psychiatrists would not necessarily be trying to 'cure' them by converting them to heterosexuality."[210] The declassification was a step forward, though a relatively basic one. Taking Spitzer's concerns a step further, Dr. Irving Bieber, clinical professor of psychiatry at the New York Medical College – someone who considered himself "in the vanguard of civil rights for homosexuals" – commented, a week after the APA ruling:

"By removing homosexuality from the nomenclature we are not saying it is abnormal but we are not saying it is normal."[211]

Finally, the gay and lesbian rights movements, as with the women's and civil rights movements, were not always internally cohesive. Some radical lesbians saw being female as something that kept them entirely apart from men, by design and by choice. They encouraged "physical intimacy" with their female friends and fought against what they saw as male domination, through tactics as common as holding protests and as unusual as forming communes.[212] As a 1979 bestselling psychology book commented, "'Radical lesbians' carry the logic of separation to its ultimate futility, withdrawing at every level from the struggle against male domination while directing a steady stream of abuse against men and against women who refuse to acknowledge their homosexual proclivities."[213] Even so, although some lesbians had protested with gay men at Stonewall in 1969, and activists such as *Village Voice* columnist Jill Johnston wrote pieces that "read like poetic yet urgent reports from the front lines in the battle against patriarchy,"[214] lesbians "still had no visible movement and no refuge," and many felt that gay men did not speak for them.[215] And, in fact, while *A Chorus Line* features a major gay character, Paul, it does not include a parallel lesbian character.

Michael Bennett, the creator of *A Chorus Line,* intended to use the show at least partly as a cathartic platform for the burdens he and others had carried about being gay. While conducting twenty-four hours of recorded interviews with a group of dancers in early 1974, Michael "opened certain doors about his own privacy and his own sexuality and his own teenage angst," according to co-choreographer and director Bob Avian.[216] Other gay public figures of the time shared this angst, including Harvey Milk. As

biographer Randy Shilts wrote, before Milk's political shift left in the early 1970s, "Harvey had lived forty years trying to corral his nonconformist instincts into everything a Jewish boy from Long Island was supposed to do, from leading an upwardly mobile career to settling into insular middle-class marriages."[217] Many gays felt this way. As the National Gay Task Force, a gay rights group, observed in 1973, connecting homosexuality with mental problems "has forced many gay men and women to think of themselves as freaks."[218] One "trans-oriented" woman reflected that, in the late 1960s just before Stonewall, that bar "was the one place we could go to relax, be ourselves, not have to explain who were were."[219] Likewise, the neighborhoods containing such watering holes created a protective bubble for many through "a growing gay subculture" in locales such as San Francisco's Castro District and New York's Christopher Street.[220]

Societal pressures to conform to a heterosexual ideal were intense, and the release emanating from the gay rights movement correspondingly powerful. Among lesbians, for instance, "The women's movement helped liberate two generations of women from the loneliness and isolation they suffered as they hid in closets or cruised bars. To older lesbians, the movement offered an opportunity to embrace the identity of lesbian with pride and, if possible, to 'come out' to friends and family."[221] Similarly, *A Chorus Line*'s biographical structure and confessional tone gave anyone who saw it, gay or heterosexual, the chance to understand homosexuality more clearly and empathically. At times such acceptance surfaced in the musical through humor, as when Greg told his fellow auditioners the story of the "first time I realized I was homosexual," when "I got so depressed because I thought being gay meant being a bum all the rest of life and I said: *(Sings)* 'Gee, I'll never get to wear nice clothes.'" He lightens the mood by continuing

on, "And I was really into clothes, I had this pair of powder blue and pink gabardine pants."[222]

Most notably, such acceptance of the gay voice appears in *A Chorus Line* through the character of Paul, who tells a story about his parents unwittingly coming to watch him perform at Harlem's Apollo Theatre in drag. Although one critic observed that "[p]oor gay Paul is the only character in this hit musical to be an object of pity and condescension,"[223] most actors and writers have agreed with a New York Times piece from 1975, in which a reviewer called Paul's monologue "the high point of the show – Sammy Williams' climactic, skillfully understated soul-strip as a homosexual who has no outlet but drag shows."[224] The speech originated from the poignant recollections of Nicholas Dante, who ended up co-writing the book of the musical, in the original hours of tapes. As Donna McKechnie, who played the original Cassie, reflected, "When Michael heard this, he said he had to use it.... This was so personal to him because he felt all of that shame of not being able to be honest, of being judged, self-critical, not his own best friend. And he was tired of apologizing for living."[225] In the speech, Paul acknowledges, "I always knew I was gay, but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was that I didn't know how to be a boy"[226] – that he felt the isolation of not fitting in anywhere. Paul's speech seemed almost Shakespearean in its length, according to actor Wayne Meledandri, who played the role on Broadway and elsewhere: "The show is almost set up for Paul's monologue. What other show allows an actor to be by himself, for ten minutes, seven of which is monologue, on a bare stage in total control of the audience, without the use of music or dance?"[227] Even the music itself heightens the sense of drama. As critic Ken Mandelbaum observed in *A Chorus Line and the Musicals*

of Michael Bennett, the show had "almost continuous underscoring," much like a film. The only part in which the music stops "for an extended period of time" is during Paul's revelations, "the emotional content of which was so strong that no music was necessary to strengthen it."[228] A Los Angeles Times review of a local version of the show in 1990, toward the very end of the original Broadway show's nearly fifteen-year run, echoed Meledandri's awe at the speech's honesty when it reviewed his performance as Paul, mentioning the "dignity of his tortured confessional."[229] In a time when gays were still struggling for acceptance, *A Chorus Line* gave one of the night's most heart-wrenching scenes to an appealing gay character – and not without the chance of failure. At a meeting soon after the show began previews at New York's Public Theater in 1975, a group of funders met at a Chinese restaurant in Times Square to discuss the show's future. Within the high-rolling group, some worried "whether an uptown audience would accept the candid accounts of homosexuality in the show." As producer Manny Azenberg remembered, "The consensus was, It's really good, but it won't work uptown."[230] Of course it did, largely because the show transcended the personal and civil rights challenges of any one group to make a universal statement about what it means to struggle in and belong to American society.

From the moment Michael Bennett conceived the germ of the idea for *A Chorus Line,* the show's workshop style and tell-it-all script echoed the widespread language of therapy and consciousness-raising in the 1970s. Star Donna McKechnie remembered, "The strategy of developing a musical from this kind of raw material was very much a product of the mid-1970s confessionals and the so-called 'me' generation."[231] Self-improvement through group catharsis was in vogue all over. As Stacy Wolf observed in

Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical, "By the early 1970s, consciousness-raising groups were ubiquitous in cities and suburbs.... Although the dancers who told their life stories and shared their experiences for the sessions that became *A Chorus Line* were not meeting as a precursor to political activism, this activity was part of American culture at the time and provided a preexisting format to explore their situations."[232] No one before had started a musical's development from the ground up, in this case with dancers' testimonials about the reasons they danced. The therapeutic gestalt of *A Chorus Line* emerged from the mid-1970s culture of sharing feelings and ideas as a step toward enlightenment.

Psychologists and psychiatrists in the 1970s found themselves split between those who stuck with psychoanalytic or behaviorist theories, considered outdated by some, and those who preferred seemingly more modern therapies, such as humanist approaches.[233] In the early years of the previous decade, "psychiatry [had been] so popular in Beverly Hills...that analysts there were not taking on any new patients except in cases of real emergencies (like an actor not getting a role he or she coveted)."[234] Yet by September of 1970, at least eight hundred people attended a gathering in Miami Beach of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, a branch of the profession that "arose mainly as a 'third force' protest against the two prevailing forces in psychology – behaviorism and Freudian psychoanalysis," according to a reporter on the scene.[235] Many believed this Human Potential Movement breathed life into a creaky profession. "Rather than view people as products of an imperfect childhood (psychoanalysis) or passive organisms in need of 'reconditioning' (behaviorism), humanists focused on the uniqueness and autonomy of individuals," lessening "personal alienation" and thus contributing to a

sense of community.[236] Both the taped conversations that sparked *A Chorus Line* and the psychological structure of the show itself echoed strands of humanism, especially the show's implication that we all can become better people if we put ourselves in concert with each other.

Group therapy or encounter groups in the 1970s promised new connections to others and new insights about oneself in a way that solo sessions on a couch did not necessarily achieve. As humanist psychologist Carl Rogers wrote in late 1973 in a newspaper article for a popular audience,

> "In the midst of a culture becoming more dehumanized, more alienated, [a] person is not content to be a stranger. He is following a deep drive – a tendency I believe inherent in the human species – toward community. He wants to be known, accepted, close. So we see a burgeoning development of communes, of encounter groups, or 'underground churches' - all of them attempts to come into close, sharing, interpersonal relationships, where one is not anonymous but unique and specific, yet related.[237]

The very structure of *A Chorus Line* asks not only the dancers on the line but also the audience to be part of a self-styled encounter group – one in which Zach acts as Freudian psychologist with the backdrop of a crowd's response. In the 1970s, one of the biggest promoters of such as a collaborative journey toward increased consciousness was California's Esalen Institute, founded in 1962. According to cultural historian Sam Binkley, the Big Sur institution "rode a wave of interest in human potential and personal growth, whose most media-savvy product was the encounter group, a supervised session undertaken with a group of strangers whose numbers might range from half a dozen to hundreds."[238] Jeffrey J. Kripal, a professor of religious studies at Rice University, has called Esalen a place that where visitors feel "as if the world itself has become fantastically plastic, infinitely plural and, above all, radically *open.*" It is a place "at once

sacred, sexy, and slightly disreputable," much like the encounter groups it still hosts, in one form or another.[239] A *Washington Post* article from November 1973, two months before the brainstorming for *A Chorus Line* began with its own group therapy sessions, described an Esalen conference held in Maryland for those who could not make it to California. The baseline expectations of the group encounters at the conference were "honesty to one's self and others; responsibility... for yourself, for your health...; awareness, especially body awareness and acceptance of the body; [and] the sense of being a total organism, thinking, feeling, sensing, moving."[240] Interestingly, by holding such sessions with a group of dancers, Bennett tapped into the psyche of a group already intensely in touch with their bodies.

The psychological genesis of *A Chorus Line* came in its now-famous taped "rap sessions," two approximately midnight-to-noon gatherings that occurred once the dancers' shows had ended for the night.[241] As Martin Gottfried, one of the show's original reviewers, reflected before the final Broadway performance fifteen years later, "It was the era of encounter groups, and Bennett began by just sitting around with Broadway dancers talking about dancing – as children and as professionals."[242] Michael Bennett played a father-like role in the sessions, telling his own life stories to get the conversation rolling. According to Donna McKechnie, who herself had gone through eight years of therapy by this point, Bennett "had already spent a number of years in analysis, and to some extent his methods reflected that background."[243] With the intimacy fostered by his own powerful personality as well as by the post-midnight, alcohol-fueled nature of the conversations, Bennett coaxed the dancers into sharing their own stories in order to find out about a dancer' journey collectively. In the introduction to the tapes, we

hear Bennett explaining, "It's really about examining a group of people in society."[244] It was also about examining himself. As he reflected in a May 1975 interview, "I wanted to know why they had started dancing. In a sense I wanted to know why I had started - and hadn't I lost something along the way?"[245] This sense of loss pervades *A Chorus Line,* as the dancers ask what they have gained from being in show business and what they have put aside by necessity in their pursuit of fame and delight.

The dancers felt this poignancy in their reactions to the first session, showing that Bennett's taped conversations functioned as therapist and encounter group in one. The first meeting occurred on January 18, 1974, and "[s]o intense and important had this experience been for all assembled that it was immediately decided to do it again," three weeks later on February 8.[246] As Tony Stevens, who helped with the show's choreography, reminisced about the end of the first session, "When we held hands at the end and the Angelus started ringing outside, we opened our eyes, looked at each other and everybody started crying... We shared so much in that twelve hours, and the common knowledge that, no matter what, we were dancers, made it amazing."[247] Similarly, co-writer Nicholas Dante saw people connecting in unexpected ways: "All walls came down, everything, and we were just a group of people together. It was very funny and terribly human."[248] To hold group therapy or encounter group sessions with a motley crew of people was one thing; to hold them with a set of dancers who understood each others' long-sought and risky worlds was another. As the eventual *Chorus Line* program read in July 1975, emphasizing the precariousness and dedication required to dance on Broadway, the performers on stage "have appeared in 88 different shows in which they have given a total of 37,095 performances. Collectively they have had 612

years of dance training with 748 teachers.... While appearing in the shows mentioned above, they have sustained 30 back, 26 knee, and 36 ankle injuries." The reviewer citing this quotation went on to observe, "And still nobody knows their names."[249] Through the jam sessions Bennett assembled, he also created a world in which the dancers' sweat and anonymity transformed into a near-universal narrative about struggle and triumph.

Yet this narrative emerged haltingly. Much as breakthroughs sometimes arrive slowly in therapy, the workshop process was marked by fits and starts. Before the cast and directors of *A Chorus Line* began their workshop sessions, undergoing the painstaking process of transforming the tapes into a cohesive and catchy show, "There was no such thing as a workshop" in musical theater, according to the show's composer, Marvin Hamlisch. Co-choreographer Bob Avian concurred, saying, "This was the first time the workshop device had been used. Michael in a sense created it with Joe Papp," who produced the show.[250] While the workshops were going on, Michael Bennett himself even doubted the gatherings over a period of months in 1974 and early 1975[251] that seemed at times to be accomplishing little: "I was used to having five weeks of rehearsal, four days of tech, two weeks out-of-town, you move to New York, have previews and open… All I was doing was looking at the clock and thinking, 'Do I dare try this? What if I'm wrong? I've just wasted three days of rehearsal."[252] And the first results were dull if not excruciating to watch. Co-writer James Kirkwood remembered, "Our first run-through was about 4 hours and 20 minutes. We were exhausted watching; imagine how the dancers felt. We were all very disheartened. Michael said, 'We have twice the show we need.'"[253] Stevens described the scene even more vividly, compares it "all these dancers throwing up," providing "the catharsis that had happened at the talk sessions

without anything entertaining added."[254] Much like the process of therapy, in which patients spill their souls to find the nuggets that can apply to their current lives, *A Chorus Line* in its initial iterations was messy and, as McKechnie lamented, "quite awful and really boring after all."[255]

The workshops had the benefit, however, of investing everyone there – each person paid only $100 a week[256] – in a process of growth, much like an encounter group or group therapy session. Even as the show took shape, the creators replicated the "jam session" questions to mine new ideas. "Bennett would ask again about why they started dancing; Avian would ask people what they would do if they couldn't dance anymore; and Kleban would ask for greater elaboration of phrases from the tapes that had captured his imagination."[257] This iterative process, with consistent attempts at refinement, echoed psychologist Carl Rogers' analysis of human yearnings, a desire to find "a process in which I am becoming my deepest, truest self." For Rogers, "[c]ontinual change is the essence of the goal."[258] The workshops, which took place largely in Greenwich Village and Chelsea,[259] strived for such change and development.

The resulting structure can be invisible, even now, to those familiar with the musical. It begins with childhood and ends with adulthood, much like a series of psychoanalytic sessions, with true catharsis by the end. Avian described the through line this way: "It's a composite evening about the life of a dancer, which most people don't realize. The first story is about a four-year-old, the next about an eight-year-old, the next is about an eleven-year-old, the next is about adolescence, and so on, getting older and older. That's how Michael found the construction for it, and how he knew which story should come next. But he didn't want people to be aware of it."[260] Bennett confirmed this

conceit himself when he reflected, "The show is really about the experience of growing up. It's a group biography...." As people watch the show, "They watch the dancers talking about their lives, so that they're not only watching the play, they're reliving their whole growing up. And it's just nice to know that you're not alone. I think it makes people feel happier about being part of the human race."[261]

The original cast's connection to the material from the workshops shined through, enchanting with truth and universality audiences who "readily accepted the unreal notion of a director asking the type of questions usually reserved for a psychiatrist's office," Alan Jay Lerner observed in 1986.[262] The dancers show us their uncovered selves as Zach engages in "the old psychiatrist's ploy, but carried out in the nakedness of a leotard and a spotlight. 'Who are you?' 'And after that, who are you?' 'And after that, who are you?'"[263] The actors ultimately rise to the occasion. As one critic noted in 1975, "Because the company as a whole has lived straight through the building of 'A Chorus Line,' it inhabits its own domain with a dynamic sense of possession that is both rare and irresistible."[264] Such "possession" appears throughout the entire show, especially in the constant references to "broken homes,"[265] a common thread among many of the dancers. As Kleban remarked, "I think right off I realized the thing they all had in common was that they all came from desperately unhappy homes. 'At the Ballet' contains sort of a distilled cleaning up of some of the ravaged tales on those tapes."[266] With lines such as "Daddy always thought that he married beneath him./ That's what he said, that's what he said," and "I don't know what they were for or against, really,/ except each other,"[267] the song coalesced many shocking childhood experiences into one. And, in fact, Marvin

Hamlisch recalled the writing of that song as the moment at which the show really started coming together.[268]

The show did not always wallow in unhappiness, however. On the contrary, Cassie's extended dance solo in the middle, during "The Music and the Mirror," asks her and us to find joy. As Donna McKechnie, the original Cassie, mused,

> The dance is about the need to rediscover the thing that makes you happiest. It's about the fundamentals, and trying to remember *why* you did what you did.... She's saying in the dance, 'I'm fighting for my life. Give me a chance to get my life back. Let me find myself so that I can go on. I don't care what anybody thinks, this is what I really love, this is what I do.'[269]

Much as a therapist attempts works with an adult patient to turn childhood scars into resolute goals, the show begins with the darkness of childhood and ends with the bright present – in the musical, a scene of alternatives at the end in which the dancers discuss what they would do if they could not dance. By this point, the audience members, fully immersed in the therapeutic process of growth and development, have almost forgotten they are not the ones baring their souls on stage. Amid the laments about the lack of work on Broadway and the realities of a dancer's aging body, the musical asks the audience again to find joy. As Diana says, "Aw, come on, aren't you happy? Look, I sit around and get depressed and worry about all these things, too. But then I meet somebody and they say to me: 'Wow, you dance on Broadway! How fabulous! You got somewhere. You're something.'"[270] When Diana Morales lilts the first strains of "What I Did for Love," we all begin to think about what we would do if we could not pursue our passions, if we were ever able to in the first place.

And, indeed, the original creators and actors hoped that the musical would leapfrog over the life of a dancer to become universal. "We are all in a chorus line," said

Robert Lupines, who originally played Zach, in 1976. "It *is* about life. It *is* universal. The difference is simply that these kids are trying to make it by using their bodies."[271] One reviewer from 1975 quoted part of the original playbill that said, "This show is dedicated to anyone who has ever danced in a chorus or marched in step...anywhere." The review went on to note that "Bennett said he included that tribute as a measure of respect and affection for the dancers who give life and form to his art."[272] By broadening the scope beyond simply dancers, beyond people who make a living through the sweat of their bodies, Bennett pulled in audiences. Another reviewer from 1975 pinpointed his ability to make the specific applicable to everyone: "Mr. Bennett has taken the microcosm of a chorus line and made it into the macrocosm of a generation, and this is one hell of an achievement."[273] Bennett hoped that the show's openness to growth and ideas would permeate the heads of those watching, make them believe that "[a]nybody should have the right to begin again."[274] And the show still elicits that feeling today. In the summer of 2016, after a star-studded *Chorus Line* performance at the Hollywood Bowl that included Mario Lopez as Zach, Charles McNulty referred to the show as the "the jazziest group therapy session ever conducted" and took it a step further. Going beyond the exploration of homosexuality and psychotherapy that were so relevant in 1975, McNulty concluded the review by saying, "At a moment when populism is on the rise and workers are demanding their due, the timing couldn't be better for a production that makes stars out of Broadway's blue-collar personnel."[275] The economic frustrations and social changes of the 1970s made both artists looking at a diminished Broadway and blue-collar workers reading unemployment numbers feel a malaise that was hard to shake. *A Chorus Line*'s appeal during the last half of that decade, and beyond, stemmed from its ability to put the

setbacks of the 1970s into individualistic and empathetic language that listeners could imagine applied to their particular situations. All the while, the show expressed a gritty optimism (unlike *Follies'* fatalism) that tomorrow might bring a better day. Yes, we are all in a chorus line.

Chapter 4

Annie as a Reflection of Difficult Times, With Optimism for the Future

To watch a video of the cast of *Annie* singing at the 1977 Tony Awards is to be caught up in the simplicity and buoyancy of a smash hit from four decades ago. The performance began with the orphans singing "Tomorrow" and "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile," before Dorothy Loudon (Miss Hannigan) hammed up the stage with "Easy Street." The medley reached its climax when actor Reid Shelton (Daddy Warbucks) appeared on top of a riser belting out, "When you're stuck with a day that's gray and lonely, simply stick out your chin and grin and say...," leading into the famous chorus. The entire tableau shouted uplift, and the audience ate it up, whistling and cheering at the ending.[276] Watching the performance, it is easy to see why *Annie* won seven Tony awards that night and ultimately "ran for 2,377 performances, surpassing long-run milestones such as *Oklahoma!* (1943), *South Pacific* (1949), and *Man of La Mancha* (1965)."[277] *Annie*'s phenomenal success tapped into the frustration of many in the 1970s with political and economic troubles, harkening back to another "depressed" era that seemed more easily fixable.

The success of a show based on a comic strip, Harold Gray's "Little Orphan Annie," that struck at the hearts of the American public in a decade known for its malaise begs for explanation. Early on the show did not attract such acclaim, and it almost did not get made. As composer Charles Strouse remembered of difficult days in 1973 in a memoir twenty-five years later, "With each passing week, it became clearer that no one was particularly eager to hear *Annie* or to even try to imagine it as a musical. Early auditions for friends and possible producers had induced blank looks – not unlike the

empty eyeballs of the Harold Gray cartoon itself."[278] And Strouse and book writer Thomas Meehan were initially not as excited as lyricist Marvin Charnin. According to Charnin in a 1979 interview, "They were never as passionate as I was about the project. I kept saying to them, 'Fellows, I tell you, it's going to work.'"[279] Strouse remembered being skeptical, but he also believed that "Martin, who had never been known to wear clothes that were more than a week out of fashion, seemed to know what he was talking about."[280] Yet even Charnin's optimism took a while to come to fruition. As he wrote in 1977 about the process of looking for producers: "Everyone listened and said things like, 'Yes, it's an interesting idea,' or worse. Nobody jumped up and down and said, "My God, I've *got* to do that musical!' And 1973 became 1974... and 1974 became 1975."[281] Finally, in 1976, after renowned producer and director Mike Nichols saw the show in its first out-of-town tryout at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Connecticut, the show's fortunes changed. It went on to open in Washington, D.C., early the next year before landing on Broadway on April 21, 1977.[282]

Throughout the years, many people have professed liking the show in spite of themselves. New York Times critic Clive Barnes admitted in a first-night review in 1977 that, "against my expectations, I found it whimsically charming." Barnes went on to opine, "To dislike the new musical 'Annie,' which opened last night at the Alvin Theater, would be tantamount to disliking motherhood, peanut butter, friendly mongrel dogs and nostalgia. It would also be unnecessary, for 'Annie' is an intensely likable musical. You might even call it lovable; it seduces one, and should settle down to being a sizable hit."[283] Barnes was not alone; as Meehan recalled in 1978, "'Annie' opened...to a wildly enthusiastic audience and reviews so sensational we might have written them

ourselves."[284] From the beginning, panning *Annie* has meant having to explain one's cold heart. Even a reviewer of the 2012 Broadway revival, who opening his piece by saying, "Apparently there are a lot of people around who are sicker of *Annie* than I am," then went on to praise the show's evergreen music and lyrics: "The Charles Strouse–Martin Charnin songs are as winning as ever – simple, perky tunes that are more infectious than they have a right to be, with clever lyrics neatly balancing satire and sentiment."[285]

These memorable songs caught at audiences' hearts for their very nostalgic value, not because of any ground-breaking musical advances. A two-thirds-page ad to the left of the masthead in the *New York* magazine issue from June 27, 1977, quoted *New York Post* critic Martin Gottfried as saying, "These are catchy, melodic, truly theatrical songs, nearly all of them grand and some just wonderful." The ad continued by encouraging readers to pick up the show's "LP or tape at Sam Goody's for $4.94!"[286] Such a score harkened back to blockbuster musicals not of the 1970s but those of two decades earlier. As one composer and writer has noted, "Strouse's score for Annie was probably the last Broadway use of the musical idioms of late 1950s–early 1960s rock, other than the nostalgia shows that directly quote from that era, like *Grease* and *Smoky Joe's Cafe*."[287] A musical theater scholar explained *Annie*'s old-fashioned feel by analyzing its components: "Its overture medley of happy tunes, traditional book structure, and chorus members doubling or tripling up roles referenced classic 1950s musicals rather than contemporary musical theatre trends."[288]

Annie is boisterous, fun, brassy, schmaltzy – and it holds these qualities in contrast to many other musicals of its day, including in some ways *Follies* and *A Chorus Line*. As one prolific observer of the American musical theater has mused,

> None of [Annie's wonder] challenges the discoveries of the great seventies shows - *Chicago, A Chorus Line,* the five Sondheim titles. But that's the point: Annie was *re*discovery, a return to what American know-how and imagination made of the form that Europeans invented. It was not supposed to generate unique masterpieces every time, but rather unique formats of protean potential. What's wonderful about *Annie* is not that it made history, but that it didn't have to.[289]

Annie's straightforward delight in itself and in traditional musical theater forms pulled audiences to it. Before the show hit Broadway, Strouse insisted that producer Mike Nichols' name be the only one on Annie's initial advertisements so that the show would seem geared toward adults more than to elementary school girls: "Hal Prince's words were still ringing in my ears: 'If a musical appears to be a children's musical, and the children can bring their parents to it, it probably won't be a hit. But if it's an *adult* musical that parents can bring their *children* to, you've got the possibilities of a smash!'"[290] *Annie* became a show that all generations could enjoy together, partly for its simple joy. Book writer Meehan highlighted that good cheer, as opposed to the angst and drama of other musicals of the period, when he said, "We decided we wanted to write an old-fashioned musical... At the time, Hal Prince and Steve Sondheim were doing the so-called concept musical – *Company, Follies.* But *Little Orphan Annie* was not going to lend itself to that form. We wanted to write the kind of musical we loved as kids – tuneful, funny, straight ahead with the story."[291]

Despite the straightforward and simple nature of *Annie*'s plot, its messages about the national politics of its times and of the 1930s – as well as the economic struggles New York was having – lay under the surface. When Charnin, Meehan, and Strouse conceived of *Annie* in the early 1970s, they intended the show to be an antidote to the corruption and despair they believed endemic to the politics of Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War; by the time *Annie* appeared in 1977, the show's upbeat themes coincidentally reflected

many people's hopes, coming out of a recession, as a new president stepped into office. The musical's deliberate homage to the beauty of New York City also helped lift Manhattan out of its own economic doldrums, as part of the city's very successful "I Love New York" campaign in 1978.

From the outset, the creators of *Annie* connected the musical to the down-on-one's-luck stories of Charles Dickens. "At the time that I found 'Annie,' which was Christmas 1969, and got the rights in 1970, all of Dickens had been taken," said director and lyricist Martin Charnin. "I was always a big fan of how Dickens wrote and always thought that Dickens's material was always very, very adaptable. And I guess I felt the same way about 'Annie.' I always felt there was something very Dickensian about it."[292] For critic Ethan Mordden, the mood of the original Harold Gray cartoons about Little Orphan Annie felt "gloomy," and Gray's "view of human nature...misanthropic; the few well-intentioned people are assailed on all sides by criminals, hypocrites, and incompetents,"[293] very much like the often naïve and ill-beset characters of a Dickens novel. In an interview published by the *New York Times* four days before *Annie* opened on Broadway in 1977, book writer Thomas Meehan also saw reflections of the British author in Gray's black-and-white, open-eyed characters: "There was something distinctly Dickensian about the comic strip, I noticed, and so harkening back to Dickens and other 19th-century literary sources, I concocted a consciously old-fashioned and simple plot for 'Annie.'"[294] In complicated times, the simplicity of *Annie* appealed to its writers and audiences alike.

One of the earliest songs in the musical, "It's the Hard-Knock Life," belied the upbeat nature of many of the other numbers and echoed this Dickensian feel. One

Broadway historian commented, "As it happened, Strouse and Charnin captured the Dickensian spirit Meehan was aiming for in the first song they wrote, 'It's the Hard-Knock Life.'" The orphans, dressed in drab rags, scrubbed floors with metal pails in front of them while belting out lines such as, "Don't it feel like the wind is always howlin'/ Don't it seem like there's never any light?/ Once a day don't you want to throw the towel in?/ It's easier than puttin' up a fight."[295] Danielle Brisebois, who played the youngest orphan, Molly, in the original Broadway cast, remembered that "we would always engage with the audience and break the fourth wall a little bit" while performing the song. Brisebois interpreted "It's the Hard-Knock Life" not as "sad" but "more angry, like, 'We don't deserve this. This is bull.'"[296] The orphans' scrappy complaints played on top of a beat so intense and catchy that the song became the basis for Jay Z's breakout 1998 rap hit "Hard Knock Life."[297] Charles Strouse himself recalled in an interview with *Blender* music magazine, "Most of the songs in *Annie* are very 1920s, more upbeat, but 'Hard Knock Life' had to reflect the fact that the kids in the story were underprivileged and exploited. So I wrote a very angry, angular melody, quite unlike the other songs."[298] This second song in the show set the tone for a dreary orphanage that needing rescuing.

When Charnin, Meehan and Strouse originally began to write *Annie* in the early 1970s – the same time *Follies* emerged on Broadway – U.S. economics and politics were encountering their own share of hard knocks. As national columnist D.J.R. Bruckner lamented in 1971 in "The Sufferings of Our Society," an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times:* "Will the United States collapse? That question is commonly asked rather than: Could it collapse? Such wide anticipation – a national public opinion study last month indicates that 47% of all Americans think the civil order may collapse – must spring from

inequities felt by very large numbers of individuals."[299] Bruckner went on in the piece to cite factors such as "cost of living," "unemployment," "racial division," "political corruption," and "the war" as contributing factors to the uncertainty he described. Indeed, the political left confronted many challenges in early 1970s, not least "finding ways to maintain support within the white blue-collar base that came of age during the New Deal and World War II era, while at the same time servicing the pressing demands for racial and gender equity arising from the sixties." Such disparate interests, often competing, posed difficulties in and of themselves, and they also "had to be achieved in the midst of two massive oil shocks, record inflation and unemployment, and a business community retooling to assert greater control over the political process."[300] The issues were financial and international, social and domestic, generational and intergenerational, and perhaps it was appropriate that Dickens was on the mind of *Annie*'s creators.

Amid such challenges, a sense of national decline was evident to many commentators, including Cornell government professor Andrew Hacker, who joined Richard Hofstadter, Daniel J. Boorstin, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Eugene Genovese and Staughton Lynd for a *Newsweek* panel in July 1970 on "the ills of contemporary America." For Hacker, according to a book reviewer writing in the neoconservative magazine *Commentary* two months later, "the United States is in the grip of a disease which is fatal and which has reached a terminal stage. According to his diagnosis, the process of decline dates from the closing months of World War II. In essence, Hacker believes, there has been a collapse of the national psyche."[301] Historian Bruce Schulman has painted the period with an equally broad swath of pessimism:

> Many Americans sensed that the nation had entered a period of decline. No longer able to lead the world, the United States could no longer even

> find its own way at home. These intimations of decline were everywhere to be heard and seen in the early 1970s – as the war ground toward defeat, as the Watergate cover-up unraveled, as the Arab oil embargo humiliated a seemingly impotent nation, as the economy worsened. Even those who could not point to specific political events like the war or the scandal felt that something had passed – that the American Century, however abbreviated, had ended.[302]

Historian James T. Patterson, too, in his omnibus *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*, described the so-called Great Recession of 1973 to 1975 as simply one of the factors that "caused many Americans in 1974 to fear the passing of what they had imagined as the golden age of American history that had followed World War II. The cherished American Dream of upward social mobility, sustained for many people in those prosperous years by vigorous economic growth, seemed endangered."[303] Observers across the political spectrum in the early 1970s saw precariousness in the United States' government's approach to mending cracks in a newly unstable foundation.

Annie's creators repeatedly and directly linked such democratic and economic tremors, especially the presidency of Richard Nixon and the war in Vietnam, to the origins of their musical. In 1977, Thomas Meehan explained why he decided to set *Annie* in 1933:

> At the time that I was writing the musical, the spring of 1972, President Nixon was in the White House, the Vietnam War was still going on, the country was in a deep economic recession, and there was a growing sense of cynicism and hopelessness among millions of Americans, including me. And it struck me that Annie could in the musical become a metaphorical figure who stood for innate decency, courage and optimism in the face of hard times, pessimism and despair.[304]

In April 1977, one of the show's first reviewers picked up on this idea of the title orphan as an allegorical stand-in for the relief that some Americans felt in the first year of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, arguing that "the authors have taken her as a symbol – a

symbol of the end of the Great Depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in 1933."[305] Similarly, in a newspaper preview of the show from the previous month, the authors also used the word "symbol" to highlight the original intent of Charnin, Strouse, and Meehan: "The creators of 'Annie' saw in the foundling girl a symbol of dogged determination and optimism, good for a country depressed during the Nixon years by Vietnam and and economic setbacks."[306] Charnin, who has described himself as an optimist,[307] also contrasted the historical time in which he wrote with the musical's unflagging sense of hope: "We were coming out of a very, very angry, cynical, spiritless time. It was Vietnam, it was Nixon, it was drugs, it was awful. And *Annie* was the perfect manifestation of all of the promise and hope and spunk and optimism that I and my collaborators wanted not only for ourselves, [but for] our children, our country, our world."[308] From the outset, Charnin, Strouse, and Meehan saw the musical's potential for shoring up people who needed encouragement.

In the musical, such positivity arose not only through the orphans' spunk and spirit but also through the appearances of a legendary Democratic president, Franklin Roosevelt – his very presence on stage contrasting with the Republican president actually in power in the early 1970s. As much as Annie herself symbolized unswerving optimism, the version of FDR in the show epitomized a can-do approach to the nation's problems. As Meehan reflected, "I thought it might be interesting to write something set in the Depression that starts off dark but then becomes hopeful with a president – FDR – who radiates optimism and a New Deal."[309] The choice of 1933 was not accidental, either. Not only was it "a long-ago time for which we feel a great deal of fondness," Meehan noted, since he and Charnin and Strouse "were children in the 1930's,"[310] but it was also the

year in which Roosevelt was inaugurated and promised in his inaugural speech "to recommend the measures that a stricken Nation in the midst of a stricken world may require."[311] In 1977 Charnin remembered hearing Meehan's early suggestion that "the action of our musical take place two weeks prior to Christmas 1933 – the first Christmas with Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the President of the United States,"[312] and thus a pivotal time.

With such a chronological setting (albeit slightly ahistorical, as the New Deal was announced in March rather than December), the musical was able to bookend FDR's impact through "before" and "after" songs. In the early number "We'd Like to Thank You Herbert Hoover" – its tempo listed as "Freely, but forlornly" – the inhabitants of a Hooverville lament, "Today we're living in a shanty,/ Today we're scrounging for a meal." They think back to a time several years earlier, when it seemed "[p]rosperity was round the corner," before they go on to call Hoover a "dirty rat" and a "bureaucrat."[313] Fast-forwarding to the end of the play, Oliver Warbucks, Oliver's secretary, Grace Farrell, and the orphans cast the Depression in very different and eminently fixable terms:

ANNIE AND ORPHANS
The snowflakes are frightened of falling

MOLLY
And oh, what a fix
No peppermint sticks!

WARBUCKS
And all through the land folks are bawling

GRACE
And filled with despair
'Cause cupboards are bare[314]

This culminating song then presents the solution, as encapsulated in its title – "A New Deal for Christmas" – before going on to cast Roosevelt's Cabinet members as eager reindeer, ready to implement change, with such lines as "On Roper and Swanson!/ Get along Cordell Hull."[315] Of course, both of these historical songs gloss over detail and lack nuance, but *Annie* was aiming toward broad strokes, not historical explication. At the same time, however, the valorization of the New Deal and its social welfare programs did fit with Charnin's unabashedly Democratic politics.

Reactions over the years have often paid attention to the overt and often hagiographic political choices in an otherwise lighthearted show. When *Annie* opened out of town to smash reviews in Washington, D.C., in early 1977, Charnin and his crew "were apprehensive about opening in Washington because Annie is a musical with political overtones, and we were playing games with the New Deal. Roosevelt is a significant character in the show, and we were curious as to what the reaction to him would be."[316] In Washington in 1977, the reaction turned out to be strongly positive, with "editorials in the Washington newspapers, and an especially gratifying one in *Time* magazine, about how *Annie* had caught the mood and needs of our country, helping to salve our post-Watergate wounds," according to Strouse.[317] At other times since the 1970s, the show's uncomplicated and unnuanced portrayal of Roosevelt as benign savior has also resonated with other economic downturns and frustrations. When *Annie* was revived on Broadway in 2012, an entertainment writer for *Time* commented that the show was

> returning, of course, at an unusually poignant time. When the frizzy-haired orphan first made her appearance, the breadlines and Hoovervilles of the Great Depression were safely bathed in nostalgia. Today, with the nation still trying to emerge from something close to a second Great Depression,

> the sight of a sunny little kid helping the President of the United States find a way of getting people back to work — and let's call it a New Deal! — seems less like nostalgic fantasy and more like a viable political strategy.[318]

Annie's political nostalgia has often felt especially potent when applied to the salient issues of the time in which it is revived.

Interestingly, *Annie*'s eternal buoyancy became a reflection of political anticipation rather than a foil to the nation's present ills when the show finally appeared on Broadway in April 1977, fresh on the heels of the inauguration of a Democratic president. Newspaper articles from early that year touted the hopes that U.S. citizens and international leaders alike were investing in Jimmy Carter: "As Carter takes over from Ford, the expectations are immense," the *Washington Post* quoted a Danish newspaper as saying in a story the day following the president's inauguration.[319] A later historian noted that "Jimmy Carter's narrow victory in the 1976 election reflected the nation's mood ('hopeful, sort of,' as *Time* Magazine phrased it)."[320] Carter appeared to many to be a straight shooter, with his "down-home manner," as well as his seeming "modesty and wholesomeness" that "spoke to a national yearning for simpler, quieter times."[321] At least in the beginning, "voters found Carter's bland style and lack of ideological vigor reassuring – an antidote to the wrongheaded sureties that had landed the nation in Vietnam and Watergate."[322] Indeed, it was perhaps Carter's very milquetoast qualities that enhanced his appeal to a nation weary of scandal and belligerence.

Annie was able to ride the wave of this presidential honeymoon period with its own brand of Pollyannaish comfort food. An early reviewer called the show's lyrics "bland to the point of banality," a kind of vanilla pudding for the ears, but went on to consider that "even this could have been intentional, for obviously nothing is intended to

disturb the show's air of amiable nostalgia. It is meant to be a show to experience, not to think about."[323] A more positive perspective in *Newsweek* viewed Annie herself as "the mascot of the new age of hope, optimism, and simplicity that's coming in with President Carter."[324] And the concurrence of Annie's stage debut with Carter's first several months as president was unexpected but fitting. As a *Chicago Tribune* article observed in May of that year, "the musical that had been written 'as a reaction to the Nixonian American of 1972...was no long antithetical to the mood of the country but is instead a mirror of it,' according to Meehan.[325] Another piece the month before quoted Meehan scratching his head at the unforeseen coincidence of *Annie*'s timing, because "now, paradoxically enough, as 'Annie' at last comes to Broadway, it is no longer a musical in conflict with its times but is instead a reflection of the current spirit of the country. Strange."[326] Strange, perhaps, but true. The Carter administration found *Annie* so in sync with its ideals that it invited the cast to perform at the White House for the Governors' Dinner on March 1, to a 1977 audience composed not only of state leaders but also Supreme Court justices and Cabinet officials. After a standing ovation, according to Charnin in a 1977 book,

> The most thrilling and emotional moment was at the end when the entire company sang 'Tomorrow.' Governor George Wallace began singing 'Tomorrow' as though he knew the song, with tears streaming down his face, particularly at the point where the lyrics went, 'Tomorrow, So I gotta hang on till tomorrow, come what may! Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya tomorrow. You're always a day away.'"[327]

This strangest of strange moments – a conservative Southern governor weeping at the promise of a new day brought about by Franklin Delano Roosevelt – demonstrated once again the power of the show's enduring "optimist anthem."[328]

The musical's trajectory, from what Charnin saw as the unremittingly gray early 1970s to the at least temporarily more upbeat late 1970s, was one that the lyricist had hoped for, if not expected. In a hugely heartfelt expression of his goals for the show, laid out next to a nighttime photo of the U.S. Capitol at the beginning of a chapter in his 1977 memoir, Charnin wrote:

> In 1973 Tom and Charles and I were pleading for a better time. The specific song that manifests the political mood of the authors is 'Tomorrow,' and the lyric was one of the first written for the show. The song was a reaction to what was going on in the country – the political situation, the war, the economy, the sense of quiet desperation that everyone had, the disenchantment with government leaders… there were no heroes. But the lyric says, 'The sun'll come out tomorrow, so I gotta hang on till tomorrow, come what may. Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow. You're always a day away.' That's the message of *Annie.* It is also correct in terms of the little girls. She is the eternal optimist… she is the light at the end of the tunnel… she's a person who stands there, chin up, facing all kinds of adversity. She will survive. We all want her to survive. We wanted the country to survive. That's why the song was written. That's why the song worked. That's why the show was written, because at the time when all the madness was going on Charles and Tom and I believed.[329]

Annie may be just a musical about a bunch of little girls, but, in this quotation, Charnin combined patriotism with optimism in a way that echoed what the best artists have written about America. As he described "a person who stands there, chin up, facing all kinds of adversity," one can imagine Jimmy Stewart standing at the Lincoln Memorial in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," the 1939 Frank Capra movie whose thesis is that the government must survive for the good of its least powerful people. As Charnin expressed his yearning that the country would survive, one can hear the fourth verse of "America the Beautiful," a stanza that focuses on the eternal power of the ideally "undimmed" American experiment: "O beautiful for patriot dream/ That sees beyond the years/ Thine alabaster cities gleam/ Undimmed by human tears!" Perhaps all of this sounds too

grandiose or old-fashioned, but in 1977 audiences ate up Charnin's old-fashioned vision in hope for their better "tomorrows."

The setting of the musical in a romantically black-and-white New York City was no accident; the creators intended the show as a tribute to the metropolis, both as it was in the 1930s and as it was emerging in the late 1970s. On the most basic level, the city was familiar to them. As Meehan said in 1977, "I chose to set Annie in New York City because Charnin, Strouse, and I have lived almost all of our lives in and around New York, and it is, quite simply, the town we happen to know and love best."[330] From the beginning, Charnin and designers David Mitchell and Theoni Aldredge intended to make "a musical loaded with production values... a feast for the eyes."[331] Charnin's 1977 account of the making of *Annie* included photographic inspirations such as the Williamsburg Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, an old-fashioned subway entrance that read "Interborough Rapid Transit Co UPTOWN," and a series of row houses reading "John Dais Co. Whole Fish," "Flag Fish Co." and "Berman Fish." People working on the show fiddled with Mitchell's small photographic "cutouts" endlessly to find ideal spots for all of the scenic elements.[332] Charnin, with a B.F.A. in painting, was intimately involved in the "physical" aspects of his shows and valued "[j]ust the ability to understand things visually: colors, textures, sizes, shapes, whatnot."[333] And authenticity in *Annie's* scenery was key, as Charnin recalled:

> For the New York skyline scenes, Mitchell went to the New York Public Library, to the Bettman Archives, and other sources to get pictorial references from the thirties. Every building that became a photo blow-up in the show comes authentically from someplace in New York in the thirties. Whereas Boris Aronson's designs for *Fiddler on the Roof* were influenced by Chagall, Edward Hopper was our source - Hopper's New York.[334]

The influence of Hopper's dark, psychological studies layered an appropriate gloom onto a Depression-era Manhattan, at the same time providing a foil for the optimism that Annie and FDR brought to the 1930s by the end of the show. Even with this somber tone, Mitchell's sets captured the imaginations of those in the audience. *New York Times* critic Walter Kerr, who had reviewed the show negatively in September 1976 during its first stint in Connecticut, related in a much more glowing notice in May 1977 that it was "impossible *not* to feel warmed by the late-afternoon wash Mr. Mitchell has provided by way of a period New York City skyscape."[335]

Building upon the appeal of the sets was the centerpiece song "N.Y.C.," which paid homage to the city's onetime grandeur. Even Kerr's 1976 review, which had few bright spots, called the number "a paean of praise to glorious New York City."[336] Charnin and his crew had realized that they needed to get this one right, and he acknowledged in 1977 that it had taken a while: "The last musical number to be solved was 'N.Y.C.' We worked on it through the previews in New York, changing it, reorchestrating it, restaging it, reshifting it, writing new lyrics for it. We were very aware that we were doing a Valentine to New York City and were worried about singing the praise of New York in New York. Many great songs had preceded us."[337] A reviewer in 2012, looking back on the 1977 production, viewed the entire show as "a smiley-faced, old-fashioned love song to a city's gumption and resilience,"[338] and "N.Y.C." contributed in no small part to that sense of sweet toughness. Its lyrics include shining testimonies to the town's pizzazz, such as "The city's bright/ As a penny arcade/ It blinks, it tilts, it rings," as well as yearning accounts of the passion the singers feel for it, almost like an long-ago love, with admissions such as, "I go years without you/ Then I can't get enough."[339] One

commentator has also praised the song for presenting such a diversity of perspectives on the city, given that it "begins with a saxophone solo typical of a Times Square busker [that] is later joined by swelling brass and a full ensemble representing a cross section of citizens, all fulfilled and praising the city for its rich offerings and unique character."[340] This ensemble number pulls out all the stops to make New York seem like a warm and welcoming place.

Yet this song of praise contrasted sharply with the myriad woes New York faced in the early and mid-1970s. In the relatively thriving mid-1990s, one journalist remembered that, in "the late spring of 1975, New York City seemed to be dying a ghastly and self-inflicted death."[341] Much of the crisis began at the top, with city leaders who flirted with bankruptcy because "Albany and Washington [were] refusing [New York] emergency aid" and "Wall Street [was] loath to buy its bonds."[342] *The* number of Fortune 500 companies who had their headquarters in the city dropped from 125 in 1970 to ninety-four in 1975.[343] To put it simply, according to one historian, "The city's fiscal circumstances were all too similar to the Depression years" during this long recession.[344] On October 30, 1975, the *New York Daily News* famously wrote a headline reading "Ford to City: Drop Dead!" after President Gerald Ford insisted the federal government would not "bail out" the city and, in fact, called the financial hemorrhaging he believed the city was engaging in similar to an "insidious disease."[345] Nor was Broadway exempt from the city's misfortunes. In 1975, *A Chorus Line* debuted, and Times Square to many felt like the center of a den of iniquity, an unsavory place for patrons to see theater: "The streets were strewn with garbage. Prostitutes and drug dealers did their business with little

interference from police. Crime escalated."[346] New York in the early and mid-1970s felt like a city in need of saving.

Out of this miasma of problems, which constituted an "unmistakable wakeup call"[347] for the city's leaders, came an idea with sticking power: to brand New York in a way no one would forget, to make it a place to come to rather than a place to leave. Thus sprang up the "I Love New York" campaign of 1977 and 1978, which launched a slogan and a logo still in use today – and *Annie* was a crucial part of this advertising campaign. In the summer of 1977 and spring of 1978, three television commercials appeared to support New York's redefinition of itself, and none was more famous than the 1978 ad about Broadway. This commercial "featured the stars and casts of top-drawing Broadway plays and musicals, and it was this remarkable talent pool – all working for scale, with the support of the League of New York Theaters and Producers – who first sang 'I love New York." The actors included Included Yul Brynner, Angela Lansbury, Frank Langella, and the casts of *A Chorus Line, Annie, Grease,* and *The Wiz.*[348] In a newspaper article from March 1978 explaining the new ad, *Annie* featured prominently, likely because the musical itself embodied the zest of the city:

> "Many businesses in the state of New York are rightfully upset that the state has not done enough in the past to help them." The voice coming from the radio is conversational, reasonable, sympathetic.
>
> "I'm John Dyson, Commissioner of Commerce, State of New York. In too many cases that was true." Stern the voice is now, a no-nonsense voice. "But the attitude has changed and it has changed for the better. We're now going to *help* business stay in New York." The voice now holds out hope. John Dyson has rehearsed well.
>
> Switch to television: "I'm from New Hampshire, but I love New York," say the televised couple camping next to an upstate creek. And the cast of 'Annie' raises its arms and sings, "I love New York. I love New York."
>
> New York is on the make...[349]

This ad campaign, launched on Valentine's Day,[350] brought romantics of all kinds to the city and worked wonders. The "turning point," according to a historian of the economics of Broadway, was this commercial with its "catchy jingle" and "slogan that became famous all over the world."[351] The economic impact was impressive, with the New York Convention and Visitors Bureau reporting "more than $17,000 requests for the Broadway Show Tours brochure mentioned in the commercial in just the first two weeks after it aired – and an average of 1,500 requests a day for information, double [its] past record."[352] And the makers of *Annie* understood their pivotal role in the regeneration of Broadway both fiscally and musically. As Charnin observed in 1977, "The fact that we were a great boost to the economy of New York City was important; and that we were a musical in the truest sense of the word was important."[353] *Annie* wore its heart on its sleeve as far as New York was concerned, and New York and the world loved it back because of the promise *Annie* held – for a better urban tomorrow for that city of dreams and for a better political tomorrow for the nation as a whole.

Over the four decades of *Annie*'s existence, writers have asked repeatedly why a musical that seems so simple has held such sway over audiences and critics alike. One reason is its structural strength. Ethan Mordden has wondered "why a show that is in effect nothing more than a capable musical comedy became such a landmark in the musical's geography," and he answered himself partly by saying, "It never falters, for one thing. It starts very immediately and does not let up; many shows start up too slowly or lose content in the second half."[354] Another reason lies in *Annie*'s very simplicity. Composer Strouse linked the original source material for *Annie* to its eventual straight-up format, musing that "a comic strip is an ideal basis for a musical comedy because they

are similar forms of popular American culture. They both deal in broad strokes, telling simple stories in as few words as possible."[355] In Walter Kerr's gushing second review in 1977, he agreed that the show's appeal came in its being "straight, bland as those blank eyes that Annie's always had, open, expansive, opulent, innocent."[356] What an interesting combination of adjectives. To characterize the show as "expansive" and "innocent" is to encourage the vastness of children's dreams, and adding "opulent" and "open" to the mix varnishes such dreams with a smooth layer that even adults can appreciate. The show's beauty contrasted with the more prosaic lives that many of its audience members experienced, in a decade that had not given everyone opportunities for economic rejoicing or political innocence.

Ultimately, the appeal of *Annie* has come in such unexpected juxtapositions between myth and reality, between the depths and the surface. When Charnin, Meehan, and Strouse shopped around the show in the early 1970s, with no takers until Mike Nichols came along, "Nobody believed. It's as simple as that," Charnin remembered in 1977. Everyone kept trying to play the show as camp, even attempting to cast adults as Annie, but "[c]amp was the furthest thing from our minds." And so, "[a]fter four auditions, Tom and Charles and I decided to do a little preamble – stating that we were doing the musical as a *real* story, a *real* story about a child's search for her parents, as well as a love story between her and the fifty-five-year-old man who ultimately adopts her."[357] Annie's search became the show's journey – "a child's Odyssey-like quest for her missing father and mother," as Meehan "constructed it in the spring of 1972"[358] – a journey that echoed, both intentionally and serendipitously, the nation's trajectory in that time period to try to heal itself economically and political from recession and scandal.

The audiences and critics watching in 1977 were "forthrightly invited to lose our minds," Kerr wrote, "and that – reluctantly at first, then helplessly – is what we do."[359] There is something to be said for bringing joy to audiences in the midst of urban or national struggle, for providing untarnished optimism for several hours during a visit to the theater. As Charnin reflected at the end of his 1977 memoir, "Sometimes I stand at the back of the house at the curtain calls, and I hear more and more people singing 'Tomorrow' along with the company. It's a wonderful moment."[360]

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Every Age Is a Golden Age of Musicals

The 1970s represented an era between times in many ways. As one historian has observed,

> The 1970s might appropriately be thought of half post-1960s and half pre-1980s, but they were also more than that – they served as a bridge between epochs… The period has been named 'pivotal' not because of its monumental events, its great leaders, or its movements, but because society, from its economic foundations to its cultural manifestations, really did move in a new direction. It stands as a bookend to the New Deal era: that which was built in the thirties and forties – politically, economically, and culturally – was beginning to crumble barely two generations later."[361]

Such crumbling and regeneration stippled the art of the era, not least in Broadway's musical theater. The connections between each of three pivotal musicals of the 1970s – *Follies* (1971), *A Chorus Line* (1975), and *Annie* (1977) – and the social and cultural currents of the time are numerous and, often, explicit. *Follies* reflected the disillusionment many felt in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a confusing and shifting time for social expectations. Traditional approaches to institutions such as marriage were weakening, and aging had become not necessarily something to be respected, but rather something to be avoided. *A Chorus Line* presented a more positive reaction to shifting cultural norms, attempting to make homosexuality seem acceptable through a sympathetic main character. It also helped bring the language of therapy into common conversation, based on a new and exciting workshopping process. *Annie* is perhaps the least overtly complicated show of the three on the surface, but its creators wrote it as a deliberate and serious response to political developments they saw as disheartening. In addition, its optimism helped jump-start a revitalization campaign for its makers' native and beloved city, New York. All three musicals emerged from and commented on

specific trends of the times in which they were conceived and performed, and all strived to reclaim parts of the American dream that seemed fragile if not broken.

The lessons these musicals can teach, about how intimately this seemingly light art form can track and even shape social and cultural patterns, still apply today. As an example, identity politics of race and ethnicity have moved into Broadway in an enormous way since the debut in August 2015 of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton.* The show has ratcheted up the profile of musical theater in recent years so that "there's no denying that Broadway burns brighter — and more multihued," according to one critic.[362] Miranda noted in December 2015 that the musical has changed expectations of what appears on Broadway, just as *A Chorus Line* did when it burst onto stage at the Public Theater forty years before *Hamilton:* "These kids are going to grow up in a world in which *Hamilton* existed, and this is just what a musical sounds like. It tells them, 'Even if the people who founded it don't look like you, it's your country. We get to tell this story, too, and we get to tell it our way.'"[363]

Indeed, for aficionados of musicals, every age has its stories, its narratives, that shape the lives of the children and adults who love the theater. It is fitting, perhaps, that one consider musical theater master Stephen Sondheim's view on the "golden age" of musicals, in his introduction to an annotated chapter of *Follies* lyrics in a 2010 book. Sondheim reflected,

> This chapter, like the show itself, deals a lot with pastiche and may be of particular interest to readers who persist in believing that the period between the World Wars was the Golden Age of Musicals. There are others who think of the Golden Age as the 1950s, but then every generation thinks the Golden Age was the previous one; my father thought the Golden Age was that of Victor Herbert and Sigmund Romberg, although he acknowledged enjoying the 'modern' age of Porter, the Gershwins and Rodgers and Hart. Everybody is correct.[364]

Musical theater critics and cultural historians may never consider the 1970s a "golden age." But even the feel-good shows contained powerful social messages that revealed the complexity of a United States confronting an age of limits and confusion, one in which apparently eternal truths yielded to lived experience, to the daily challenges of those who were privileged enough to see live performances, as well as those who could not. Far from being a decade in which "nothing happened," the 1970s reflected powerful debates about marriage, gender, meaning, and the seemingly endless struggle between naïve hope and utter despair. Such struggles shaped the creative work of writers, actors, producers, and directors, as well as those whom they sought to entertain and perhaps influence.

NOTES

Chapter 1: Introduction

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Chapter 3: *A Chorus Line*

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