

Stylistic Play and Humour in Musical Theatre



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Pastiche and Musical Theatre

- Stylistic pastiche as standard compositional device in contemporary musical theatre—using an identifiable style from outside either the narrative or performance context of the show (i.e. *Bonnie & Clyde* but not *Dear Evan Hansen*)
- Stylistic pastiche to shape understanding of characters (from Moore 2005) and providing “sonic markers” of setting (from Askerøi 2016)
- Stylistic pastiche as humour

Musical Humour (in theory)

- Theories of incongruity
- Evident in parody bands, such as Spinal Tap and The Rutles (Covach 1991, 1995); also in mashups (Brøvig-Hannsen forthcoming)
- “In Short” (*Edges*, Pasek and Paul): a break-up song in a soft rock ballad style...
- Incongruity in terms of the narrator’s volatility, as well as the expectation that such aggression doesn’t “belong” in a pop song

Pastiche and Narrative Incongruity

- Pastiche and narrative incongruity: associations of style do not match the lyrical content
- “Give Up Your Dreams” (School of Rock, Lloyd Webber/Slater)—in the style of Queen
- From “We are the Champions”: 6/8 groove, SRDC chorus phrasing, textural contrasts between verse and chorus, electric guitar doubling bass, triplet semiquaver fills on toms, guitar run into final chorus
- From “Somebody to Love”: descending bass line in chorus
- From “Barcelona”: lyrical reference to “bells ringing”; sustained vocal note over dominant pause before chorus

Pastiche and Authority

- Humour as: an “important safety valve” in society, something that can “cut it [e.g. a person/institution] down to size” (Scruton 2007)
- Trope of the authority figure paired with an “old” style
 - “King Herod’s Song” (a 1920s rag, *Jesus Christ Superstar*); “Song of the King” (early Elvis, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*)
- “You’ll Be Back” (Baroque pop, *Hamilton*)

Pastiche and Authority

- Effete performance style undercuts the masculine associations of authority figures
- Authority figures “out-of-touch” with their subjects
- “What’d I Miss” (*Hamilton*, sung by Thomas Jefferson)
- Pastiche of the early ‘80s rockabilly revival plus vocal groups (e.g. Brian Setzer, Manhattan Transfer)—“I guess I basically missed the late ‘80s”
- Stuck in the sounds that were trendy before Jefferson left for France...

“Turn It Off”

- From *The Book of Mormon* (Trey Parker, Matt Stone, Robert Lopez)
- Elder Price (lead character) is struggling with anxieties about his mission; his fellow missionaries tell him to simply “turn off” the negative feelings
- Incongruity between the serious lyrical content (e.g. dying sister), the frivolous response (i.e. “turn it off”), and the light jazz style
- The final (and main) “problem” is the repressed homosexuality of the young men
- Second half of a song moves into a “classic musical theatre” song-and-dance number with a tap sequence, elaborate vocal harmonies, and choreographed ensemble finale (à la “Hello Dolly”, “Singing in the Rain”, “Anything Goes”, “Another Op’nin’, Another Show”, “Anything Goes”)

Layers of Humour

- Musical theatre as a “camp” style (from Sontag 1968)—“love of the exaggerated...spirit of extravagance” (notes 8, 25); “There is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap [between camp aesthetics and homosexuality]” (n. 51)
- Incongruity, then, between lyrical content and the homosexual associations of the song’s aesthetics
- A play on the stereotype of homosexual males in musical theatre (see “Keep it Gay”, *The Producers*)—“Turn it Off” as a caricature of this characterisation
- Question of offensiveness? Heterosexual men mocking gay men for the amusement of other heterosexuals (i.e. myself)?
- “You can’t camp about something that you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun *out* of it” (Isherwood 1999, 31; emphasis added)
- “Turn It Off” as an empathetic celebration of classic musical theatre, the flamboyant performance style, and homosexual males within the theatre world and the Mormon church