“WE’LL FIND A NEW WAY OF LIVING”: 
RACISM IN  *SHOWBOAT, SOUTH PACIFIC*,  
*THE KING AND I* AND *WEST SIDE STORY* 

A Thesis 
Presented to 
The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron 

In Partial Fulfillment 
of the Requirements for the Degree 
Master of Music 

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August, 2005
“WE’LL FIND A NEW WAY OF LIVING:
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Thesis

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To Mom, who is always there for me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Brooks Toliver-thank you for all of your support and guidance throughout this process. It has been a joy working with and taking classes from you. Special thanks for allowing me to pursue a topic which was not your specialty. I appreciate the freedom.

To Dr. Michele Tannenbaum-thank you for being on my committee. Theory Review would not have been the same without you.

To my other School of Music teachers and friends-thank you for great experiences and rehearsals that I will not forget.

To my extended family-thank you for being so understanding when I had to miss family functions to work on my thesis!

To my immediate family-thank you does not seem like enough words for what you have done. To Mom and Matt, thank you for being my proofreaders and support system, especially when it seemed like this project was never going to be complete. I love you!
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Broadway stages have been echoing the sounds of music for nearly a century. Musicals are a defining genre in this performance arena. Before 1927, these productions functioned essentially as revue shows, where the songs became popular hits heard on the radio. This medium changed with the arrival of Showboat. This musical altered the history of the theater by incorporating social elements, such as racism. In this paper, I will discuss racism in four musicals: Showboat, South Pacific, The King and I and West Side Story. In this introduction, I will provide an overview of each show and a preview of the discussions to come.

Showboat changed the face of the American musical. The team of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II were inspired by Edna Ferber’s novel. This show takes place over the course of twenty-five years. We begin in the 1890s, just thirty years removed from the Civil War. Despite being free, blacks were treated as though they remained enslaved. Showboat contained several unique features. It was the first musical to have a mixed race cast. The musical was among the first to incorporate a “show within a show.” Showboat is considered one of the first shows to bridge two genres: musical comedy, with
its vernacular songs and dance music, and operetta, where music and drama were traditionally more integrated. This musical was one of the first to incorporate social elements, including miscegenation, alcoholism, and spousal desertion. In chapter two, I will discuss the origins of the musical, social elements, changes in the subsequent revivals, white stereotypes concerning blacks, the music, and perhaps the single most controversial aspect: the use of the word “niggers.”

With *South Pacific*, Oscar Hammerstein II continued the discussion of racism he and his previous collaborator, Jerome Kern had begun. He and his new partner, Richard Rodgers, became one of the most esteemed musical teams of all time. After the success of their first musical, *Oklahoma!*, they were seeking a new project when they encountered Joshua Logan who owned the rights to James Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific*. Rodgers and Hammerstein knew this would be a hit. *South Pacific* contains many unique features. To begin with, it has two serious leading couples. Generally, in previous shows, the second couple was comedic. Additionally, neither pair sings a love duet. In chapter three, I will work these oddities into a larger understanding of the musical, one that takes into account its origins, the book which inspired the composer and librettist, as well as other unique characteristics and an overview of the original runs. Also, I will discuss racism, the most controversial song in the musical, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” awards, potential political ramifications and why a main character had to die.
After their success with *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein were inspired by Margaret Landon’s book, *Anna and the King of Siam*. It was the only time in their illustrious careers Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote a role for a specific person (Gertrude Lawrence). One of the unique features in this musical involved our main couple, Anna and the King: they never declare their mutual attraction to each other due to the fact they have different ethnic backgrounds. In chapter four, I will discuss the origins of this work, the portrayal of Asian culture, similarities with *South Pacific*, and Western ideals in the musical. I will also examine the awards the work has received, the film version, the actor has most often played the King, the relationship between Anna and the King, and the famous “Shall We Dance?” scene.

After the death of Oscar Hammerstein II, Leonard Bernstein carried on his legacy of incorporating social issues into musicals. He originally envisioned *West Side Story* as a love story where romance reigns victorious over religious differences. However, after a drive in New York City, he changed the focus to that of racial tensions. Bernstein credited choreographer Jerome Robbins with the Romeo and Juliet parallel. In chapter five, I will discuss the origins of the work using Bernstein’s diary entries, connections to *Romeo and Juliet*, racial tensions, problems inherent in the musical, and the concept of the American dream. A short conclusion will tie together the major themes of the previous chapters and speculate on the contribution these musicals have made to racial understanding in America.
Imagine hearing about a new musical to be premiered in Washington D.C. The only aspect of the play you know is the title. You arrive on opening night at the National Theatre on Tuesday, November 15, 1927. Once you have been seated, you observe the remainder of the theatre. The audience consists of all white people, most of whom look affluent. The overture begins and the curtain rises. You see a boat docked on the levee and Negro stevedores are piling bails of cotton. The music begins and the first phrase sung is “Niggers all work on de Mississippi.” What did I just hear? “Niggers?” This cannot be. What kind of musical starts off with that word?

This is the start to one of the most interesting and unique musicals ever written, Showboat. This work was among the first musicals to integrate social elements and the use of song to further the plot. A majority of the shows during this time were revues or ensemble shows whose musical numbers became popular hits heard on the radio. Showboat challenged American citizens to evaluate their personal values with regard to the treatment of others, specifically blacks. In this chapter, I will discuss the origins of the musical, social elements, changes in the subsequent revivals, white stereotypes concerning blacks, the
music, and perhaps the single most controversial aspect: the use of the word “niggers.”

*Showboat* is based on the novel of the same name written by Edna Ferber, a Jewish woman. In her thesis, “Edna Ferber’s *Showboat* as literature and as film,” Gwen T. Anderson provides a glimpse into Ferber’s life and the persecution she faced being a Jew surrounded by Christians.

As a child she lived in small towns that were very provincial and predominantly Protestant. She was extremely sensitive to all forms of snobbery, hypocrisy and bigotry. Her legacy in *Showboat* is the clear presentation of southern life as she saw it in her characters—letting readers draw conclusions for themselves.¹

Having been discriminated against had a profound impact on Ferber. I believe this led her to pursue these issues in her novels.

*Showboats* were a fad in the 1800s. However, these boats began to disappear toward the turn of the century. Since the popularity of the showboats were on the decline, Ferber had a difficult time finding one in order to be as historically accurate as possible in her novel. After completing her research, the novel was published in segments in the *Women’s Home Companion*.

There are a few notable differences between the novel and the musical. In the novel, Cap’n Andy, the leader of the showboat, Cotton Blossom, his wife, Parthy Ann Hawks and Gaylord Ravenal, a local gambler who falls for Andy’s daughter, Magnolia, all die. By contrast, all of the characters are living at the end of the musical.² Within a few years after their marriage and the birth of their daughter, Ravenal deserts them. Once he abandons his family in the novel, Ravenal never comes back. In the musical version, he returns. In the novel, Kim,
their daughter, becomes a leading lady of the theatre, marries a man named Ken and has a son. In the musical, she has grown to be a star of the showboat troupe.

When the story was published as a complete novel (as opposed to a series of vignettes) it was read by composer Jerome Kern. He, in turn, contacted lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. They read the work independently, yet sketched the plot using the same scenes.

United in their quest to create a musical from this piece of literature, Kern contacted Ferber requesting the rights to Showboat, but she refused. Showboat did not fit the mold of a typical 1920s musical. The story unfolds over several decades. The social issues discussed were not in line with the comedic stories of the revue shows. Determined to bring this story to the stage, Kern contacted Alexander Wollcott, a friend of the author. Through Wollcott, Kern met Ferber, who immediately agreed to the project. However she wanted to hear the music; as she later reminisced:

He played and sang “Ol’ Man River.” The music mounted, mounted and I give you my word my hair stood on end, the tears came to my eyes, I breathed like a heroine in a melodrama. This was great music. This was music that would outlast Jerome Kern’s day and mine. I never have heard it since without that emotional surge. When Showboat was revived four years after its original production I saw the audience, after Paul Robeson’s singing of “Ol’ Man River,” shout and cheer and behave generally as I’ve never seen an audience behave in any theater in all my years of playgoing.

After hearing and feeling the power and emotion behind “Ol’ Man River,” Edna Ferber could not help but love this song:
Since then I’ve supposed I’ve heard the *Showboat* music and “Ol’ Man River,” especially a 1,000 times. I must break down and confess to being one of those whose eyes grow dreamy and whose mouth is wreathed in wistful smiles whenever any orchestra plays “Ol’ Man River”…I never have tired of it. I just happen to think that when Jerome Kern wrote the *Showboat* score he achieved the most beautiful and important light-opera music that has ever been written in America. And I consider Oscar Hammerstein’s lyrics to “Ol’ Man River” to be powerful, native, tragic and true.⁷

“Ol’ Man River” is perhaps the highlight of *Showboat*. Interestingly enough, it is not performed by one of the lead characters, but by Joe, a black employee of the Cotton Blossom. The song discusses the plight of the black man, just thirty years after the Civil War.

‘Dere’s an ol’ man called de Mississippi;  
Dat’s de ol’ man dat I’d like to be!  
What does he care if de world’s got troubles?  
What does he care if de land ain’t free?…  
He don’ plant taters,  
He don’ plant cotton,  
An’ dem dat plants ‘em  
Is soon forgotten…  
You an’ me, we sweat an’ strain,  
Body all achin’ an’ racked wid pain-  
Tote, dat barge!  
Lif’ dat bale!  
Git a little drunk,  
An’ you land in jail…  
An’, gits weary  
An’ sick of tryin’;  
Ah’m tired of livin’  
An’ skeered of dyin’,…  
Niggers all work on de Mississippi,  
Niggers all work while de white folks play,  
Pullin’ dem boats from de dawn to sunset,  
Gittin’ no rest till de Judgment Day,  
Don’ look up  
An’ don’ look down-  
You don’ dast make  
De white boss frown.  
Bend your knees
An’ bow your head,
An’ pull that rope
Until yo’ dead,
Let me go ‘way from the Mississippi
Let me go ‘way from de white man boss;
Show me dat stream called de river Jordan,
Dat’s de ol’ stream dat I long to cross.
Ah gits weary
An’ sick of tryin’
Ah’m tired of livin’
An’ skeered of dyin’,
But Ol’ Man River,
He jes keeps rollin’ along!

While blacks had at this point been emancipated for thirty years, they still were not treated with respect. Early on in the song, Joe sings about being drunk. Presumably, if a black man were found drunk and disorderly, he would go to jail. Also, according to the lyrics, black men still held the same jobs as when they were slaves: planting potatoes and cotton. They still had to worry about their white bosses. But one question still remains. Who or what is “Ol’ Man River?”

There can be many interpretations of “Ol’ Man River.” First, one could take the lyrics at face value, understanding it as the Mississippi River. However, if one reads the lyrics closely it becomes apparent that “Ol’ Man River” is time. “But Ol’ Man River, he jes keeps rollin’ along.” Time keeps going. It has no feelings or concerns. Time is time. It is abstract. It does not care if you are mistreated or are the bell of the ball. Despite the years of freedom, blacks remained pigeon-holed by society. Yet time keeps rollin’ along. The importance of this is clear: identifying “Ol’ Man River” with time underlines the musical’s political dimension.
After Ferber heard and heartily approved of the music, Kern and Hammerstein presented the work to Florenz Ziegfeld, the most popular Broadway producer of the time. He was concerned about the musical because it was radically different from his previous shows. “Hammerstein’s book is too serious. In its present shape, it hasn’t got a chance except with the critics and I’m not producing for critics and empty houses.” \(^8\) *Showboat* was supposed to be premiered in Ziegfeld’s new theatre but a play, *Rio Rita*, took off, which delayed production. \(^9\) Interestingly enough, *Showboat* was Hammerstein’s only Ziegfeld production. \(^10\) The initial difficulties in getting *Showboat* performed may help to explain why, despite its ultimate success, Hammerstein and Ziegfeld never collaborated again.

After the opening night, *Showboat* continued for four more nights in Washington D.C. The show then moved to the Nixon Theatre in Pittsburgh from November 21-26, 1927. The Ohio Theatre in Cleveland hosted *Showboat* from November 28 to December 3, 1927. The Erlinger Theatre in Philadelphia was next. The show then moved to its ultimate destination, the Ziegfeld Theatre, where the show ran for 572 performances. \(^11\)

Besides its groundbreaking focus on racism, another aspect of *Showboat* that made it different from other works of the time was the music. Ziegfeld was generally more concerned with his performer’s looks than with their singing ability. Here, by contrast, good singing is absolutely essential, for the drama is dependent upon the audience being able to recognize motives that like Wagner’s leitmotifs recur in the service of the plot. An example is Magnolia’s piano playing...
in Act I, Scene One. The motive is first heard while Parthy Ann Hawks is talking with the townsfolk. It reappears just minutes later when Ravenal enters. Another connection is evident between “Cotton Blossom” and “Ol’ Man River.” The first six notes of “Cotton Blossom” are an inversion of the first six notes of “Ol’ Man River,” only presented twice as fast. This is important to recognize since the songs offer opposing views of the same subject. “Cotton Blossom” suggests life as it glitters mercurially on the stage, while “Ol’ Man River,” as discussed above, offers up the slow and meaningful passage of time in real life.¹²

_Showboat_ incorporated a variety of musical styles and genres, including hymns, spirituals, popular songs, jazz and vaudeville.¹³ An example of the spiritual can be found in “Ol’ Man River.” The song is very solemn and reverent. “After the Ball” is the only song in the musical Jerome Kern did not write. It was a popular tune with words and music by Charles K. Harris. Magnolia sings this piece for her job as a club singer since Ravenal has deserted his family. “I Might Fall Back on You” is sung by Frank and Ellie, the comedic couple of the troupe. These characters possess a vaudevillian type of personality. In the context of New York theater, comedy was primarily the province of the vaudeville stage.

In most modern day musicals of the post- Ziegfeld era, the most popular type of song is the love ballad. _Showboat’s_ two glowing examples are “Make Believe” and “You Are Love.” In “Make Believe,” Magnolia has just encountered Ravenal, an attractive high-society type of man. She is immediately attracted to him but is leery to converse with Ravenal as they have not been properly introduced. Since he is eager to talk with Magnolia, he suggests they make
believe they are in love. By the conclusion of the song, they are, in fact, smitten
with each other.

Toward the end of Act One, another such ballad, “You Are Love,” is also
sung by Magnolia and Ravenal. Circumstances have caused Magnolia and
Ravenal to take over as the leading couple of the troupe. In the course of
performing show after show, they have genuinely fallen in love. However, Parthy
Ann Hawks does not take kindly to this relationship. In order to see each other
off the stage, the couple must arrange a secret rendezvous. Ravenal decides to
propose and Magnolia accepts. “You Are Love” embodies his thoughts and
feelings.

“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” is sung by Julie after hearing Magnolia state
her love for Ravenal. Julie tries to warn Magnolia against falling in love with a
man whom no one truly knows. “But if I found out he was no account, I’d stop
lovin’ him,” replies Magnolia. Julie tries to tell Magnolia about love and how no
matter what Steve does, she will always love him. Again she cautions, “Love’s a
funny thing-there’s no sense to it-that’s why you got to be so careful when it
comes creeping up on you.” After Julie begins to sing, Queenie enters with a
puzzled look on her face; she asks Julie how she knows that song, since she has
only heard colored folks perform it. Julie is flustered but manages to avoid
answering the question. This foreshadows the most important scene in the
musical: the miscegenation scene. I will discuss this scene in a moment, but first
want to prepare the ground for it by broadening our awareness of the musical’s
social themes.
One of the more controversial numbers is “In Dahomey.” This occurs while the Ravenals and Hawks are attending the 1903 Chicago World’s Fair. It portrays the “wild” African villagers. Such portrayals were inevitably received negatively:

Contrary to what Showboat indicates, the Dahomey exhibit at the Chicago Fair was constructed by the Fon, a people from Dahomey, and so was fairly authentic. On the other hand, the exhibit did much to convince whites that blacks were essentially a savage people further reinforcing existing stereotypes. [Also], “In Dahomey” was an homage to a landmark musical from 1903. In Dahomey was the first major musical with an all-black cast to enjoy a long Broadway run: notably, its representation of life in Dahomey was exactly the kind of projection that Showboat implies took place in Chicago a decade earlier.14

Showboat was groundbreaking in its incorporation of social elements heretofore absent from the musical. Besides racism (in the form of bigotry and miscegenation), these include gambling, spousal desertion, and alcoholism. Ravenal is a wayfarer who gambles. Sometimes he can control this habit, but often he cannot. This failure as a husband and a father causes him to desert his family; he feels since he cannot regularly provide for them, the family would be better if he left.

Another example of spousal desertion is Steve Baker, Julie’s husband. Years after Julie and Steve have left the Cotton Blossom, we see Julie in Chicago, abandoned by Steve. She now has to support herself. Julie is singing at the Trocadero Night Club. However, more often than not, she can be found drinking, and is quite often drunk. It is Steve’s abandonment that has driven Julie to alcoholism.
As stated earlier, the miscegenation scene is this musical’s most controversial one. Pete, an employee of the Cotton Blossom, is in love with Julie, despite the fact she is married to someone else. He showers her with gifts that she in turn gives away. When Pete sees Queenie wearing the broach he gave Julie, he becomes enraged and threatens to reveal Julie’s secret. Pete locates the town sheriff, who is on his way to the showboat. Steve, having discovered this, decides to cut Julie’s finger and suck her blood. Once the sheriff arrives, he informs them there is a miscegenation case on board. Julie is half-black and half-white, (this explains why Julie knew “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man”). Steve comes to his wife’s defense when he claims to be black also. All the characters in the scene will swear to the fact that he has “nigger blood” in him. The sheriff believes the group but warns them not to give a show that night with a mixed cast.

I believe one of the more beautiful scenes occurs after the crowd has dispersed. Magnolia decides to go to her friend and provide as much comfort as possible.

  Parthy: You come back here this instant! No daughter of mine’s goin’ to talk to that-that-

  Magnolia: Let me go, Mother! I’m goin’ in to Julie!

  Parthy: Well, Hawks, you see what your showboat has done to your daughter-

  Andy: I think the showboat’s made a damn fine girl out of my daughter. Cap’n Andy is correct; Magnolia is a fine girl. While everyone is looking at Steve and Julie as if they were a pair of lepers, Magnolia’s first thought is to comfort her
friend. Magnolia does not see race when she looks at a person. She converses with Joe and Queenie as if they were a part of her family and in a sense they are; they are part of the Cotton Blossom family. Magnolia has a certain innocence about her. She possesses the wonderful ability to see people as they are, rather than to define them by their skin color or looks. She sees Ravenal as a dashing young man. Despite popular opinion, she cannot see him as a “no-account river feller.” Perhaps this innocence and open-mindedness is what Kern and Hammerstein wanted the audience to see. Maybe they hoped that people in the 1920s and even today would look past their own personal prejudices regarding skin color and see people for who they were.

Racial issues remain unresolved in Showboat. This is most probably because they were still volatile in society at that time. Showboat defines problems without giving the illusion of solving them. Raymond Knapp discusses possible solutions to the race problem in the United States:

On one level, then, we might reasonably note that there is no solution to the race problem in America-so that Showboat has no option but to leave its related dramatic problems unresolved. But, on another level, we may also note that despite the extended representations of the plight of American blacks in Showboat, the show’s dramatic focus remains resolutely on its white population, whose problems are at each turn placed in the foreground. Thus, the context in which there seems to be no solution to America’s race problem is already a closed shop…

For the musical to be anything other than dramatically over-ended would thus be false. Showboat is ultimately less about being black at this time than being white. Showboat did much to change the public’s perception of blacks, according to Kislan:
The [black] race was a victim of much that was tasteless and derisive until Showboat revealed a sympathetic treatment of a serious dramatic situation where dignity survives where misery, hard work and suffering waste the body but not man’s indomitable spirit.\textsuperscript{16}

I believe this was one of Kern and Hammerstein’s motives for writing the show. A predominantly white audience needed to be educated regarding a major problem in this country.

Showboat was the first musical to use black and white choruses, even though they were separated. Despite the fact that the musical calls for a black chorus and two black employees (Joe and Queenie), not all the performers in the original production were black. The first Queenie was Tess Gardella, a black-face entertainer.\textsuperscript{17} She went by the stage name, Aunt Jemima. She was so popular an entertainer that the program listed her as Aunt Jemima instead of Tess Gardella. Richard Kislan describes the roles blacks played in theatre productions before this show: “Before Showboat existed, musicals treated the black person as a comic character in the genre of fool, clown or darkie simpleton.”\textsuperscript{18} In this work, Joe and Queenie are part of the troupe. They are the fuel that keeps the showboat running. If it were not for Queenie, the troupe would starve. Joe is a Renaissance man who helps whenever possible. Cap’n Andy and his daughter are similar in that they treat Joe, Queenie and any other black character as a member of the family; you would never hear them uttering racial epithets.

Over the years, the libretto and music saw changes with each revival or film version. “Gallavantin’ Around” is a blackface number sung by Irene Dunne
(Magnolia) in the 1936 film version. It was a controversial number then, and in the two subsequent film versions, it was removed. The main change in the libretto involved the term “nigger.” In the 1946 revival the opening chorus changed the wording from “niggers” to “colored folks.” When spoken by sympathetic characters, the dialogue went through similar substitutions. However, “nigger” remained when spoken with hostility by Pete or Vallon.

The use of the word “niggers” is probably the most controversial aspect of the musical, even more so than that of a bi-racial woman being married to a white man. The term “niggers” is never used in any film version. This is due to the fact that black cast members, in many versions of the musical, have objected to the term and have, in fact, refused to sing it. The opening line, which contained the epithet, “niggers”, is perhaps the most shocking piece of dialogue:

Thus the progression of euphemistic alterations to which this opening line has been subjected is almost ludicrous. First it was “Niggers all work on de Mississippi” in the 1936 film it was “Darkies all work on de Mississippi,” in the 1946 revival it was “Colored folks all work on de Mississippi,” in Till the Clouds Roll By (a film based on the life of Jerome Kern), it was “Here we all work on de Mississippi” and by the 1966 revival it was “Nobody all work on de Mississippi” because the Negro chorus was omitted altogether from the opening number.

Miles Kreuger laments this trend as one that has robbed the musical of its power to stun theatergoers:

…while his use of the word “nigger” is not a white writer’s attempt to be derogatory or flippant, but rather an unashamed expression of artistic honesty; for the term was and, in some cases, still used in the South by whites and Negroes alike. Unfortunately, the honest use of this term has grown unpopular in the last few decades…Showboat alike has fallen victim to a bleaching process that has drained them of that ineffable quality of truth that occurs only when the right word is chosen for the right situation. In the case of Showboat, the use of “nigger” as the very opening
word serves superbly to shock an audience for its complacency and cause it to consider the servile condition to which southern Negroes were subjected nearly a century ago. The word is therefore an indictment against those times and conditions, not against the Negro race.24

I agree with Kreuger. I do not believe Kern and Hammerstein intended to offend African-Americans. Their purpose was to educate an audience consisting mostly of white people regarding the ignorance of their attitudes. They created Magnolia with her innocence to serve as a model for the spectators to follow. Likewise, I believe that is why in the 1946 revival every character, with the exception of Pete and Vallon, used “negroes” instead of “niggers.” Kern, Hammerstein and Ferber for that matter, were aiming for historical accuracy. It was not their intention to offend. As stated earlier, Edna Ferber was a Jewish woman who knew the effect of persecution. The implication of this point is that the language they used reveals a heightened sensitivity to ethnic and racial issues, not an insensitivity.

I find it interesting that people have become obsessed with the use of “nigger” in the musical. In chapter five, I will be discussing West Side Story. The musical describes the conflict between Caucasian and Puerto Rican gangs. Here, the epithet “spic” is often used. Yet none of my research has shown any uproar at the use of this term as opposed to “nigger.” Why the difference? If people are quick to be offended by “nigger”, why does the term “spic” not bring the same reaction? I suspect the discrepancy originates from the horrible connotation derived from the word “nigger.” Its strong relationship to slavery will always resurface.
The most recent recording of Showboat has caused much controversy. This version, which dates from 1988 and features the London Sinfonietta, conducted by John McGlinn, has ironically received much criticism for its historical accuracy. The extensive booklet contains a variety of background information on the original production. McGlinn’s intentions at the beginning of this project were to record the show, complete with dialogue in its original form. The three CDs thus include numbers that were cut from the show during its test run.  

In his book, Enchanted Evenings, Geoffrey Block discusses the problems McGlinn encountered with the black singers while still attempting to be true to the original script:

Accounts of the genesis of McGlinn’s recordings of the “authentic” Showboat of 1927 report that the contracted African-American chorus refused to sing the offending word “niggers” and therefore was replaced by the Ambrosian Chorus who had been contracted to sing the white choral parts. To show his solidarity with the black chorus, Willard White, the Joe for this recording resigned and only after consultations with Eartha Kitt, a black performer and an articulate and influential opponent of racial indignities, did Bruce Hubbard consent to sing the role of Joe and the word “niggers.”

In reading along with the recording, I noticed something in the dialogue in the pantry scene when Julie and Magnolia are discussing Ravenal while Queenie is cooking. Julie wants a biscuit but is denied by Queenie. Julie suggests Joe help her. Queenie exclaims: “Joe! Dat lazy nigger don’t help me-he’s always too tired-ef dat feller, ever tried to cook, he’d be puttin’ popcorn in the flapjacks so dat dey’d turn over by damselves!” I believe it is the only time in the recording where either Joe or Queenie use the word “nigger.” As suggested earlier, the only characters that use the term outside of a song are Pete and Vallon.
A critic noted in the recent PBS special, "Broadway: The American Musical," "Musicals are divided into everything before *Showboat* and everything after *Showboat.*" Showboat was groundbreaking in several respects. This musical focused more on the plot, characters and storyline. Earlier works only focused on the song, which was also featured on the radio. The songs helped to further the plot—not just create a happy atmosphere as in previous shows. It was one of the first musicals to incorporate a “show within a show,” an idea that was later used by Cole Porter in *Kiss Me, Kate.* These points help to explain why *Showboat* is considered one of the first to bridge two genres: 1) musical comedy, which used vernacular songs and dance music and 2) operetta-music and dramatic integration. *Showboat* was the first to use a white and black chorus together on stage, an interesting feat considering it premiered in 1927! It was also among the first to utilize continuous underscoring. Another striking trait is that the main title song, “Ol’ Man River,” is sung by a black character. Finally, *Showboat* was one of the first to incorporate social elements including spousal desertion, alcoholism and most importantly, racism.

Kern and Hammerstein were pioneers in this new era of the musical. As a team, *Showboat* was their greatest success. Kern never again achieved the kind of notoriety that *Showboat* brought him. Hammerstein would have to wait almost two decades for his next hit, *South Pacific.*
CHAPTER III
SOUTH PACIFIC

South Pacific was Rodgers and Hammerstein’s second hit following the success of Oklahoma! The story centers around two couples during World War II. Nellie, a U.S. Navy nurse, has fallen for Emile de Becque, a French planter on the island. Meanwhile, new arrival, Lt. Cable has come under the “spell” of Bloody Mary, a native woman who wants Cable to marry her daughter. Problems arise when Nellie and Cable confront their prejudices. In this chapter, I will discuss the origins of the musical, the book on which the work is based, unique characteristics, the original runs, racism, the most controversial song in the musical, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” awards, and potential political ramifications. I will also speculate on the dramatic motives behind the death of one of the main characters, Lt. Joe Cable.

When looking for their next project, Rodgers and Hammerstein encountered Joshua Logan, a fellow Broadway composer who owned the rights to the novel Tales of the South Pacific. Logan had been warned to keep this secret, given the blockbuster potential of the story. However, on separate occasions, he told both Rodgers and Hammerstein. They liked the idea and contacted James Michener, the author of the book.27
Michener collected these tales while completing his tour of duty in the South Pacific during World War II. Michener’s book won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.\(^{28}\) He served as a consultant when Rodgers and Hammerstein were writing the libretto. In addition to giving the rights to the famous pair, Michener received a small advance and 1\% of the gross.\(^{29}\) Rodgers and Hammerstein selected two stories: “Fo’ Dolla” and “Our Heroine.”\(^{30}\)

“Fo’ Dolla” describes the life of Bloody Mary, a local merchant who is rumored to be swindling the military personnel on the island. When she meets Lt. Cable, Mary immediately tempts him with the splendor of Bali Ha’i. Once he arrives on the island, Mary introduces him to her daughter, Liat. After their initial meeting, Lt. Cable’s fate is sealed. The subject of “Our Heroine” is Ensign Nellie Forbush, a Navy nurse. After several meetings with an older French planter, Emile de Becque, he proposes marriage. She accepts but not without internal conflict. Despite her inner turmoil, Nellie is elated, that is until she meets Emile’s children. Now she has to make a decision as to which is stronger: her prejudices or her love for Emile.

*South Pacific* had tryout performances at the Schubert Theatre in New Haven between March 7-12, 1949. Boston’s Schubert Theatre had another round of tryout performances between March 15-April 2, 1949.\(^{31}\) The New York run began on April 7, 1949 and gave the final performance on May 16, 1953 at the Majestic Theatre.\(^{32}\) The show was so well received that another run began less than two months later and lasting an additional six months. This gave *South Pacific* an impressive opening run with a grand total of 1,925 performances.\(^{33}\)
A unique characteristic of *South Pacific* is the lack of a love duet. The song that comes closest is the reprise of “Some Enchanted Evening.” Here Nellie and Emile are singing to themselves. When Rodgers and Hammerstein began to cast *South Pacific*, they wanted Mary Martin as Nellie. However, they had already signed former Metropolitan Opera star Ezio Pinza to play Emile. Martin felt uncomfortable with the possibility of a duet with such an accomplished tenor. She was nervous about being out-sung by a star of the Metropolitan. I believe Rodgers and Hammerstein wanted to showcase both stars, not promote a singing competition. In any case, they avoided the problem altogether by foregoing the traditional love duet.

Another rare characteristic in *South Pacific* is the seriousness of the dual love stories. This requires an explanation. In previous musicals like *Showboat* and *Oklahoma!,* the second leading couple was comedic. Such is the case for Frank and Ellie in *Showboat* and Ado Annie and Will Parker in *Oklahoma!* *South Pacific* has only one comedic character, Luther Billis, a Navy sailor. However, it contains two serious love stories in Lt. Cable/Liat and Nellie/Emile. When the romance between Nellie and Emile begins, she is slightly hesitant due to their age difference. The Americans on the island harbor another prejudice, that of age. They wonder how two people with a difference of 15-20 years could have anything in common. In short, how can a couple so unconnected remain together? Perhaps the answer lies in the old adage, opposites attract. Nellie is driven by her southern roots and her family’s views. Mrs. Forbush believes that a
couple with different backgrounds cannot survive. Nellie is confused and seeks advice from Lt. Cable who tells her to abandon this relationship with Emile.

Nellie overcomes her inborn prejudices and excitedly accepts Emile’s marriage proposal. He throws a party so Nellie can meet his friends. She has a wonderful time, even drinking a little too much. However, she sobers up very quickly when Emile introduces her to his half-Polynesian children. She thinks they are precious but has a hard time accepting the idea of him having been married to a Polynesian woman. As John Bush Jones explains in his book, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, it appears that Nellie equates Polynesians with African-Americans. This is a big problem for a southern girl. She has been taught, albeit inadvertently, that the races keep to themselves. I believe that in her mind she begins to picture a future with Emile. *How would people look at us as a couple with Polynesian children?* In Nellie’s home state of Arkansas, this group would not be readily accepted during this time in history.

Lt. Cable falls into Bloody Mary’s trap and requisitions a boat for Bali Ha’i. Once there, the group of sailors witnesses the traditional ceremonies of the island. Mary takes Lt. Cable away from the splendor to her house and introduces the lieutenant to her daughter. Liat is extremely beautiful and exotic. Cable is immediately attracted to her. She does not speak English. He, in turn, cannot speak her language. They find a common ground in French, even though each speaks only “un peu.” One interesting aspect of this relationship is that they do not speak to each other. All communication is through songs and mime. The only words Liat speaks in the musical are “un peu.”
In his dialogue, it seems that he is talking at her, not to her. She is in a constant state of bliss and ignorant of this barrier. Cable expresses his happiness in “Younger than Springtime.” He is excited to be in love. Cable is so enamored with Liat that the fact she is of another race has not even occurred to him. “Happy Talk” is sung by Bloody Mary while Liat makes hand gestures along with the lyrics. At this point life is wonderful. Mary begins to talk about a future for the couple. “You will have beautiful babies.” Cable finally realizes that a future with Liat is impossible. At this time, very few Americans would accept an interracial couple and Liat is devastated. Cable is as well, but knows he could not subject Liat, not to mention himself, to that type of cruelty.

Having dissolved her relationship, Nellie puts herself into presenting the best Thanksgiving show ever. This part of the musical provides much needed laughter. Here the entertainment features a cross-dressing Luther Billis, the lone comedic character of the musical. This scene is intended to provide the war-weary soldiers with entertainment that will enable them, at least for a short while to forget the horrors around them.

It is after this scene that Nellie encounters a brooding Lt. Cable, recovering from malaria. He had much time to think about Liat and the possibility of their future. Cable tells Nellie that after the war he is going to marry Liat and live on the island. Nellie, who is concerned about such a sudden change of heart, reminds him of the fiancée he left in Philadelphia. His response, “My Girl Back Home,” was cut from the original show but was reinserted for the film
version. The song discusses the differences between life in the U.S. and the South Pacific.

At the end of the number Emile arrives. He would like to talk to Nellie alone but she wants the lieutenant to stay. Cable reluctantly agrees and turns his back to give the two some privacy. Emile asks Nellie, point blank, why she broke their engagement. She is extremely cautious about her answers. Perhaps Nellie can not or will not admit the real reason: she cannot bear the thought of Emile having married a Polynesian woman. As mentioned earlier, races do not mingle in her world. Her awkward attitude is underscored by this irony: she rather easily overcame the notion of marrying an older European man who is different from her in virtually every aspect of life. When Emile asks if he did something to offend her, she declares “no.” When he asks if it is the children she replies, “No, they’re sweet.” Emile: “It is their Polynesian mother then. Their mother and I.” Nellie: “Yes.”

Finally, Nellie must acknowledge her prejudice. Emile is shocked and cannot believe that she would think this way.

Nellie: I can’t help it. This is something that is born in me.

Emile: I do not believe it is born in you.

Nellie: Then why? Why do I feel the way I do?

She quickly runs away and escapes this encounter.

Lt. Cable is still there and cannot help but feel angry about the situation. Emile: “Why does she talk like that? Why do you have this belief you and she? I do not believe it is born in you!” Here Lt. Cable begins the most controversial
number of the show, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” which I shall discuss later.

Having faced the reality of their situations, Lt. Cable and Emile decide to go on a secret mission for the Navy. They are trying to spy on Japanese ships and relay that information to base. During this task Nellie discovers that Emile is working for the U.S. She realizes that her true feelings of love have overcome her prejudices. Meanwhile, Liat appears with Bloody Mary. She refuses to marry anyone but the lieutenant. Unfortunately for her, Lt. Cable died during the mission. Since the Navy lost contact with Emile, Nellie is unsure if he is living. This causes her to realize how foolish she has been. She decides to see de Becque’s children. The musical’s ending is unique in the absence of a big number. While eating lunch the children are singing “Dites-moi,” a sort of nursery rhyme and are interrupted by Emile’s arrival. Nellie is shocked and happy all at once. The only interaction between Emile and Nellie is their clasping of hands underneath the table.

This musical is filled with racism. As mentioned earlier, Nellie cannot accept Emile’s marriage to a Polynesian woman, because in her mind, races must not commingle. Lt. Cable cannot marry Liat because of his own inner prejudices. “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” created a stir when the show first opened and the controversy would remain for several years to come. The lyrics, with their direct indictment of racism, are clearly political in intent: Lt. Cable: “It’s not born in you it happens after you’re born.”
You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear,
You’ve got to be taught from year to year,
It’s got to be drum in your dear little ear,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.

You’ve got to be taught to be afraid
Of people who’s eyes are oddly made
And people who’s skin is a different shade.
You’ve got to be carefully taught,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.

You’ve got to be taught
Before it’s too late
Before you are six
Or seven or eight.
To hate all the people
Your relatives hate
You’ve got to be carefully taught,
You’ve got to be carefully taught!

Richard Rodgers defended the song against charges of sermonizing and justified it on the grounds of Cable’s psychological development:

Another song for Joe Cable, “Carefully Taught” has been denigrated in some quarters because it is considered propagandistic. The fact is that the song was never written as a “message” song, though it has, I know, provided ministers of many faiths with a topic for a sermon. It was included in South Pacific for the simple reason that Oscar and I felt it was needed in a particular spot for a Princeton-educated young WASP who, despite his background and upbringing had fallen in love with a Polynesian girl. It was perfectly in keeping with the character and situation that once having lost his heart, he would express his feelings about the superficiality of racial barriers. End of sermon.35

Lt. Cable is expressing his frustrations. The ending of the quotation is particularly interesting. If having racial barriers is superficial, are you not expressing your opinion through song? I agree that the idea of racial barriers is ridiculous. However, writing a song about racism cannot be about anything else except the issue at hand. I would not say this song is propagandistic but it does
make us think about our own values. In this light one I find “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” a message song. It carries a provocative idea of breaking down barriers.

James Michener heard many complaints about this song during the show’s trial run. He relayed these comments to Rodgers and Hammerstein, but stood by them when, as he stated: “The authors replied stubbornly that this number represented why they had wanted to do this play and that even if it meant the failure of the production, it was going to stay in.”

For his part, Michener lauded the foregrounding of a critique of racism in the musical.

*South Pacific* received many accolades. It won the Pulitzer Prize in drama and was thus only the second musical at the time to receive such an award. The original cast recording earned $400,000 before the show opened and an additional $700,000 after the premiere. The musical also won the 1949-50 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical.

In addition the musical won nine Donaldson Awards that year. Rodgers and Hammerstein won for Best Score and Lyrics respectively. Joshua Logan and Hammerstein shared Best Book honors while Logan received the Best Direction award. Ezio Pinza was awarded the Best Debut Performance. Myron McCormack (Luther Billis) and Juanita Hall (Bloody Mary) won for Best Supporting Performance in a Musical. The show won the biggest award of the night, Best Musical. *South Pacific* won many Tony Awards that year as well. These included the same awards as above with one exception: Ezio Pinza won for Best Male Performance in a Musical as opposed to Best Debut.
Despite the many awards and respect earned in the North, this production caused much controversy in the South. Atlanta was severely affected by the musical in 1953 and even more so almost 25 years later. As Hugh Fordin describes in the 1950s, “[After a] road company performance [in Atlanta], legislators protested the song and introduced legislation to outlaw works having an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow.” Although—or rather precisely because—legislation of this nature echoes of censorship, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein felt an obligation to express their opinions on prejudice through their work. Obviously, this angered the South in general, and legislators in particular. They did not want to be portrayed in a negative light. One such opinion was voiced loudly by a state representative. Thus, the legislation idea reappeared in 1976:

State Representative David C. Jones: urging “justification of interracial marriage” was “to us…very offensive. Intermarriage produces half-breeds and half-breeds are not conducive to the higher type of society…In the South we have pure bloodlines and we intend to keep it that way.” Oscar replied to reports that he didn’t think the legislators were representing the people of Georgia very well and he was surprised by the idea that anything kind and humane must necessarily originate in Moscow.  

As the quotation suggests, Hammerstein wanted to keep the song in the show partly because he felt that the people of Georgia were being misrepresented by their own political leaders.

Scholars and general enthusiasts alike, have often speculated as to why Cable “had to die.” As Ethan Mordden discusses, Cable dies because of societal pressure:
Yet there is a center: Bali Ha’i, a place we visit but cannot imagine, a dream come true but only for those with dreams. De Becque and Bloody Mary (and by extension, Liat) have dreams. The unfocused, but large-souled Nellie can share a dream. Cable cannot. Submitting to pressures of class and family background, he has renounced dreams for protocol: that’s why he dies. He wasn’t deserving, wasn’t even alive, but for that afternoon with Liat, “Your own special dream,” Bloody Mary warns Cable in “Bali Ha’i” the romantic version of the theme. And “You’ve got to have a dream” she reminds him in “Happy Talk” the comic version. She is, in effect, ambassador from this dream world to the mortal kingdom, the deity but also gatekeeper of Bali Ha’i. It is she who signs Cable’s death warrant. While renouncing Liat, he presents her with a family heirloom, a lucky watch that saved his grandfather from harm in WWI. Furious at Cable’s resistance, Mary grabs the watch and smashes it as if it were Cable. It is.

Another dramatic justification for Cable’s death may be that the connection between Liat and Cable was pure and innocent. As the younger couple, they had not yet become jaded in life. Everything was perfect. Perhaps that was the problem. Liat and Cable were almost too enamored with each other. They could only see themselves, as if through blinders, unaware of the cruel world surrounding them. Liat is Tonkanese and Lt. Cable is American. The idea of an interracial couple was extremely taboo in World War II. Some audience members were angry at the song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught.” Can you imagine how they would have reacted if Rodgers and Hammerstein allowed this couple to remain together and get married? Cable or Liat had to die in order to keep the audience happy. It could be for this very reason the couple cannot be together.

I believe this anti-climactic ending has roots in the original casting. As discussed earlier, Rodgers and Hammerstein did not want to create any competition between Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza. A big love duet would have
meant them singing together. All parties involved wanted to avoid this competitiveness.

In contrast to the primary position it holds in the relationship of Lt. Cable and Liat, racism is secondary to Emile and Nellie. While Emile’s children are half-Polynesian (through their mother), he and Nellie are both white, and thus not a direct challenge to racists. The latter might have objected to the fact that Emile was once married to a Polynesian woman, but since she is deceased, this is no longer an issue.

Rodgers and Hammerstein initiated their racially charged work where Kern and Hammerstein had begun. After the success of *South Pacific* the writing duo chose to continue along the same path. Their interest in Asian culture drew them to renew their collaboration furthering the discussion of racial diversity with the production of *The King and I*. 
CHAPTER IV

THE KING AND I

After their success with *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein were seeking another project. They found inspiration in Margaret Landon’s book, *Anna and the King of Siam*. However, one should not give all of the credit to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Rather, look toward the William Morris Talent Agency, more specifically to one of their clients, Gertrude Lawrence. Ms. Lawrence read Landon’s book and thought she would fit the role of Anna perfectly. It was the only time in their illustrious careers Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote a role for a specific person. In this chapter, I will examine the musical’s origins, the portrayal of Asian culture, similarities with *South Pacific*, the subtle appearance of racism, and the insinuation of western ideals in the musical. In addition, I will discuss the awards the work has received, the film version, the actor who has most often portrayed the King (Yul Brynner), the relationship between Anna and the King, and the famous “Shall We Dance” scene.

Landon derived the story from the real Anna Leonowens’ diary entries. However, she altered reality slightly for dramatic effect. In the book and the musical, Anna and the King encounter each other on a daily basis. However,
their real counterparts rarely saw each other. Before Rodgers and
Hammerstein’s musical, Hollywood put its version on the big screen in a film
entitled Anna and the King of Siam in 1946.

One of the first problems Rodgers and Hammerstein encountered was
how to portray Asian culture. The following is an excerpt from Oscar
Hammerstein’s reflections:

I did not want to tread on any Oriental toes. I had to be careful about the
large number of wives in the royal family. What was required was the
Eastern sense of dignity and pageantry—and none of this business of girls
dressed in Oriental costumes and dancing out onto the stage and singing
“ching-aling, ching-aling” with their fingers in the air. 47

I believe that Hammerstein was aware of the controversy caused by “You’ve Got
to Be Carefully Taught” from South Pacific, and tried his best to avoid such
comments again. In addition, as discernible in the previous quotation, he did not
want to stereotype Asian people. Richard Rodgers encountered a similar
problem when trying to compose the music:

Not only would I have been incapable of creating anything authentically
Siamese, but even if I could, I wouldn’t have done it. Western audiences
are not attuned to the sounds of tinkling bells, high nasal strings, and
percussive gongs and would not find this kind of music attractive. If a
composer is to reach his audience—and surely that’s what theatre music is
all about—he must reach the people through sounds they can relate to. 48

Rodgers knew the success of the work would depend on the audience’s reaction,
since the number of tickets sold reflects the public opinion. Why would the public
spend money on an experience they would not enjoy? 49

In her book, Making Americans, Andrea Most describes how Siamese
culture could have been portrayed more accurately, and in the process,
reinforces my statement earlier regarding how the audience determines a musical's success:

It seems more than likely that if one were to attempt to reproduce with accuracy the court of the King of Siam in the year 1860, he might have to show the king as an individual quite unattractive (physically, at least) to the Western eye. The palace itself might show a certain weird charm, but there would probably be a strange odor about the place coming from the kitchen where strange and not entirely palatable foods are being prepared. Continue this technique and let it include the philosophies, the physical discomforts and the appearance of the Siamese women and it seems probable that you would end up repelling completely the Western eye, ear, nose and sense of touch..." [She uses the following quote from Richard Rodgers to reinforce her point.] "In 1942 I had never been in the state of Oklahoma and I suppose it may be truthfully said that Oklahoma! doesn’t contain a single bar of authentic southwestern music. It doesn’t seem to have hurt the overall effect.\textsuperscript{50}

It is relevant, both historically and artistically, to compare \textit{The King and I} to \textit{South Pacific} (see Chapter III). While they take place at different times in history, both musicals occur in relatively the same geographic area, Asia. Both contain two serious love stories, something unusual in a musical. In \textit{South Pacific}, we had Emile/Nellie and Lt. Cable/Liat. In \textit{The King and I}, we have Anna/King and Tuptim/Lung Tha. Tuptim has just arrived in Siam from Burma. She is a gift to the King and will become another in his harem of wives. Tuptim does not look on this idea favorably. Lung Tha has accompanied her on this journey to Siam. They are in love with each other but realize they cannot anger the King.

When Anna first arrives, she is under the impression that she is responsible for educating the children. However the King has changed her duties to include teaching his wives as well (at least the wives in the King’s good graces, that is). While the other wives are eager to learn, Tuptim has already
been taught English and decides she does not need to learn Western ways. Tuptim is very much saddened by her situation. The other wives do not help, for they cannot understand why she is unhappy about marrying the King. Aside from the fact that she is in love with someone else, I believe there is another reason for her unhappiness: Tuptim is a “modern day” woman. She does not enjoy the idea of being one in a sea of wives to the King. She gives the impression of believing in monogamy, a view shared by Lung Tha, so the libretto makes clear. In the “Eastern” context of this musical, Tuptim comes across not just as modern in her outlook, but as “Western” as well.

After she has lowered her defenses, Tuptim forms a friendship with Anna, who enables the new wife to further her education by reading books by British and American authors. One such book is *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Tuptim shows her creativity by staging the book as a ballet for the visiting British dignitaries. The group was sent by Queen Victoria to observe life in Siam. The King decided to host a banquet in their honor. The ballet, complete with narration by Tuptim, serves as the entertainment.

The work is transformed into an Asian masterpiece. All of the dancers are dressed in traditional Asian clothing and makeup. Eliza is still a slave in this version while her owner becomes King Simon of Legree. King Simon separates Eliza from her lover. A similar parallel can be made to Tuptim and Lung Tha. With this interpretation, Tuptim is essentially describing her unhappiness to the King via the ballet. After Eliza’s escape, King Simon leaves to retrieve her. It is through the help of her fellow slaves and friends that Simon dies and Eliza is
reunited with her lover. Near the end of the ballet, Tuptim, disguised as the narrator, begs the King to give Eliza (Tuptim) her freedom. The King rises from his chair angrily and Tuptim resumes her position as being a subservient wife. At the conclusion of the ballet, we discover that Tuptim has gone missing. I will discuss her outcome later in the chapter.

In addition to paralleling Tuptim’s storyline, I believe Rodgers and Hammerstein included *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for another reason. As we saw in *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein felt compelled to deal with racism. It would stand to reason that they would be against slavery. This scene ultimately takes a position much like that of “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” from *South Pacific*. The composer and lyricist thus state their view that slavery is wrong. It is worth noting that the story takes place in 1862, a time when Americans were fighting over slavery. I doubt this is just a coincidence, a point I expand upon in what follows.

Underlying the issues of racism and slavery in *The King and I* is a clash of cultures. Anna is an Englishwoman who is filled with ideas of romance and etiquette. The King, on the other hand, is an absolute ruler. His word is law. No one is to raise his or her head above the King. It is difficult for both Anna and the King to comprehend the differences in the other’s culture. The East is very much male-dominated, with women trapped in a subservient role. It is important to note that even the King’s wives treat Anna differently. They address Anna as “sir” because they consider her to be a scientific woman. Anna is perplexed by this and requests that they address her as anything but “sir.” In short, it is difficult
for these women to understand how a woman can know so much without taking on masculine characteristics (hence “sir”).

Anna tries to instill Western ideals on her pupils. She has been hired to teach Western customs, not to suggest they abandon their culture. The King holds the banquet in order to impress the British ambassadors. They are under the impression that the King is a barbarian. Western people have difficulty comprehending the practice of having multiple wives who are valued only for their bodies, not for their minds. Anna is teaching the women Western ways in order to change the dignitaries’ opinions. Acting like Western people would influence the British views of the Eastern world. This is the reason why Anna was hired. The King wants to modernize his society. Teaching the ways of the West will help in this regard. They are not to perform as Most says but to learn.

*The King and I* received many awards after its Broadway debut. The musical was honored with five Donaldson Awards for the 1950-1951 season. Yul Brynner (The King) gave the Best Male Performance in a Musical while Doretta Morrow (Tuptim) was given the award for the Best Supporting Performance. Jerome Robbins won for Best Dance Direction. Jo Mielziner and Irene Sharaff were honored with the Best Scene and Costume Designs, respectively.51

The musical received four Tonys as well. Gertrude Lawrence was selected as the Best Female Performance in a Musical as Anna. Rodgers and Hammerstein were honored for Best Score and Best Book. *The King and I* received the Best Musical award.52 Five years after its Broadway debut, *The King and I* was filmed as a Hollywood musical. Yul Brynner retained his role as
the King, but sadly Gertrude Lawrence had passed away (from cancer) and was replaced by Deborah Kerr. The film version was honored with six Oscars. Carl Faulkner won for Best Sound Recording. Best Costume Design was awarded to Irene Sharaff. Lyle Wheeler and John DeCuir were honored with Best Art Direction. Best Set Decoration went to Walter M. Scott and Paul S. Fox. Alfred Newman and Ken Darby won for Best Scoring for a Musical film. Yul Brynner received the Best Actor Oscar. He is one of only eight actors and actresses to have been awarded the Tony and the Oscar for playing the same role.

It is unusual for an actor to be so defined by a particular role, but such is the case with Yul Brynner. Rodgers and Hammerstein discovered him while sitting in on auditions for another musical. They had another actor in mind to play the King but when they observed Brynner singing Mongolian songs in an Indian style position, they knew they had their man. When he made his Broadway debut as the King, Brynner received excellent reviews. Richard Watts Jr. from the Post wrote:

There should be a special word for Mr. Brynner’s notable characterization of the King, with his brilliantly persuasive combination of ruthlessness and goodness of the longing to be a progressive and modern monarch at war with the instinctive leaning toward remaining a barbaric tyrant. Never does Mr. Brynner fall into the facile way of being a dashing leading man putting on a superficial Oriental masquerade. To an amazing extent, he gets depth, honesty and complete credibility into an authentic characterization of a man whose awakening mind and emotion are at work.

People were often struck by Brynner’s realistic portrayal of the King. John McClain from the Journal-American was one such reviewer: “Mr. Brynner lent such strength and realism to his role that it became almost immediately
acceptable that he should have a dozen wives, scores of children and still appear attractive in the eyes of a conservative lady of Western extraction. For my own part, I cannot imagine anyone else playing the role of the King with the same degree of persuasion. I have seen live performances and the film versions of all four musicals discussed in this paper. You can replace any actor or actress in any role of these works, except the King. Yul Brynner owns the role, in short.

The relationship between Anna and the King is difficult to discuss. There is an unspoken connection between the two. Never in the course of the musical do they verbally express their feelings. This reflects a problem Rodgers and Hammerstein recognized when they began to write the story. As Stanley Green discusses:

The intangibility of their strange union was a challenge to us as a librettist and composer. In dealing with them musically we could not write songs which said “I love you” or even “I love him” or “I love her.” We were dealing with two characters only in oblique expressions of their feelings for each other since they themselves do not realize exactly what those feelings mean.

Like South Pacific, the two leads do not sing a song together. The closest the musical comes to such a song is “Shall We Dance?” Here, Anna is singing the lyrics while the King sings “1, 2, 3, and.” The numbers help him to keep in step with the music and do not really constitute lyrics (let alone love lyrics).

The King has many wives, yet his covetous nature does not appear until Queen Victoria’s dignitaries arrive. Sir Edward, a friend of Anna’s deceased husband, is among them. The King observes Sir Edward looking at Anna and becomes jealous of his spending time with the King’s employee.
unaware of Edward’s marriage proposal to Anna. For her part, Anna is reluctant to accept him. Why? After all, a marriage to Sir Edward would return Anna to the life she has always known, and, perhaps best of all, away from a “barbarian” King. It is at this moment in the musical it becomes apparent to the audience that Anna is attracted to the King.

Why would the King be attracted to Anna? She is a beautiful woman, of course, but the King has many women. What makes Anna so different? Anna is an educated woman, like the King. I believe he would almost consider her an equal. She dares to challenge him. His wives just blindly obey. Anna is willing to put her beliefs and views on the line. On the inside the two are, for the most part, are of the same mindset. However, it is their outward differences that cause problems.

This couple cannot be together because of race and class level. Anna is a British aristocrat while the King is obviously Siamese royalty. Because the lead male character is royal, he is defined as a ruler by his actions. He influences the Siamese people. His male servants look to him with respect. They often treat Anna like a lesser human being because she is a woman, even though she is a visitor to their country. The Siamese men tend to judge Anna by her gender as opposed to her class or nationality. At first, the King treats Anna the same way. However, after their many disagreements, the King comes to respect Anna and often asks for her advice and opinions, especially regarding Western matters.

The King commands her to be in charge of the elaborate banquet for his Western
visitors. Both sides are very respectful of each other and as Andrea Most suggests, this has implications for the surmounting of racial barriers:

The audience shares in the ecstasy of the moment as all are swept into one celebratory community—a utopia in which racial differences are subsumed in which a British governess and a Siamese king can fall in love, provided that the king can shed his own self and adopt the theatrical conventions Anna promotes.\(^{57}\)

But this suggestion is never truly realized. In *South Pacific*, Lt. Cable changed his views on interracial relationships. He decided to marry Liat after his mission was complete. By contrast, neither the King nor Anna is willing to change. The King certainly will not give up his throne to marry Anna. She, in turn, will not change her life as a free, independent woman to become one of many wives. Even though they truly care for one another, they cannot compromise on this issue.

The culmination of their “invisible” love affair occurs after the banquet in the “Shall We Dance?” scene. Here, the King and Anna are reminiscing about how well the evening went. Visiting with fellow Brits was a breath of fresh air for Anna, and she acts like a giddy schoolgirl. She begins to sing “Shall We Dance?” while waltzing around the room. After a verse, Anna realizes she is making an exhibition of herself and stops. The King seems pleased with this new side of Anna. He is eager to learn Western dancing. As Ethan Mordden describes it, there is a hidden message in the song: “Shall we ever be able to be truly honest with each other?” they finally agree—having pulled off this event in eighteen hours, how they bring out the other’s best qualities.”\(^{58}\)
It can be said that the crux of the show is this very scene. Here the King and Anna express their feelings towards each other via the dance. While I can understand why they do not verbalize their feelings, I cannot help but wonder how they would have reacted if one or both had declared their feelings out loud.

In his book, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Raymond Knapp describes the scene as a clash between East and West:

The climax of the show is a kind of double-image involving the opposing faces of Western exoticism, which enriches the West only at the expense of destroying the vitality of the fetishized East. As Scott Miller observes, “the dance becomes a metaphor for monogamy...She is metaphorically teaching him how to be monogamous.” Yet he is teaching her something as well, and it frightens her. He is teaching her in real terms what she knows only as a faded memory: that dance is also a metaphor for sexuality and or masculine power over the feminine. Thus the dance in question is not the feminized waltz, but the more masculine polka, and the sequence of events is carefully managed: the song's lyric innocently proclaims the point of the number by playfully suggesting the “dance” may lead “perchance” to “romance;” she dances for him; they touch (for the first time); they dance together but at a distance; he insists on their dancing as he saw her dance earlier with the Englishman Sir Edward; they dance an exuberantly wild, waltz-like version of the polka; they stop, discomfited by what has just transpired, yet not allowed to resolve their feelings since the second part of the double-image (Tuptim’s capture) then intrudes leading to the King’s destruction. 59

Knapp makes several interesting points here. By dancing with the King, Anna again realizes the pleasure of dancing in a man’s arms. This is something she has not experienced since her husband’s death. Knapp discusses the power of the masculine over the feminine. Here, at least at the beginning of the dance, the roles are reversed. Traditionally, a man leads when dancing. However, since the King does not know the dance, Anna takes on the “masculine” role of leading.
The number also indicates her wariness of dancing with the King. Is it perhaps because he will discover her true feelings for him? Anna clearly spells such themes out in the song’s lyrics: “And will you be my new romance? On the clear understanding that this kind of thing could happen. Shall we dance? Shall we dance? Shall we dance?” Anna knows the close contact she has with the King might lead to an outward declaration.

What is the King thinking in this scene? His attraction to Anna is growing by the second. Anna is leery of dancing closer to the King but he, on the other hand, wants to dance like Sir Edward. I believe he wants Anna to see him as a Westerner. For a brief moment in time, he wants to be seen as a man seeking her affections, not as the King of Siam. In the film version, we see the King and Anna dancing happily around the room. One intuits that exactly at the moment when the music stops they might have shared their feelings. However, the King wants to dance again. They resume the polka but are interrupted by the arrival of Tuptim.

The King’s guards have found Tuptim and her lover. Tuptim is held by the men and discovers that Lung Tha has committed suicide. (Whether or not this is true we do not know. He could have been murdered by the King’s guards.) As her punishment, Tuptim is to be whipped. The King himself will carry out his command. Anna attempts to convince the King that Tuptim only hurt his ego and vanity, not his heart. He is unwilling to change his mind. Anna calls him a “barbarian.” It is immediately before he strikes Tuptim that Anna’s words hit the King in his most vulnerable spot, his heart. Realizing what Anna thinks of him,
the King runs away ashamed of being less than the absolute ruler everyone has believed him to be. According to Most, by not punishing Tuptim the King realizes his attempt to join the Western world is futile. He is defined by his essence.60

After this display, Anna decides to leave Siam. However, upon her departure, Lady Tiang, the King’s number one wife and mother to the Crown Prince, arrives and tells Anna that the King is dying (of what, we the audience do not know). He wishes to see her and Anna grants his wish despite her instinctive reluctance. The King requests that Anna remain in Siam. His son will need guidance since he will be a young ruler. Anna decides to stay and help the young Crown Prince. The King is pleased and asks his son what he will do as king. While the Crown Prince envisions this future, the King dies. Why does the King have to die? The King was caught between two worlds: the world of his ancestors and a modern of Siam. He saw the necessity of Westernizing his country but was too set in his ways to actually bring about these changes. Perhaps if he had been influenced as a child, the transition would have been smoother. There is a bright light at the end of the musical. The seeds of Westernizing Siam, which started with the King, can be seen in his son’s proclamations. With this musical, we leave the Asian continent and return to the United States, more specifically to New York City in the 1950s.
CHAPTER V
WEST SIDE STORY

The golden age of the Broadway musical ended with the death of Oscar Hammerstein II. However, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s legacy of incorporating social issues into musicals continued with Leonard Bernstein.

In the latter half of the 1940s, Leonard Bernstein’s career was on the rise. His compositions were becoming well known and his conducting appearances were increasing. It was during this time that Bernstein was inspired to write his most famous musical, *West Side Story*. In this chapter, I will discuss the origins of the show using Bernstein’s diary entries, connections to *Romeo and Juliet*, racial tensions, problems inherent in the musical, and the concept of the American dream as it relates to this work.

When Bernstein first thought of *West Side Story*, he sought input from choreographer Jerome Robbins. They frequently discussed ideas for the plot. Originally, *West Side Story* was going to tackle love conquering religious differences. The following is an entry from Bernstein’s diary.

New York, January 6, 1949 Jerry R. called today with a noble idea, a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in the slums at the coincidence of Easter-Passover celebrations. Feelings run high between Jews and Catholics. Former: Capulets; latter, Montagues. Juliet is Jewish. Friar Laurence is a neighborhood druggist. Street brawls, double death-it all fits. But it’s all much less important than the bigger idea of making a
musical that tells a tragic story in musical-comedy terms, using only musical-comedy techniques, never falling to the “operatic” trap. Can it succeed? It hasn’t yet in our country. I’m excited. If it can work—it’s the first. Jerry suggested Arthur Laurents for the book. I don’t know him, but I do know *Home of the Brave* of which I cried like a baby. He sounds just right.\(^61\)

Clearly, Bernstein had a change in focus since the musical is not in fact about Jews and Catholics. At first, Bernstein was thrilled with the idea of *East Side Story* but after the following incident, he knew a change was in order and wrote in his diary:

> I was under a huge causeway somewhere right by the river up around 125\(^{th}\) Street. All around Puerto Rican kids were playing—with the causeway as a background in a classic key, pillars and Roman arches. The contrast between the setting and the kids was striking, fascinating. Right then and there we had our theme for *West Side Story*… Right then and there I even had the inspiration for the “Rumble” scene.\(^62\)

The change of turning this musical away from religious issues and toward racial ones reflects Bernstein’s life outside of music. He was a socially conscious person who practiced what he preached. Later in life, Bernstein became involved with such social and political issues like campaigning for Eugene McCarthy, raising money for the Black Panthers, protesting the Vietnam War, giving concerts for Amnesty International and supporting Israel.\(^63\)

Just four days after the previous diary entry, the parties involved met to discuss the particulars, and agreed in principle that this musical should not sound like an opera: “Met Arthur L. at Jerry’s tonight. Long talk about opera versus whatever this should be. Fascinating. We’re going to have a stab at it.”\(^64\) Once this meeting was concluded Arthur Laurents began to write the book. A few
months later, he sent a draft to Leonard Bernstein. Around this time, Bernstein reflected on the difficulty of being a composer-conductor:

Just received draft of the first four scenes. Much good stuff. But this is no way to work. Me on this long conducting tour, Arthur between New York and Hollywood. Maybe we’d better wait until I can find a continuous hunk of time to devote to the project. Obviously, this show cannot depend on stars, being about kids, and so it will have to live or die by the success of its collaborations, and this remote control collaboration isn’t right. Maybe they can find the right composer who isn’t always shipping off to conduct somewhere. It’s not fair to them or to the work.65

The team weighed their options and decided to postpone the project for six years. By this time, Steven Sondheim, a new face on the Broadway scene, was added to the artistic staff as a lyricist.

Here Bernstein discusses how the postponement enabled changes to occur:

Time had brought us a new better background for the musical: today’s confused adolescents forming gangs to give them a sense of belonging to something, two juvenile gangs for “both your houses!” We had begun with religion…Instead, the racial problems of Los Angeles influenced us to a shift…the conflict to that between a Puerto Rican gang and a polymorphous self-styled “American” gang.66

As the previous discussion makes clear, one of the team’s ideas at the very beginning was a modern day Romeo and Juliet. Tony, West Side Story’s Romeo, is the co-founder of the American gang, the Jets. His best friend, Riff (Mercutio) is now the leader of the Jets, since Tony seems to have lost interest. Tony’s time is now spent working in Doc’s Store (read: Friar Laurence). Like the good friar, Doc is the sense of reason in this entire piece.

On the other side of the world are the Sharks, the Puerto Rican gang. Bernardo, West Side Story’s version of Tybalt, is the leader of the group. His
sister is Maria, our Juliet. Maria has only been in the country for a few months. She is what one might call naïve. Like Juliet, Maria is young and wants to experience everything, especially love. She is unaware that Bernardo desires her to marry Chino, a fellow Puerto Rican. Chino represents Paris, the man to whom the Capulets have promised Juliet’s hand in marriage. Anita, Bernardo’s girlfriend and Maria’s confidant, is Bernstein’s version of Juliet’s nurse. Another character is Lt. Schrank. He depicts the Prince of Verona. In Shakespeare’s play, the Prince of Verona knows of the troubles between the Montagues and the Capulets and threatens to take action if the rivalry pursues. Lt. Schrank tries to keep peace between the rival gangs but is rather unsuccessful. A different character that also might be perceived as the Prince of Verona is Gladhand. In West Side Story, he is the supervisor of the dance. Gladhand tries to keep the peace between the Americans and the Puerto Ricans.

In his book, Coming Up Roses, Ethan Mordden takes the Romeo and Juliet parallel to another level:

Riff is very connected to Tony-they live together presumably sharing the same bed (Romeo and Mercutio). Mercutio must die for Romeo and Juliet to continue. Riff tells Tony to come to the dance (Capulet’s Ball)- where he meets Maria-cementing Riff’s demise. Tony attempts to stop Riff, which enables Bernardo to kill and in turn be killed by Tony (Romeo-Mercutio-Tybalt).67

I think Mordden has gone overboard here. There is no place in the libretto that states Tony and Riff live together. This is not even implied. Since they do not live in the same apartment, one cannot even think they share a bed. I do agree with the latter half of the statement. Like their predecessors in Showboat,
South Pacific and The King and I, Tony and Maria see only each other and are unaware of the problems caused by their relationship. Mordden is correct when he says Riff must die. Tony has become so enamored with Maria that he no longer has time for the Jets, especially Riff. His concern is for the welfare of Maria.

Laurents not only paralleled the characters from Romeo and Juliet but abstract concepts as well. As stated earlier, the school dance represents the Capulets’ Ball. Doc's Drugstore depicts Friar Laurence’s apothecary. After the dance, Tony meets Maria on her fire escape (read: balcony). Tony and Maria have a mock marriage ceremony using mannequins in the bridal shop where she works. The fight between the Montagues and Capulets takes the form of the rumble between the Jets and the Sharks. After Riff and Bernardo’s (Mercutio and Tybalt’s) murders, Tony goes to Maria. Words cannot express her anger, yet they consummate their relationship like Romeo and Juliet.

Like its predecessor, Showboat, West Side Story contains racial slurs, such as “spic” and “PRs” (an abbreviation for “Puerto Ricans”). Since Tony is Polish, the Sharks like to call him a “Polack.” Unlike Showboat, however, the characters in West Side Story use weapons along with words.

The songs in West Side Story help to move the plot along and paint a picture of the U.S. in the 1950s. One of the best known songs is “America.” The song celebrates the idea of the U.S. and its community as a melting pot and a land of opportunity. The song is filled with internal conflict between the women, who like the U.S., and the men, who prefer Puerto Rico:
Puerto Rico, My heart’s devotion
Let it sink back in the ocean.
Always the hurricanes blowing,
Always the population growing,
And the money owing.
And the sunlight streaming.
And the natives steaming.
I like the island Manhattan,
Smoke on your pipe and put that in.

I like to be in America.
Okay by me in America.
Everything free in America.
For a small fee in America.

Buying on credit is so nice.
One look at us and they charge twice.
I'll have my own washing machine.
What will you have, though, to keep clean?…

Lots of new housing with more space.
Lots of doors slamming in our face.
I'll get a terrace apartment.
Better get rid of your accent.

Life can be bright in America.
If you can fight in America.
Life is all right in America.
If you're all white in America.

Here you are free and you have pride.
Long as you stay on your own side.
Free to be anything you choose.
Free to wait tables and shine shoes.

I think I go back to San Juan.
I know a boat you can get on.
Everyone there will give big cheer…
Everyone there will have move here.

This song discusses the American dream. The Puerto Ricans came to the U.S. in hopes of building a better life for themselves. However, the citizens here were not welcoming. Their attitude, in turn, spread over to the immigrants who
changed their opinions on the American dream. The Americans saw the new arrivals as infringing on their “turf.” The lyrics describe the plight of immigrants. For example, they could only have jobs as shoe-shines or waiters.

Another song that provides humorous and trenchant insight on social problems is “Gee, Officer Krupke.” The Jets sing “Krupke” after an encounter with Lt. Schrank and Officer Krupke. The song focuses on young people seeking assimilation into the world and society’s misconceptions of them.  

Hey you!
Me, Officer Krupke?
Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,
Ya gotta understand—
It’s just our bringin’ upke
That gets us outta hand.
Our mothers all are junkies,
Our fathers all are drunks,
Golly Moses—natcherly we’re punks!
Gee, Officer Krupke, we’re very upset;
We never had the love that every child oughta get.
We ain’t no delinquents,
We’re misunderstood.
Deep down inside us there is good!…

Dear kindly Judge, your honor,
My parents treat me rough.
With all their marijuana,
They won’t give me a puff.
They didn’t wanna have me,
But somehow I was had.

Krupke, we got troubles of our own!
Gee, Officer Krupke,
We’re down on our knees
‘Cause no one wants a fella with a social disease.
Gee, Officer Krupke,
What are we to do?
Gee Officer Krupke- -
(noise) you!
“Somewhere” is an uplifting song. It expresses hope and optimism of the good life that is ultimately possible. Tony and Maria sing this song following the rumble, after she had just discovered the truth of the situation. It is, at this point in the musical, where the couple finally realizes the hatred in the world and how it affects them:

Tony: We’ll be all right. I know it. We’re really together now.

Maria: But it’s not us! It’s everything around us!

Tony: Then I’ll take you away where nothing can get to us, not anyone or anything…

“Somewhere” is Tony and Maria’s idea of a utopian society.

There’s a place for us.
Somewhere a place for us.
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us,
Somewhere.

There’s a time for us,
Someday a time for us,
Time together with time to spare,
Time to learn, time to care
Someday!
Somewhere!
We’ll find a new way of living.
We’ll find a way of forgiving.
Somewhere!

There’s a place for us,
A time and a place for us.
Hold my hand and I’ll take you there.
Somehow,
Someday,
Somewhere!

One of the problems the team anticipated was “tread[ing] the fine line between opera and Broadway, between realism and poetry, ballet and just
dancing, abstract and representational." West Side Story was unique for its time in several respects. One of the more prominent aspects of the musical is the dancing. It is apparent from the very beginning that Bernstein and Laurents mapped out everything. It incorporated more difficult dancing than the norm, as Jerome Robbins intended his choreography for experienced dancers. The musical includes dance into almost every scene. Every step has been deliberately sketched in the script. The first scene shows the Jets walking with a sense of purpose. They are snapping their fingers while walking, almost dancing. In “Cool”, the Jets are singing about keeping their tempers in line. However, when the audience sees the musical live, the cast seems to be walking to a rhythm. All steps are deliberate and every motion is choreographed.

Bernstein and Sondheim encountered the same problem as Rodgers and Hammerstein when it came to the issue of sending a message. Joan Peyser discusses the issue of being preachy: “Avoid being ‘messagy.’ The line is there, but it’s very fine and sometimes takes a lot of peering around to discern it.” Essentially, “Somewhere” is a message song. In my opinion, it is not as blatantly obvious as “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” from South Pacific, but the song has a point. The message, in this song, is of a couple who sees a positive future. There is a place in this world that would accept a bi-racial couple. However, in the 1950s, this would be a difficult pill for some people to swallow.

Tony and Maria, much like Showboat’s Magnolia, are innocent. They prefer to be all-inclusive with their relationships. When the couple looks at each other, they see equals who look past the color of their skin and differences in
race. Unlike their peers, they challenge people’s beliefs regarding interracial
dating. Tony and Maria look toward the future while their friends live in the past.

Anita is able to see both sides of the coin. After Maria and Tony’s initial
encounter at the school dance, Anita does not acknowledge a problem.

Anita: They use Maria as an excuse to start World War Three.

Bernardo: It is more than that—

Anita: More than what? She was only dancing.

Bernardo: With an “American.” Who is really a Polack.

Anita: Says the spic.

Anita is a rather unique character. She is extremely vibrant and full of life.
Throughout the musical, she is constantly seen bantering with Bernardo. In the
previous script excerpt, Anita tries to convince Bernardo he has no business
determining who is classified as an American. She insults him with an ethnic slur
as an attempt to make him realize his own use of a racial epithet. She obviously
does not follow the adage that two wrongs don’t make a right.

This dialogue raises an interesting point. Bernardo’s line puts “American”
in quotation marks. Are we not all “Americans?” As Americans, we are a big
melting pot of cultures: English, African, German, Chinese or Native American.
So, why are we polarized when viewing the mixing of ethnic and racial
backgrounds? Most Americans are, in fact, mixtures of different nationalities. I
would venture to say few couples in the United States are exclusively of one
tightly defined ethnic background or religion. It is additionally strange to think
that these teenagers stick by their parents’ beliefs, when teenagers are generally stereotyped as being rebellious.

When *West Side Story* first appeared on Broadway, the majority of the reviews were positive. However, the following from the *Herald Tribune*’s Walter Kerr is rather negative. I have chosen to quote it because the author’s misconceptions are instructive:

…Jerome Robbins has put together and then blasted apart, the most savage, restless, electrifying dance patterns we’ve been exposed to in a dozen seasons…He has almost been sacrificially assisted in this macabre onslaught of movement by Leonard Bernstein, who for the most part has served the needs of the onstage threshing-machine, dramatizing the footwork rather than lifting emotions into song. Which brings us to the fact that there is another side to *West Side Story*. The show is, in general, not well sung. It is rushingly acted. And it is, apart, from the spinetingling velocity of the dances, almost never emotionally affecting… Don’t look for laughter or—for that matter—tears.

I disagree with the latter part of Kerr’s review. The show is extremely emotional. This is what drives the characters’ actions. Tony saw Maria and danced with her. This upsets Bernardo because in his opinion races do not mix. Maria’s brother is driven by his emotions. Like Bernardo, Tony is, fundamentally, an emotional character. At Maria’s request, he tries to stop the rumble and wants peace between the two groups. However, when his best friend is murdered right in front of him, his emotions take a drastic and costly turn. As for no tears, I disagree with this statement, for the Jets and Sharks surely mourn their friends. And what of Maria? Is she going to be happy upon learning about the death of her brother? Musicals cannot be serious the entire time; otherwise the audience would become bogged down with heavy emotions. Numbers like “I
Feel Pretty,” “Gee, Officer Krupke,” and the famous Mambo scene at the school dance, help bring levity to a rather serious situation. To deny the emotional quality of a show discussing racism is to miss its central point.

Kerr also says there is no laughter. While the overriding tone of West Side Story is in fact serious, there are comedic moments. “Gee, Officer Krupke” is such an example. Here the Jets are mocking the police officer and society’s view of teenagers. Mockery creates laughter, not anger. Another lighter moment in the musical is “I Feel Pretty.” This song takes place in Lucia’s Bridal Shop, where Maria and many of the other Puerto Rican women work. Maria has just met Tony the night before and she is in a state of bliss. Her friends find this behavior a little odd and comment on it during the song.

Most critics offered positive reviews of this new musical. John Chapman, of the Daily News, highlights West Side Story’s unique features with regard to music, dance and plot:

The American theatre took a venturesome forward step last evening. This is a bold new kind of musical theatre—a jukebox Manhattan opera. The various fine skills of show business are put to new tests and as a result a different kind of musical has emerged. The manner of telling the story is a provocative and artful blend of music, dance and plot. The music is by Leonard Bernstein, and it is superb. In it there is drive, the bounce, the restlessness and the sweetness of our town. It takes up the American musical idiom where it was left when George Gershwin died. It is fascinatingly tricky and melodically beguiling.74

West Side Story is almost a carbon copy of Romeo and Juliet with one exception: the final scene. Anita is sent to Doc’s Drugstore to relay a message from Maria to Tony about a secret rendezvous. Upon her arrival, Anita falls victim to the Jets’ attack. Out of anger, she alters the message, claiming Chino
killed Maria. When Tony discovers this, he goes to find Chino so he can be with Maria “in death.” He captures a glimpse of Maria but is shot by Chino. He dies in Maria’s arms. Initially, the creators of *West Side Story* had thought of killing Maria. However, they reconsidered upon hearing these words from a legend in musical theater, Richard Rodgers: “After all she’s been through, she’s dead already.” This was sage advice that Bernstein, Sondheim and Laurents adopted. But there is an additional reason for keeping Maria alive as well: she, along with her deceased boyfriend, provides the sense of reason in this musical. They see beyond prejudice. If both of them were to die, who would relay the reality of the situation to the Jets and the Sharks? They would have continued to avenge the senseless murders of their friends.

After Tony dies, Maria has harsh words for the rival gangs:

Stay back! (She grabs the gun from Chino.) How do you fire this gun Chino? Just by pulling this little trigger? (She points the gun at various people while her voice becomes more angry.) How many bullets are left, Chino? Enough for you? And you? All of you? YOU ALL KILLED HIM! And my brother and Riff. Not with bullets and knives! WITH HATE! WELL I CAN KILL TOO! BECAUSE NOW! I HAVE HATE! How many- - and still have one bullet left for me? (By this time the police have arrived and approach Tony’s body to take him away.) DON’T YOU TOUCH HIM! (She then leans forward and kisses him.) *Te adoro,* Anton.

Laurents’ stage directions provide an interesting picture of the future for these teenagers. Some seem willing to bury the hatchet, while others cannot.

Music starts as the two Jets and the Shark lift up Tony’s body. One of his legs falls; quickly Pepe steps forward to add his support, and the four boys start to carry him out of the playground. Some of the others, fall in behind to make a procession, as Baby John picks up Maria’s shawl and places it over her head. She sits quietly, like a woman in mourning and the procession moves on. At last, she gets up and lifts her head proudly and triumphantly turns to follow Tony’s body being borne off by Jets and
Sharks who appear, for the moment, to have found understanding in tragedy...And nearly, looking across at each other uneasily and then moving off in opposite directions, are the few Jets and Sharks who have not joined the procession, who are not yet ready, perhaps never will be ready to give up war as a way of life.

Laurents touches on a point that is discussed by John Bush Jones in his book, *Our Musicals, Ourselves*. Is the final scene a reconciliation or a temporary truce? We will never know the answer, as in *Romeo and Juliet*. Who’s to say that the deaths of Romeo and Juliet did not spur the Montagues and Capulets to continue fighting? The same applies to the Jets and Sharks. One would hope they listened to Maria’s words and saw how Tony’s death changed her from a girl with hope into one of hate.

Joseph Swain focuses on the difference between *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*.

...her act of not killing herself or any of the gang members whom she threatens in the final scene, underlies the basic difference between this play and Shakespeare’s. *West Side Story* is conceived as a social document, *Romeo and Juliet* as a *liebestod*. Consequently, it becomes important to the contemporary play’s message that a resolution of the gang warfare be effected not as one of the play’s protagonists.

Swain is correct in saying the musical’s purpose is social. Bernstein and Laurents wanted to educate the public about social tolerance, by asserting that races dating or even marrying each other is not taboo. Richard Rodgers was correct when he told the team to let Maria live. Hopefully, the Jets and Sharks realized the cruel absurdity of their attitudes (although as Laurents hinted in the stage direction, there will always be a few people who are small-minded).
West Side Story was a unique work that paved the way for modern day musicals. Bernstein used his talents to draw attention to social causes close to his heart. The creative team decided to discuss a topic affecting many people. It is interesting to note that in the four musicals discussed to this point, we encountered three different types of relationships: black-white, Asian-white and Hispanic-white. Each takes place at a different time in history but the message remains the same. The racism theme would subsequently be picked up by modern day musicals such as Hairspray, which deals with black-white relations in 1960’s Baltimore.
Artists have been tackling the issue of racism since Shakespeare’s time. *Othello* was one of the first plays to discuss an interracial marriage. From W.E.B. DuBois to Harper Lee, many have followed suit. Each of the musicals in this paper focused on three types of interracial relationships. In *Showboat*, we centered on Julie, a half-black, half-white woman and her eventual abandonment by her white husband, Steve. *South Pacific* dealt with racism on two levels: a potential husband who had been previously married to a Polynesian and had half-Polynesian, half-French children, and a U. S. Navy lieutenant who falls for a Tonkanese woman. In *The King and I*, we explored the attraction between Siamese royalty and a British governess. *West Side Story* focused on the love of two teenagers: one a Polish-American and the other a Puerto Rican immigrant.

It is easy to see why Kern, Hammerstein, Rodgers, and Bernstein wanted to treat this issue. Rodgers and Hammerstein participated in many civil organizations, especially those relating to Judaism. Bernstein was also famous for practicing what he preached when it came to social and political issues. The majority of these artists were Jewish, and experienced first hand the adverse effects of persecution.
Many contemporary composers and lyricists have followed in their footsteps. *Miss Saigon*, a musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, focuses on American soldiers in Vietnam during the war and their liaisons with the local women. This work is essentially an updated version of *Madame Butterfly*. Another example is *Hairspray*, written by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman. This musical takes place in 1960s Baltimore. In addition to tackling racism, it also deconstructs popular notions of beauty.

These four musicals have exhibited genuine staying power, influencing not only audiences of their time but today’s theatergoers, as well. Thanks to these works, maybe as Tony and Maria sing in *West Side Story* “we’ll find a new way of living. Somewhere.”

2 Ibid, 32.

3 Ibid, 34.


5 Ibid, 71.


7 Ibid, 304.

8 Fordin, Getting to Know Him, 78.

9 Ibid, 72.

10 Ibid, 86.


13 Anderson, “Edna Ferber’s Showboat as literature and as film,” 39.


15 Ibid, 194.

16 Ibid.


23 Ibid, 211-12.


29 Fordin, Getting to Know Him, 261.


31 Stanley Green, Rodgers and Hammerstein Fact Book (New York: Lynn Farnol Group, 1985), 560.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.


37 Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, 281.

38 Ibid.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, 270.

43 Ibid.

44 Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin’*, 264.


46 They had already begun South Pacific when Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza were cast.


49 A comparison can be made to 20th and 21st Century music. Audiences are skeptical to see a performance of a modern day composition for a variety of reasons. “I don’t understand it.” “It’s too dissonant.” “If the composer can’t explain the piece, how can I comprehend it?”


52 Ibid.

53 Ibid, 593.

55 Ibid, 360.


60 Most, *Making Americans*, 194.


65 Ibid.


69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

72 Ibid.


74 Suskin, Opening Night on Broadway, 695.

75 Mordden, Coming Up Roses, 243.


