“COME LOOK AT THE FREAKS”:
THE COMPLEXITIES OF VALORIZING THE “FREAK” IN SIDE SHOW

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ABSTRACT

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The Broadway musical *Side Show*, by Bill Russell and Henry Krieger, focuses on real-life conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, who sang and danced in carnivals and side shows in the middle part of the 20th century. *Side Show* dramatizes the Hilton’s rise to fame, as well as their romantic liaisons. Russell and Krieger’s presumed objective with *Side Show* is to represent Daisy and Violet as individuals, which they succeed at doing. By granting the Hilton twins individuality, the authors give value to the actual Daisy and Violet Hilton. However, Russell and Krieger specify that the performers playing Daisy and Violet be separated throughout the musical. Therefore, *Side Show’s* conjoined twins are not connected to each other during the performance. In seeking to grant individuality to the actual Hilton sisters, Russell and Krieger have taken away part of what made Daisy and Violet unique individuals. Ironically, the same representational tactics that work to valorize the Hilton twins in the musical also bring with them severe limitations, which thwart Russell and Krieger’s presumed objective of giving agency to the actual Hilton twins.

This thesis begins with a brief overview of the historical Hilton sisters, contextualizing the women *Side Show* seeks to valorize. Throughout the study I apply Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, as well as Julia Kristeva’s abject theory, to the script, evaluating how *Side Show* succeeds and fails to valorize the Hilton twins. I conclude by proposing a different way of performing the text than by following the specifications that accompany the published script, thereby offering a new representation of the staged “freaks” in *Side Show*. 
For my parents, Edward and Karen Harrick
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The creation of a study of this length is not the journey of a sole participant. I had help from a great many individuals, whom I would like to acknowledge here.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, conjoined twins have featured prominently in U.S. culture. Popular films such as the broad comedy Stuck On You, the thoughtful Big Fish, the art-house indie Twin Falls Idaho and the rock-‘n-roll drama Brothers of the Head, as well as television programs such as the melodramatic Nip/Tuck, HBO’s saga Carnivale and the Howard Stern-produced comedy Son of the Beach have all been about or featured conjoined twins. Abel Brekhus’s gripping graphic novel The Ballad of the Two-Headed Boy is about conjoined twins who will do anything to be separated. Children’s television and literature also feature conjoined twins (Sesame Street’s Two-Headed Monster and Dragon Tales’ Zak and Wheezie). In that this phenomena has found its way into multiple medias, it seems fitting, if not logical, that conjoined twins have also entered the ranks of Broadway in the form of the musical Side Show.

Side Show, by librettist and lyricist Bill Russell and composer Henry Krieger, draws from the lives of real-life conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton. The Hilton twins were popular stage performers between the 1920s and the 1950s who also acted in the cult classic films Freaks (1932) and Chained for Life (1951). Since the Broadway premiere in 1997, Side Show has received subsequent professional, community and university stagings. The original Broadway production netted Tony Award nominations for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Original Musical Score, as well as nominations of Best Actress in a Musical for the two leads, Alice Ripley and Emily Skinner. In his review of the Broadway production, Vincent Canby wrote the following:

[W]ith most of the dialogue sung, [Side Show] is propelled and given emotional heft by Mr. Krieger's bright, inventive score [...] and Mr. Russell’s lyrics. The
latter often have something of the intelligence, purity and wit you might have recognized in the work of Betty Comden and Adolph Green. (AR4)

In another review from *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley wrote that “the songs of ‘Side Show’[ . . .] spin out of each other with agility and a beautifully sustained momentum (E25).

Even with these positive reviews, *Side Show* closed on Broadway after a short three month run. However, it has developed a healthy second life, receiving productions at major regional theatres across the country (including a critically acclaimed production at Chicago’s Northlight Theatre), as well as university and community theatre productions.

Focusing on the Hilton sisters, *Side Show* tells the story of how Daisy and Violet leave the side show in which they work, to become stars of their own traveling vaudeville show, and thus emerge as stars in their own right, first onstage and later as actors in the film *Freaks*. As the plot advances, Daisy falls in love with Terry Connor, a talent scout, and Violet falls for Buddy Foster, a musician employed by Connor who is teaching the twins to sing and dance. These two relationships form the backbone of the plot. Along the way, another central character, Jake, a purported cannibal, African American, and friend from the side show, joins Daisy and Violet and provides them with emotional support. This friendship is shattered, however, when it is revealed that Jake also has romantic feelings for Violet. When he professes his undying love to Violet, she spurns him, saying society would never allow her to be with a black man. Thus, Jake leaves them. This sad event is offset, however, by the twins’ professional success. Additionally, as the twins’ star begins to rise, Violet and Buddy plan to be married in a public ceremony. This too is thwarted when Buddy admits he cannot be with a conjoined twin. In turn, Daisy begs Terry to marry her. But this is also to no avail. At the end of the musical, Tod Browning, director of the film *Freaks*, enters and offers Daisy and Violet roles in his new film. *Side Show* concludes with
Daisy and Violet discovering that they will always only have each other when they sing the signature song in the musical “I Will Never Leave You.”

While Side Show offers many avenues for scholarly consideration, in this study, I will focus on thematic concerns. More specifically, I will chart the ways in which Side Show attempts to valorize the “freak” character (principally Daisy and Violet Hilton, but also Jake and the other members of the side show), offer a critique of how the musical succeeds and fails in those attempts, discuss the ways in which Side Show does and does not parallel the actual lives of the Hilton sisters and, ultimately, weigh whether or not this musical offers the “freak” character a new level of agency or merely reifies existing notions (or perhaps both). In so doing, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How does this musical help to give new value to the so-called “freak” characters?
- How is this connected to movements in the larger cultural field that have sought to give agency to disabled populations?
- How does this valorizing of the “freak” succeed? How does it fail? Does it do both?
- What are the ethical challenges that accompany any attempt to valorize conjoined twins when the actors playing them are in actuality not physically connected?
- In spurning Jake, does Violet treat Jake the same way society treats her?
- Do Daisy and Violet have a choice in displaying themselves, as is suggested in Side Show, or are there few options for them?

With these and other pertinent questions, I seek to contribute to the ongoing conversation about disability and theatre, as well as Side Show.

At present, very little has been written about Side Show, and virtually none of it is scholarly in nature. Most of the written materials have been articles and reviews for popular
publications. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, only two pieces include any kind of useful, scholarly consideration of Side Show. Thus, one of the primary objectives with this study is to add to this meager body of work.

Central to my reading of the book, music and lyrics, as well as the numerous historical and cultural materials that inform that study, is a view expressed and method modeled in Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays 1675-1707 by Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume. In their historical and critical examinations of Restoration and sentimental plays, Milhous and Hume write that “production analysis should draw freely on theatre history and drama history. Particular productions will be studied for what they can tell us about the potentialities of the script, but the critic is in no way limited to what has been staged” (10). Similarly, I will examine specific productions of Side Show (most notably the Broadway premiere) but will not be limited to solely reading that production for information.

Since little has been written on Side Show, scholarly or otherwise, there is little to review on the subject of the play and script proper. Shellie O’Neal’s dissertation, The Anxious Double: Twins in Plays of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, gives brief consideration of Side Show. O’Neal’s study concludes that American perceptions of twins, especially conjoined twins, are troubling to American culture at large. However, her treatment of Side Show shares part of a chapter with two other plays and is by no means exhaustive. O’Neal merely concludes that conjoined twins were oppressed and exploited without examining how the playwrights, lyricists and composers might also contribute to this behavior toward disabled populations.

Barry Singer’s book-length study, Ever After, also includes a brief consideration of Side Show. However, the most notable aspect of Singer’s single paragraph on the musical is that he refers to Daisy and Violet as “Siamese twins” and diminishes the popularity of the Hilton sisters.
In his short treatment on the piece, Singer writes that *Side Show* is about “a pair of Siamese twins who’d been minor Depression-era celebrities. [. . .] Watching these two fall in love with different men, while vowing to each other that, ‘I Will Never Leave You,’ was certainly one of musical theater history’s weirder moments” (151). By referring to them as “Siamese twins,” Singer reifies existing terms marking conjoined twins. “Siamese” as a reference to conjoined twins is no longer socially acceptable, yet many people still use it¹. Also, his use of the term points to a larger cultural perception of conjoined twins that is not only inaccurate, but offensive. By using “Siamese” to refer to the Hilton twins, Singer not only reinforces the usage of an obsolete term, he also strengthens the implication that conjoined twins are exotic, foreign, and mysterious. While I will refer to Daisy and Violet as “Siamese twins” throughout this study, I will do so in a manner that is indicative of how characters in *Side Show* pejoratively use that term. Further, Daisy and Violet were more than “minor Depression-era celebrities.” They were hugely popular and successful vaudeville stars, eventually branching out into film. They earned lots of money for their performances and lived comfortably for many years. Finally, Singer’s claim that watching Daisy and Violet fall in love was “one of musical theater history’s weirder moments” also solidifies society’s perception that conjoined twins cannot or should not have romantic lives or fall in love. Singer is myopic, focusing on Daisy and Violet as conjoined twins and not two individuals who desire the same things that those who are not conjoined.

Naturally, there are many reviews and articles on *Side Show* published in the popular press. Most notable of these are from *The New York Times* and *American Theatre*. In many regards, the most significant piece on *Side Show* published in the popular press is Jim Lillie’s article “Step Right Up!” Published in *American Theatre* in 2001, “Step Right Up!” focuses on a

¹ In describing this study to an Associate Professor with a doctorate from a major research university in the United States, she used the term “Siamese twins” to describe Daisy and Violet. The struggle continues.
community theatre production of Side Show by PHAMALy, also known as the Physically Handicapped Amateur Musical Actors League. “Step Right Up!” is an examination of this production that featured performers with disabilities, and as such will be very important to my analysis of valorization. In fact, ideas discussed in “Step Right Up!” will figure prominently in my conclusion.

While there is a general dearth of information on Side Show, there are a number of useful texts that theorize and contextualize the historical and current treatment of “human curiosities.” Central to my consideration is Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s edited anthology, Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body. Of particular interest in this collection is Allison Pingree’s “The ‘Exceptions That Prove the Rule’: Daisy and Violet Hilton, the ‘New Woman,’ and the Bonds of Marriage.” This piece studies the professional careers of the Hilton sisters and how they performed domesticity as something to be disregarded. Pingree’s reading of the Hiltons is helpful in understanding the artistic choices the twins made. Also in this collection is Elizabeth Grosz’s “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit.” Grosz’s piece offers a description of the dual attraction/repulsion response that society has towards conjoined twins, which I will include in attempting to define the term below.

Further, there is a considerable amount of biographical data on Daisy and Violet Hilton, which will prove useful in considering how the musical succeeds and fails in valorizing them. While I have found several books and articles that offer information on the lives of the Hilton twins, I will direct my attention to four books either about the Hilton twins or offering lengthy sections on them. Frederick Drimmer’s Very Special People: The Struggles, Loves and Triumphs of Human Oddities, the oldest of the four publications, is a survey of human curiosities, focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, including the Hilton sisters. Robert Bogdan’s
sociological study, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, is a canonical text on side shows and those who found employment in them, including the Hilton twins. Marc Hartzman’s encyclopedic study of side shows and its performers, *American Sideshow: An Encyclopedia of History’s Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers*, has a section on the Hilton twins. The last study I wish to mention is Dean Jensen’s *The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton: A True Story of Conjoined Twins*, which is a recent biography of the Hilton sisters. One aspect I will need to take into consideration as I continue this study is the number of contradictions between these four publications. Some of these books publish apocryphal and anecdotal information, with no citation or source offered to confirm the data. I will be wary of such writing, focusing more on the biographical information that the scholars agree upon.

As far as a methodology is concerned, my study is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, and, to a lesser extent, Kristeva’s notion of abjection. I will detail my use of these theoretical approaches below. Additionally, and in support of my methodology, I will utilize approaches employed by scholars to analyze plays about other exploited characters. In particular, Harry J. Elam and Alice Rayner’s excellent piece on the Suzan-Lori Parks play *Venus*, “Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks,” in many respects models what I hope to achieve. Elam and Rayner offer an outstanding reading of how the play performs the Venus Hottentot, an African woman with an extremely large posterior who becomes a human curiosity. Elam and Rayner write:

Parks’s stage presentation recuperates and refigures her body as a sign of opposition to colonial exploitation and dehumanization. On the other hand, the
play represents and reinscribes these same systems of oppression and degradation by putting her once again on display before the gaze of an audience. (267)

A similar argument may be made about *Side Show*. Since the musical gives the twins agency and allows them to make their own decisions, the stage becomes a site of resistance toward any dehumanizing factor. However, this becomes problematic when displaying them in front of a paying audience for the amusement and entertainment of others. Exploring this doubleness, the simultaneous positive and negative feature, will be a central part of my study.

Another useful study from which I will draw is Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. In Roach’s foundational study on the symbiotic relationship between England and New Orleans over several hundred years, he inspects and defines what he calls “surrogation.” Roach describes surrogation as a continuation of “actual or perceived vacancies” (2) in a culture, and primarily applies it to the collective memory of a person who dies, but lives on in surrogation. For the purposes of this study, I will take Roach’s concept and use it to examine dramatizations of historical figures and how these works of drama succeed or fail in surrogating their subjects. Many plays and musicals, such as *The Elephant Man*, *Venus* and *Barnum*, as well as *Side Show*, all attempt to surrogate historical figures, yet many fail in their attempts, which will be a major section of chapter one. In short, Roach’s study will prove useful to my own consideration of the problems of giving new value to the oppressed human curiosity.

In like manner, Alvin Goldfarb’s article on giants and little people who performed in the 19th century will also help to contextualize the historical performance of “freaks.” Titled “Gigantic and Miniscule Actors on the Nineteenth-Century American Stage,” Goldfarb’s
historical account of little and giant performers as spectacle will prove useful to my treatment of the conjoined twins, as well as the other “freaks” represented in the early part of Side Show.

Peter W. Graham and Fritz H. Oehlschlager’s Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and His Interpreters, which includes a chapter on the Bernard Pomerance play The Elephant Man, will also aid my endeavors in that they provide an example of literary criticism of another work of drama that involves a disabled character. Also of note is that Graham and Oehlschlager critique the hagiography implicit in Pomerance’s play, which Russell and Krieger avoid.

Two sources, along with the aforementioned “Step Right Up!,” will greatly impact my conclusion. Bruce Kirle’s Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-In-Process is an excellent study of musical theatre history. In the book, Kirle argues that Broadway musicals are always unfinished works of art whose meanings are reimagined and redefined throughout different time periods and locations. In applying this study to Side Show I will argue that Side Show can, in certain instances, valorize the Hilton sisters without changing the intentions of the script. To do so, I will also use Bruce McConachie’s “Slavery and Authenticity: Performing a Slave Auction at Colonial Williamsburg.” McConachie’s article provides a model for a new mode of presentation of historical performance that I will apply to Side Show. Between these two studies, I will conclude that Side Show is open to interpretation and may be produced in more than the way that is described in the published libretto.

The approach I take in analyzing Side Show is informed by all of the aforementioned studies. Still, the critical lens that I found most useful is Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque. Indeed, in reading and re-reading Krieger and Russell’s text, I came to realize that the
carnivalesque, especially the notion of grotesque realism, would be the ideal lens through which to examine conjoined twins in a side show. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin writes that “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal” (19). If this is the case, then it is also necessary to raise all that is low (i.e. conjoined twins and side shows). However, this grotesquery becomes problematic (as does the musical) when considering a dramatic text (often considered high) that is about a side show (low). Further complicating matters is that conjoined twins (low) are acting and singing beautifully and with immense talent (high). This raising of the low and lowering of the high makes sense for such a complicated musical, where conjoined twins take control of their lives and careers. Bakhtin continues:

> To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place.

> Grotesque realism knows no other lower level. (21)

This “new birth” of which Bakhtin writes is what Krieger and Russell are attempting to give the Hilton twins, without considering the previous, actual existence that they experienced. Such problematizing makes Side Show a complex, and, I will argue, problematic dramatic text on various levels.

> Additionally, in this study I will include aspects of Julia Kristeva’s abject theory in reading the valorization of the Hilton sisters. As Kristeva writes, “It is…not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (391). This system is already problematized in Side Show since the two leads are not connected in any physical way. John Limon, in his analysis of stand-up comedy, gives an extremely useful description of the
abject. “When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed” (4). As there is nothing tangible to “slough off” in Side Show, the abject treatment the Hiltons receive seems incongruous with the presentation of them as characters in a musical instead of conjoined twins who actually existed.

In terms of organization, in my first chapter, titled “Marginalized Characters in Drama and the History of the Hiltons,” I will contextualize Side Show as another drama in a long line of plays and musicals revolving around marginalized “freaks.” Herein, I will also provide information about the actual Hilton sisters, who were different from the fictionalized Hilton sisters in Side Show. The second and third chapters, titled “Successes of Side Show” and “Failing the ‘Freak,’” respectively, examine how the musical, in both the printed form and on stage, succeeds and fails in valorizing the “freak,” and will include analyses of giving agency to people traditionally refused a voice, the absence of that physical connection between the performers playing Daisy and Violet, the fact that the only scripted African American character is portrayed as a cannibal in the side show attraction, and many other aspects that succeed and fail in valorizing the “freak.” In the brief conclusion, I will summarize the study and offer possible directions for the future of Side Show and propose a new way of producing the musical, as well as other plays about human curiosities.

Before concluding this introduction, I feel compelled to offer a brief explication of a particularly thorny term that I will use frequently in my study, as well as clarify my use of certain terminology. “Freak” is a seemingly problematic term. It in no way attempts to give humanistic values to the person being objectified, nor does it make comment about exploited people other than their outer appearance. However, it has become a popular term amongst academics addressing those exploited individuals. In fact, by using “freak” I believe writers and
scholars have reclaimed the term for new usage. Similar to queer studies, the emergence of freak studies has made this a common term for the study of the oppressed and exploited human curiosity. In his canonical *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, Leslie Fiedler argues that the “freak” is a social construct and the recognition of such dilutes the strength of such a construct. Fielder writes that the relationship between the freak and the spectator, “we and them, normal and Freak, is revealed as an illusion, desperately, perhaps even necessarily, defended, but untenable at the end” (36). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz writes that while she does not recognize one concrete definition of the term, she does see it making clear “that there are very real and concrete political effects for those thus labeled, and a clear political reaction is implied by those who use it as a mode of self-definition” (56). Another aspect of the term that Grosz explores is the dual nature associated with “freak.”

The freak is…neither gifted nor unusually disadvantaged. He or she is not an object of *simple* admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening. (56, emphasis in original)

Other studies, such as the previously mentioned *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* and *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, continue a similar line of inquiry.

Throughout this study I will describe Daisy, Violet and other members of the side show as being “abnormal,” “odd,” “deviant” and use other terms implying similar perceptions of them. I feel it necessary to clarify my use of these terms. As Alice Domurat Dreger has written, “statistically [conjoined twins] are extremely rare, accounting for perhaps as few as one in 200,000 births and no more than one in 50,000” (6). Clearly, based on this evidence, conjoined
twins are a minority in the United States and my use of such terms to describe them is meant to reflect this status, as well as societal perceptions of them.

Bill Russell and Henry Krieger have taken on a task that would seem intimidating, if not daunting. While Daisy and Violet Hilton were popular performers, they have not remained in the cultural memory of the United States as many other human curiosities and performers have (General Tom Thumb, the Elephant Man, the Circassian Beauty), Russell and Krieger sought to revive them and bring them back into the cultural consciousness. To be sure, Side Show has raised widespread awareness of Daisy and Violet Hilton. It also endeavors to give new value to not only the Hilton twins, but also the other characters performing in the side show. Such an undertaking is complicated, as it will succeed in certain instances and fail in others. This study focuses on how Side Show gives new value to the “freaks” who inhabit that world and, simultaneously, how it falls short in the process.
CHAPTER ONE: MARGINALIZED CHARACTERS IN DRAMA
AND THE HISTORY OF THE HILTONS

Before exploring Side Show for ways in which it gives value to the “freaks” that it examines, it will be useful to look at other plays about marginalized characters. After all, Side Show is not the first drama about characters considered “abnormal” by societal standards. In so doing, I will compare Side Show to other plays and musicals about human curiosities: other conjoined twins, little people, characters with differently shaped body parts, and characters whose bodies have been wracked by disease. Additionally, because Side Show is a fictional musical about the lives of two very real women and their associates, I will also look at the lives of Daisy and Violet Hilton, and note the ways in which the lives of the real Daisy and Violet run parallel or counter to Krieger and Russell’s dramatic characters.

Marginalized Characters and Strategies for Surrogation

Crucial to this comparison of Side Show to other plays about marginalized characters will be Joseph Roach’s concept of surrogation. In Cities of the Dead, Roach suggests that “culture reproduces and re-creates itself” by surrogation (2). Roach examines how culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can be best described by the word surrogation. In the life of the community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure, I hypothesize, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates. (2, emphasis in original)
It is significant to note, however, that Roach believes that “surrogation rarely if ever succeeds” and that “the fit cannot be exact” (2). To be sure, Roach claims that “the intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus” (2). Though Roach proposes the study of surrogation in the performance of cultural memory, I believe the concept extends beyond solely that kind of performance and can be useful when discussing other types of performance. Therefore, surrogation in drama will inevitably also fail the original, either by falling short or going beyond the subject. This will conclude with a mythmaking of the original, as Roach suggests that the surrogate “may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin” (3). I will look at examples of how surrogation has failed in the theatre by either not fulfilling or surpassing the original, thereby contributing to the myth of the original.

The first play that I will examine by way of this rubric is Bernard Pomerance’s *The Elephant Man*. Based on the life of Joseph Merrick, a longtime human curiosity, Pomerance’s play dramatizes the last years of Merrick’s life while living in the London Hospital. Merrick, who probably suffered from Proteus syndrome (though the lack of evidence makes it impossible to be certain), is the main character of the play and requires an actor of considerable dedication to play the role. Before the Introductory Note to the published playscript, Pomerance writes that “Merrick’s face was so deformed he could not express any emotion at all. His speech was very difficult to understand without practice” (v). Pomerance continues. “Any attempt to reproduce his appearance and his speech naturalistically—if it were possible—would seem to me not only counterproductive, but, the more remarkably successful, the more distracting from the play” (vi). Pomerance finishes this note with “for how he appeared, let slide projections suffice” (vi). Clearly, Pomerance prefers a stylized method of representing Merrick’s condition that, in the
end, fails to surrogate the actual Merrick. Nevertheless, Pomerance, who engages in a kind of hagiography with the play (Merrick is the moral superior to the other characters, and the more “normal” he becomes, the worse his condition deteriorates until he dies), has constructed a version of Joseph Merrick that creates in the audience a sympathetic reaction. In terms of Roach’s notion of surrogation, it can be argued that the lack of prosthetic additions to the actor playing Merrick ironically leads to a surplus which exceeds the original Merrick.

Peter Graham and Fritz Oehlschlager note Pomerance’s hagiographic treatment of Merrick, which falls short in surrogating the actual Merrick. In their Articulating the Elephant Man, Graham and Oehlschlager write that “Merrick has seemed free of the narcissism that afflicts all of the other characters” (90). Though this might seem ironic or somewhat funny to those who know what Joseph Merrick really looked like, this does seem an apt critique of the play. Indeed, Merrick is the only character not wrapped up in his own outward appearance (closely connected to his health), which inevitably makes his death at the end of the play that much more tragic. However, it is also important to remember that this Merrick is Pomerance’s construction, shaped to function in a particular way. Graham and Oehlschlager write that they set out to examine “how [through various mediatized representations] Joseph Merrick has been transformed from a suffering individual to an exhibit, a shape-shifting curiosity whose different guises variously suit the needs of particular audiences, genres and interpreters” (2). Pomerance’s play takes part in this transformation, situating Merrick as a fighter, transcending the odds to make it in a culture that would rather not have to look at such a hideous figure.

Suzan-Lori Parks’s Venus, also examines a lone figure who was exploited for her physical appearance. Parks’s play tells the story of Saartje Baartman, better known as the Hottentot Venus, who was taken from her native Africa and put on display in England. This
display focused on her exceptionally large posterior. In writing about the Venus Hottentot, Sander Gilman notes that in so doing “the figure of Sarah Bartmann [sic] was reduced to her sexual parts” (179). Therefore, the Hottentot Venus (the character), not Saartje Baartman (the human being), was sexualized in a way that the Elephant Man was not. In Parks’s play, when the Baron Docteur—the man who took Baartman from Africa, displayed her, and eventually impregnated her—realizes that he loves Baartman but cannot marry her because of his status, he has a dream about an old friend of his, the Grade-School Chum. In the dream, the Grade-School Chum talks the Baron Docteur into throwing Baartman in jail for indecency (Parks 143). When the Baron Docteur protests, the Grade-School Chum scoffs, saying that Baartman is “just a 2-bit sideshow freak” (144). In turn, when the Baron Docteur proclaims, “she would have made uh splendid wife,” the Grade-School Chum brushes it off, saying, “Oh, please. / She’ll make uh splendid corpse” (144). The Grade-School Chum dismisses Baartman, implying that she is only good for what she can offer the Baron Docteur, which, at various times in the play, includes sex, money for displaying her body, and prestige in the medical community.

Determining whether or not the play successfully surrogates Baartman is difficult. As Harry J. Elam and Alice Rayner note, “it is not altogether clear, and was not even at the time [when these events occurred on which the play is based], whether to consider Baartman a willing partner in her spectacle, or an exploited victim” (265). The opaqueness of the historical record aside, Parks clearly situates Baartman as complicit in her decision to continue being exploited by the Baron Docteur. Moreover, in the play she is shown as choosing to continue to have sex with him. Since historians do not know exactly how involved Baartman was in the running of her affairs, it is difficult to determine if the play surrogates her. One the one hand, since the character Baartman has some agency in deciding whether or not to participate in her own
exploitation, one can infer that Parks’s construction of Baartman falls short in surrogating the real Saartje Baartman (88). On the other hand, however, it could be argued that what makes this play more successful at surrogation than *Side Show* is the fact that the performer playing the Venus wears padding over her posterior. Elam and Rayner write that “in the New York Public Theater production of the play, Venus was costumed with enormously padded tights. The butt clearly did not belong to the actress, but it nonetheless gave the effect of total exposure” (271).

Therefore, what was absent from *The Elephant Man* (prosthetic additions to the body) is present in *Venus*.

The musical *Barnum*, with book by Mark Bramble, lyrics by Michael Stewart, and music by Cy Coleman, focuses on the life of circus entertainer, P. T. Barnum. The musical primarily focuses on the personal life of Barnum and his life’s dream to “excite people, stir ‘em up, give ‘em a glimpse of the miracle” (Bramble 14). However, there is a number of scenes which involve his various performers. One of these scenes revolves around Charles Stratton, the little actor better known as General Tom Thumb, arguably Barnum’s most famous star attraction. It is upon this scene that I would like to shift my focus.

Once Barnum talks Stratton’s parents into allowing him to display the young man onstage (for more money than Barnum was originally offering them), Barnum decides to give him the moniker, “General Tom Thumb.” What is telling about this scene for my purposes is not what Barnum says, but what Bramble writes in his stage directions. Once Barnum and Stratton’s parents agree on an amount of money (and after asking young Charles what his decision was, even though historically Stratton was only four years old at the time), the writers give General Tom Thumb a solo, titled “Bigger Isn’t Better.” As framing for this song, Bramble writes:
And Tom Thumb, in general’s uniform, steps out from behind chair. NOTE: THIS IS THE FIRST TIME WE SEE TOM THUMB. HE IS PLAYED BY A NORMAL-SIZED PERSON WITH EVERYTHING ON THE SET GIANT-SIZED TO CREATE THE ILLUSION THAT HE IS ONLY TWENTY-FIVE INCHES TALL (32, emphasis in original).

Read by way of Roach’s method, this attempt at surrogating Charles Stratton is problematic because the performer either exceeds (he is too tall) or fails to fulfill (he does not match) the original. Further, Bramble’s use of the term “normal” when referring to Stratton’s size is also problematic in that it implies that Charles Stratton’s size is not normal.

Another work which suffers from the same tactics as those employed in Barnum is the comedy Babylon Heights. Babylon Heights, by Irvine Welsh and Dean Cavanagh, is about four little actors who played Munchkins in The Wizard of Oz. Set in their hotel room, it focuses on their lives off of the movie set, trying to survive in a world not made for little people. In the Staging Notes, Welsh and Cavanagh write the following:

In order to maximize audience empathy with the ‘trapped’ dwarfs, the four actors who play the Munchkins will be of ‘regular’ size. Instead, the stage equipment—beds, doors, table, etc.—will be outsized. The production is best suited to a small space. [. . .] The only reference to the outside world is the booming offstage voice of the ‘normal people’, which should be intrusive and threatening. (4)

Welsh and Cavanagh take an approach similar to that taken by the authors of Barnum. By “outsizing” the scenery and casting actors who are not little people in those roles, they fail to surrogate the actual performers who worked on The Wizard of Oz. Also, they refer to the actors playing these roles as being “regular,” as well referring to the offstage characters as “normal.”
This echoes what Bramble wrote in his stage directions about Stratton. Clearly the goal of Welsh and Cavanagh is not to represent these people accurately, nor is it of the authors of *Barnum*. However, by requiring actors who are clearly not the same size as Charles Stratton or those in *The Wizard of Oz* to play these roles, the writers are making a conscious decision to not represent these people accurately. The size or shape of an actor’s body are not the sole factors taken into consideration when applying the concept of surrogation to drama. The connection between conjoined twins is also important.

Chang and Eng Bunker, the conjoined twins more famous than Daisy and Violet Hilton—and for whom the term “Siamese twins” was coined—are the subject of the play, *The Wedding of the Siamese Twins* by Burton Curtis. The play, set in Wilkesboro County, North Carolina, revolves around the Bunkers public and private lives. In the play (as well as in their lives) Chang and Eng meet Adelaide and Sally Yates, two young women whom they would later marry. When the girls’ parents object, Adelaide and Sally elope with the Bunkers. Eventually their parents give their consent (after the fact) and the married couples settle down in North Carolina, living in separate houses, with Chang and Eng rotating between the two families. This constant movement eventually takes a toll on Chang, who has long wanted to be surgically separated from his brother. Eng rejects this proposal, and the two go on tour lasting many years, which involves them exhibiting their bodies and even demonstrating the ways in which they had sex with their wives (Cohen 40-41). The touring proves arduous, and eventually Chang has a stroke, which affects both brothers’ abilities to walk and function. At the end of the play, Chang dies, with Eng shouting at his dead brother “please don’t leave me!” (65). Eng dies soon after Chang, leaving both Sally and Adelaide widows. Sally and Adelaide decide to live together.
while they mourn their losses, their connection to each other echoing that of their late spouses’ physical connection.

Most striking about The Wedding of the Siamese Twins is what Cohen includes in his description of the characters. On THE CHARACTERS page of the script, Cohen writes that Chang and Eng are “normal-looking, except for the connecting band of flesh in the breast-bone area” (4). The problematic “normal-looking” aside, Cohen clearly specifies the use of some sort of prosthetic connection between the two actors playing Chang and Eng. Cohen also mentions that such material may be included as part of the costume. In the stage directions where Chang and Eng are introduced and described, Cohen writes that “Change and Eng sit at a cloth covered table facing the audience. They wear suits with only a small stretched band of flesh showing” (7). Thus, Cohen not only allows, but actually requires, the two actors playing Chang and Eng to wear some sort of connecting apparatus. In so doing, it could be argued that he is more successful in his attempt to surrogate the persons of Eng and Chang Bunker. Cohen even includes this material in the COSTUME PLOT of the script. He recommends a “connecting flesh band with harness for each actor, about 6 inches” (72). His consideration of the “flesh band” in the COSTUME PLOT suggests that Cohen believes that such a connection is imperative in order to play Chang and Eng Bunker.

Another play that revolves around conjoined twins is Alexander Woo’s Debunked. Woo’s play, which he dubs “a headroom farce,” is about a pair of conjoined twins and their mother who is conspiring to trap two young men into marrying her daughters (Woo 1). Mrs. Colonel Kincaid is the mother of the twins, Anne and Virginia. With the exception of their family doctor, William Beauregard, the twins have never seen a man in their lives and are looking forward to meeting their unknowing beaus. The two young men are Robert, a Chinese
man who is a reporter looking to interview the twins for a story, and James, another Chinese man who is at the house under the auspices of a job interview. Once both men are captured, Dr. Beauregard performs surgery on them, removing their heads from their bodies and placing them on the conjoined bodies of Virginia and Anne, who will then have the bodies of the two Chinese men. Dr. Beauregard, who has aspirations of making star performers of Robert and James, writes songs and forces them to perform for large audiences. Meanwhile, James begins to study medicine and figures out a way to perform the same head transplant surgery that Dr. Beauregard developed. After much head-switching amongst all of the characters in the play, Robert and James wind up with their own bodies and Anne and Virginia are placed onto other female bodies, while Mrs. Colonel Kincaid and Dr. Beauregard end up on the conjoined bodies that Virginia and Anne originally had. Over the course of the play, Robert and James fall in love with Virginia and Anne, and the four run away together. The play ends with Dr. Beauregard and Mrs. Colonel Kincaid, connected to each other, expressing their affection for one another.

As does Cohen, Woo has his conjoined twins wear some kind of connecting material. In his stage directions for the first appearance of Virginia and Anne, Woo writes that “Anne and Virginia emerge from behind the screen. For the first time we see they are quite literally joined at the hip” (23). Woo’s play reduces and perhaps even trivializes the impact of having two characters as conjoined twins, since all of the other major characters are also joined to another character at some point in the play and the way in which coupling and uncoupling are performed with relative ease. What Woo’s play does point to is that, even though it does not surrogate specific conjoined twins from the past, it does attempt to portray them in a more accurate or
seemingly authentic manner than *Side Show*. What *Debunked* does is that *Side Show* does not is surrogate one particular segment of conjoined twins and presents it onstage.  

The final work I will review is the musical *Twenty fingers, twenty toes!* with music and lyrics by Michael Dansicker and libretto by Bob Nigro and Michael Dansicker. This piece, which was produced before *Side Show*, is also about Daisy and Violet Hilton, though it concerns their lives before they were released from the oppressive rules of their Aunt, known as Auntie in the musical. Daisy, who is also called Hanna in the script, and Violet, who is also called Helen, are miserable. They are treated horribly by Auntie and her business partner, Sir Myer Myers, who also fondles the girls throughout the musical. With the help of their black hermaphrodite friend, who is also a minority in society, Daisy and Violet are able to run away from their Aunt and Sir Myer.

What is most interesting about *Twenty fingers, twenty toes!* as it relates to my study is that Dansicker and Nigro write specific information about the costuming for Daisy and Violet. In the stage directions detailing the first entrance of the Hilton sisters, Dansicker and Nigro note that “they are dressed identically in a loose, ill-fitting smock” (2). While this speaks to the shabby treatment of the twins by Auntie, it also reveals that Dansicker and Nigro want to indicate in a very obvious sense that the actors playing Daisy and Violet are meant to be connected.

Another play that features conjoined twins that is not central to my study, but is still noteworthy, is *The Neo-Apocalyptic Inquisition Circus* by Michael Szeles. Set in the future, the play centers on Joshua Vainway, a man who has been required to face his sins, as well as those of his species. The Ringmaster, who is in charge of the Circus, must decide whether or not Earth is worth saving, and communicate this to God, who is planning to destroy it and, along with it, the human race. Two characters in the play are Tave and Gask, conjoined twins who are brought in by the Ringmaster to show Vainway his pride. Szeles’s stage directions read “LIGHTS: Fade over to the SIAMESE TWINS” (10). In the original production at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville in 1995, which I worked on as a production assistant, the two actors playing Tave and Gask wore a long band that connected them together, so that they could not move too far away from each other.
In all of these plays and musicals, one will notice that some plays were more successful at achieving surrogation than others. In comparison, *Side Show* comes close to surrogating the Hilton sisters at times, yet overall it, too, fails the Hilton sisters at other moments. Before discussing how the musical is and is not successful in its attempts at surrogating the actual Hilton twins, one must first know more about the history of Daisy and Violet Hilton.

**The Historical Hilton Twins**

Daisy and Violet Hilton were born on February 5, 1908 in Brighton, England. It is unclear who their parents were. While some claim that the mother was an unmarried young woman who was mortified by her daughters’ connection (Hartzman 167), others believe that their parents were a married couple who died shortly after the birth of the twins (Dreger 48). While the historical record is unclear regarding their birth parents, it is known that the twins were raised by Mary Hilton, the midwife at the birth of Daisy and Violet. It is also generally accepted that Mary Hilton treated the girls as though they were her property, required them to refer to her as “Auntie” when they were old enough, and forced them to perform as early as age three. For years, they sang, danced and played instruments at circuses, carnivals and fairs (Hartzman 168). They were popular in England, as well as Australia, where they toured, but it was not until they arrived in the United States in 1916 at the age of eight that they became stars.

Living in Texas, they were dubbed “The Hilton Sisters, San Antonio’s Siamese Twins.” Despite their celebrity, the twins were unable to enjoy their early success, as their Auntie treated them poorly, with beatings, threats and emotional torment (Bogdan 166-167). Eventually, their “Auntie” passed away. Unfortunately, however, the twins were willed to Auntie’s daughter, Edith, and her husband, Myer Myers (Hartzman 168). Under the authority of Myer (or “Sir”)
and Edith, Daisy and Violet performed all over the country, including Broadway. They made their Broadway debut in 1925, with many other attractions performing the same evening, including a young George Burns and Gracie Allen (Jensen 119). By all accounts, Daisy and Violet were the stars of the evening, and they were received with reviews lauding their New York debut. During the 1926-27 season, Daisy and Violet toured the Orpheum circuit, playing vaudeville houses all around the country. A pair of comedians-dancers, dubbed The Dancemedians, toured with them, and included in their ranks one Leslie Townes Hope, who later changed his name to Bob Hope (Jensen 130). In many respects, then, Daisy and Violet Hilton were doing well, as they were star performers across the country, making plenty of money, and hobnobbing with talented comedians. However, the appearance of success was deceiving. In truth, Myer and Edith did not give the twins much of the money that they earned, instead keeping it for themselves.

It is under an extremely strange situation that Daisy and Violet were at last emancipated from Edith and Myer. A man who took care of their scheduling, publicity, and other matters while on tour, requested their autographs on a publicity photo. Daisy and Violet signed the photo, writing “with love and best wishes” (Hartzman 168-169). The man’s wife later filed for divorce, citing the twins in her lawsuit against the man, because they “loved” her husband (Hartzman 169). Understandably, Daisy and Violet sought out legal counsel, and met with a lawyer. The lawyer, apparently sensing some tension in the room, asked Myer, who had accompanied them to meet the lawyer, if he could meet with Daisy and Violet alone. Once Myer left the room, Daisy and Violet told the man about their constant fear and abuse, and the lawyer agreed to represent them in seeking freedom (Hartzman 169). In 1931, at the ages of twenty-three years old, Daisy and Violet were finally freed from the constant oppression they had
experienced their entire lives (Bogdan 171). Further, the court ordered Edith and Sir to turn over $100,000 in assets to Daisy and Violet, which included about $80,000 in cash (Jensen 187).

With their new-found freedom, Daisy and Violet began performing in vaudeville shows and, in 1932, appeared in the film *Freaks*. Not surprisingly, in the film they played conjoined twins in a freak show. However, what is somewhat surprising is that they played characters who had separate love lives.

The search for love was not limited to the realm of fiction and celluloid. In the early 1930s, Maurice Lambert, the bandleader for a touring show starring Daisy and Violet, began courting Violet soon after he was employed by the twins. Maurice and Violet got engaged in 1934 and subsequently sought out a marriage license in New York, where they were both living. However, Maurice and Violet were denied a marriage license by William C. Chanler, acting corporation counsel (“Pygopagus Marriage”). Chanler was quoted as saying that “the very idea of such a marriage is quite immoral and indecent. I feel that a publicity stunt is involved” (“Pygopagus Marriage”). In response to this refusal, Maurice and Violet left and drove to Newark, New Jersey, where they hoped they could obtain a license. However, City Clerk Harry S. Reichenstein also turned them away, stating “Nothing doing! Moral reasons” (“Pygopagus Marriage”). In all, Maurice and Violet were denied a marriage license by twenty-one states (Bogdan 172). Eventually, Maurice and Violet broke off their engagement. Surprisingly, however, Violet did end up marrying James Moore, a dancer friend of the twins, at the Dallas Cotton Bowl in 1936 (Jensen 265). Spectators could purchase tickets to the event for twenty-five cents a piece (Jensen 267). However, less than two months later Moore and Violet requested that a New Orleans court annul the marriage, claiming that the entire incident was a sham and that they were strongly persuaded to do so for their careers (Jensen 274-275).
These period accounts provide a glimpse into cultural views regarding the idea of a conjoined twin getting married. Certainly Chanler and Reichenstein found the prospect of either Daisy or Violet marrying a man immoral, as both cited this as the reason why they denied the request of a marriage license. However, the public ceremony at the Dallas Cotton Bowl allegedly drew 7,000 or more spectators, presumably all eager to see a wedding of a conjoined twin to a man without any physical abnormalities (Jensen 269). This points to an important aspect that I will discuss in my analysis of *Side Show*: the dual fascination-horror of a conjoined twin who seeks out a life similar to the kind that “normal” people lead.

As did Violet, Daisy too was married at one point. She and Buddy Sawyer, a dancer who had worked with them on a cruise, married in 1941 at Buffalo City Hall (Jensen 295-296). Apparently, the couple had no problem procuring a license. Still, it seems that Sawyer had personal issues with being married to a conjoined twin, and left Daisy ten days after the ceremony (Drimmer 54). Regarding his marriage to Daisy, Sawyer reportedly said,

Daisy is a lovely girl [. . .] but I guess I just am not the type of fellow that should marry a Siamese twin [. . .] As far as being a bridegroom under such conditions is concerned, I suppose I am what you might call a hermit. (quoted in Drimmer 54)

Audiences eventually lost interest in the Hilton twins, and Daisy and Violet wound up opening a hamburger stand in Miami (Bogdan 172). In the early 1960s *Freaks* was reissued, and the twins began booking personal appearances at movie theaters to promote the film. However, in 1962 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the agent who arranged their appearance at a drive-in movie theater failed to pick them up and Daisy and Violet were stranded there (Bogdan 172-173). They lived the rest of their lives in North Carolina, working at a grocery store until their deaths in 1969 due to complications from the flu (Dreger 49).
Daisy and Violet Hilton were special people. They were individuals who lived separate lives, yet, by all accounts, maintained an emotional connection to each other. Their lives were complicated and fraught with hardships that required them to be strong. Understandably, such lives would be a fascinating subject for a play or musical, focusing on how the twins persevered. The story would serve as an inspiration to all who have had to deal with oppression because of some physical abnormality or disability. This is where Side Show enters the picture, and how it succeeds and fails in telling the story of Daisy and Violet Hilton.
CHAPTER TWO: SUCCESSES OF SIDE SHOW

As mentioned in chapter one, the historical Daisy and Violet Hilton considered themselves individuals who happened to be connected to each other. In *Side Show*, as the dramatized twins go about performing, confronting undue hardships, and eventually enduring and triumphing in the face of monumental odds, this individuality is drawn to the center of the action, highlighted, and celebrated. This capacity to transcend the limits of everyday existence (i.e. the twins’ conjoined existence) and embrace new possibilities (i.e. the fact that Daisy and Violet are individuals) calls to mind Bakhtin’s writings regarding the grotesque, specifically the strategy of inversion which allows figures who are routinely or traditionally marginalized to achieve agency.

For Bakhtin, grotesque inversion “frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (49). In *Side Show*, these new potentialities are called forth through the representation of the twins without a physical connection, as well as in the drawing of a black character, who, though ostensibly living in the United States in the 1930s, is treated in an accepting manner. Thus, by asking the audience to suspend the logical and/or historically accurate processes of understanding, and by suspending one’s logical process of understanding by establishing onstage a fictional world where the rules of order that typically govern life do not necessarily apply, the authors of *Side Show* encourage the audience to “see” the Hilton sisters and Jake, their African-American friend, in a different light. In both cases, Violet and Daisy, as well as Jake, are granted a level of agency in the play that, while indeed logically problematic or historically inaccurate, might well lead the audience to imagine new possibilities. That is to say, then, that the play allows the audience to see these othered, freak, or grotesque characters, traditionally cast as abject figures, differently, or as Bakhtin would have it, these grotesques are invested with the energy of “new potentialities” and are thus given value.
In this chapter, I will examine how *Side Show* endeavors and succeeds in giving value to the “freaks” who inhabit that world. To do so, I will first look at the dramatized Daisy and Violet, comparing these fictionalized characters to what we know about the actual Hilton sisters. I will then turn my attention to Jake and discuss how he is treated by the non-freaks, evaluate his ability to speak and move with great ease in the fictional world of the play, and compare that to how such an individual would have been regarded in the actual, segregated United States of the 1930s.

As entry into this consideration of the dramatic vs. the actual, I will first briefly examine what Bill Russell and Henry Krieger set out to create with *Side Show*. Based on interviews and essays by both of them, I will offer a summary history of how the musical developed and, moreover, outline what both men sought to accomplish the *Side Show*.

In September 1997, Bill Russell, the librettist/lyricist of the piece, videotaped an interview for the American Theatre Wing’s “Working in the Theatre” series. The episode, which also featured interviews with noted playwrights Paula Vogel and Douglas Carter Beane and director Mark Brokaw, focused on the roles of the playwright and the director in contemporary American theatre. On the one hand, Russell was there to discuss his art in general. On the other hand, however, he was seeking to promote *Side Show*, which was about to open on Broadway. Significant to my study, in the context of the interview, Russell discusses the ideas and agenda undergirding the development in *Side Show*. He reveals that the impetus for the musical came from Robert Longbottom, the director/choreographer of the original production on Broadway. Russell also proclaims that he considers Longbottom a third author of *Side Show* (Playscript/director). The situating of Longbottom as an integral member of the development and creative team follows composer Henry Krieger’s recollection that “Bill Russell…and Bobby
Longbottom asked me to be the composer of a musical featuring the Siamese twins Daisy and Violet Hilton” (Krieger B7). Piecing together the history of composition, it becomes clear that Longbottom had the idea for a musical about the Hilton sisters, yet needed to find a book writer, lyricist and composer to help him realize that idea. It is, perhaps, also important to note that in the course of the interview Russell also reveals that the musical was, at one point, entitled *Songs of the Siamese Twins*, and that he “thought that was just a gorgeous title. It was poetic” (Playscript/director). Despite the fondness Russell had for the previous title, there is little doubt that this earlier title alters the focus and, in turn, changes the perception of the musical. This is why, according to Russell, Broadway producer Emanuel Azenberg encouraged the development team to rethink the title. In short, the earlier title suggests that the musical is solely about conjoined twins, which, I argue, it is not. Conversely, the final title, *Side Show*, broadens the scope beyond a dramatic recounting of the lives of the Hilton sisters and implies, instead, that what is involved is a more expansive consideration of what it means to be a “freak.” A final comment from Russell further reveals this impetus to deal with otherness in a broader sense and brings to light his own feeling regarding the idea of “freakishness.” At one point in the interview, Russell says that, growing up gay in South Dakota with no role models to look up to, he “felt like such a freak” (Playscript/director). No doubt feeling like an outsider or “freak” informed his artistic choices once he began writing plays and musicals, as is evident in not only *Side Show*, but also in his poignant musical *Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens*.¹

The intent driving Russell and Krieger as they worked on *Side Show* is also the subject of an article Krieger wrote. In this article, published in the *New York Times* in December 1998 (eleven months after *Side Show* closed on Broadway), Krieger first discusses the experience of

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¹ *Elegies for Angels, Punks and Raging Queens* is a musical that focuses on characters who have lived with, died from or have been affected by AIDS.
watching the musical receive critical acclaim yet sell few tickets. Following this, he recalls that while writing *Side Show*, he, along with Russell and Longbottom, sought out to treat the Hilton twins “with great sensitivity” and that the musical “would need to touch on issues like duality, compromise, conflict, exploitation, yearning, courage and love, and should examine who and what is ‘normal’” (B9). By looking at this musical about conjoined twins it is clear that the three collaborators sought to treat the Hilton sisters with respect, compassion and empathy. Krieger goes on to devote an entire paragraph on how the three wanted to represent the Hilton sisters. He writes:

As we moved forward, we took pains to make the Hilton twins fully drawn human beings, much “like everyone else” (as they sing in Act 1); to endow them with senses of humor like the real Daisy and Violet. We explored what we imagined to be the special intimacy between conjoined sisters, both in serious scenes and in lighthearted vaudeville numbers. We assiduously avoided eliciting pity for them (Krieger B9).

These “behind the scenes” looks provided by Russell and Krieger reveal that the authors intended to create, with the characters Daisy and Violet in *Side Show*, complex or “fully drawn human beings,” ones that did not seek to elicit pity from the audience.

This complex drawing of the characters that anchors *Side Show* is, in many respects, novel. Alvin Goldfarb, in his article on giant and little actors, writes that “most freak performers simply provided the spectacle for which they had been engaged” (276). While it may be true that the entertainment value of many human curiosities was often, as Goldfarb suggests, tied almost entirely to their spectacle value or “freak” nature, the evidence suggests that this was not the case for Daisy and Violet Hilton, who sang, danced, and played musical instruments with
considerable skill. Indeed, by all accounts, the Hilton sisters were “among the highest-paid performers in vaudeville and Hollywood during their career” (Pingree 1996b, 177). While monetary wealth does not necessarily imply high artistic ability or talent, it does point to the Hilton twins’ success and, moreover, suggests that if they were not talented, they would probably not attract such large audiences for as long as they did. In this respect, *Side Show* does well by the Hilton sisters, as it allows the dramatized Daisy and Violet to be successful and talented performers in their own right.

Above and beyond this favorable drawing that situates the twins as complex and talented figures, there is another more remarkable advance. In short, with their drawing of Daisy and Violet, the authors of *Side Show* endeavor to grant agency to each of the twins. That is, while the characters Daisy and Violet may be conjoined twins, throughout the play it is made clear that they think of themselves as two distinct people with separate (and sometimes competing) desires, goals, and dreams. So, for example, in Act One while singing “Like Everyone Else”, Terry asks them what their dreams are, and Violet responds “I want to be like everyone else/So no one will point and stare/To walk down the street/Not attracting attention/No notice, no mention/No hint of despair/A normal reaction/A standard response/The same as everyone wants” (20). On one level, this moment is important to my argument because, in response to Terry’s query regarding “their” dreams (implying that the twins share the same dreams), Violet responds with “I” statements, thus declaring her individuality. On another level this moment is revealing because of what each sister reveals as she responds. To be sure, as is clear from her line cited above, Violet desires to be seen as a “normal” person and is willing to give up fame and fortune just for the prospect of walking down the street unnoticed. Significantly, though Daisy also wishes to be “like everyone else” her response is markedly different than that of Violet. In response to the
same question, Daisy sings “I want to be like everyone else/But richer and more acclaimed/Worshiped and celebrated/Pampered and loved/To see those who’ve laughed/Feeling ashamed/A glorious, frantic/Adoring response/The same as everyone wants” (20-21). As Daisy wants to also be like everyone else, she also desires fame and fortune with this “normalcy.” It seems then that Daisy still wants attention from many people, but for a different reason than she is a conjoined twin. Thus, both want to be “normal,” but have different views as to what that means. Near the end of the song these differing views are clearly articulated when Violet and Daisy sing in unison: “Though we can’t agree on a single response/We want what everyone wants/Only what everyone wants/The same as everyone wants” (21). Singing these lyrics together, it is nonetheless clear that the twins are striving for separate and different ends. Indeed, even when they do sing about wanting the same things, they are represented as seeking completely opposite and, if you will, individualized goals in life.

This notion may be explored further by considering how the very structure of the music in Side Show illustrates and reinforces the individuality of Daisy and Violet. A lay review of the music in Side Show demonstrates that the music serves to buttress the view that Daisy and Violet are, and wish to be viewed as, separate people who happen to be joined together. Perhaps the best way of illustrating how this notion is expressed in the music is to briefly consider the last song the twins sing as a duet, “I Will Never Leave You.” This song is sung at the end of the play, when the twins realize that they will always be seen as a singular freak to the rest of the world. Daisy and Violet sing “I will never leave you/I will never go away/We were meant to share each moment/Beside you is where I will stay/Evermore and always/We’ll be one though we’re two/For I will never leave you” (109). As they sing in this song, it is clear they are resolutely standing in opposition to the world’s vision of who they should be, and declaring
instead the singularity of their bodies, and thus asserting their own individuality. As with some
of the other songs, it is within the lyrics that this quest for individuality is perhaps most clear.
However, the very structure of the music also embodies this quest. In more specific terms,
instead of singing in unison, Violet and Daisy sing this song in harmony. Indeed, while the
lyrics sung are essentially the same for both women, the notes and rhythms are different: as one
sings much higher and holds her notes longer, the other sings lower and begins certain lyrics on
different beats (Side Show). They are, in effect, simultaneously singing together and, yet,
singing apart at the same time. By way of the conventions of harmony and differing rhythms, it
is clear that Krieger was trying to do with the music what Russell did with the book and lyrics:
to distinguish Daisy and Violet as individuals who happen to share a physical bond.

Krieger and Russell’s endeavor to present Violet and Daisy as two distinct people is, of
course, supported by what we know about the actual lives of the Hilton sisters. As I wrote in
chapter one, for the early part of their lives Daisy and Violet were forced to live under the
tyrannical thumb of Edith and Myer Myers, who controlled every aspect of their professional and
personal lives. However, as soon as the twins were no longer under this authority, they began to
live their lives and conduct their careers as they saw fit. So, for example, where they had been
forced by Edith and Sir to wear matching costumes, once free of that influence the twins wore
different dresses and developed individual styles (Drimmer 59). Moreover, once they were on
their own they became regulars on the social scene, where, by all accounts, they were regarded
as two distinct people, Violet and Daisy, not the singular Hilton sisters. Regarding these
expressions of individualism and independence, Dean Jensen, in his book on the twins, contends
that once they were on their own, Daisy and Violet “had become San Antonio’s darlings. Their
names appeared on the guest lists of almost every celebration held in town, from children’s
birthday parties to the elegant soirées of the wealthy” (190). Even though Jensen supports this assertion with little more than anecdotal evidence, it nonetheless suggests that though they were connected to each other, Daisy and Violet chose to lead active and independent social lives. Thus, the perception of Daisy and Violet Hilton was that they were unique individuals who were not constrained from living the high life that other socialites were accustomed to living.

Living a more refined life was something that Daisy and Violet pursued, especially once they were no longer under the control of Edith and Myer. In fact, the Hilton sisters both sought out romantic relationships with various men. Issues of intimacy are problems that conjoined twins have long faced. Allison Pingree has written that “conjoined twins arrest the attention and imagination of the national public because they embody both a national fantasy and a national nightmare” (1996b, 174). For example, famous conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, who fathered twenty-two children between the two of them, were throughout their lives constantly questioned about their sexual practices. In her article on Chang and Eng, Pingree writes that “when Chang and Eng began to court the young women who would become their wives, the surrounding community was outraged” (1996a, 107). Pingree further suggests that the community members “could fantasize about the sex acts of the foursome, where three-if not four-persons always would be present” (1996a, 108). Similarly, there are many well documented instances where the real Daisy and Violet were confronted with comments and questions regarding their sexual practices. On top of this, a bit of apocrypha regarding the sexual practices of the Hilton sisters has continued to haunt them, even after their deaths. Actor Ricky Jay, who collects documents and anecdotal information about human curiosities, has written about how Daisy and Violet would leave each other behind when they wanted to be alone. Jay writes:
Daisy and Violet, in an effort to master the art of veiling their individual minds to the ‘business’ of the other, consulted with Harry Houdini. The great mystifier taught them, says a tempting piece of apocrypha, how one could withdraw mentally while the other engaged in the pleasures of sex. (A1)

This bit of ephemeral evidence is also outlined in their obituary. While I recognize that this may not be reliable information regarding the actual processes which Daisy and Violet used to distance themselves, I believe that it proves useful in examining how people perceived and continue to perceive conjoined twins. It is significant to note that in the case of the Hiltons, such comments implied that their sexual behavior was not only mysterious but deviant. In an article publicizing the engagement of Daisy to Jack Lewis, the unidentified writer asserts that next to murder, love-making is the most personal and exclusive job in the world. All the world may love a lover, but lovers don’t want anyone in on the loving. The question at once arises as to how Mr. Lewis managed to woo and win Miss Daisy, with the inseparable Miss Violet always welded to her. (quoted in Pingree 1996b, 181)

Significantly, in Side Show, this power dynamic is sometimes inverted, and those making the comments or asking the questions are cast as the sexual deviants, not Daisy and Violet.

Before I begin to analyze this sometimes affirming representation of sex in Side Show, I must first include a quote from Myer Myers, the caregiver of the actual Daisy and Violet. During the court case in which Daisy and Violet won independence from Myer and Edith, Myer took the witness stand to counter the accusation that the sisters lived in isolation from the rest of the world. Myer claimed that Daisy and Violet “sought freedom only in the desire to ‘make whoopee’” (Hendricks 26). Therefore, Daisy and Violet, even if they were not seeking out a
tawdry life of sex (as they were, instead, trying to gain freedom from the oppressive grip of Myer and Edith), were nevertheless accused, in court, of wanting their freedom so that they could have sex. Myer, knowingly or not, marked an already abnormal Daisy and Violet with another corporeal characteristic, one that society already speculated about because of the twins’ conjoinment. Further, Myer was labeling them as such because he still wanted to control them. By making this accusation, Myer was insinuating that Daisy and Violet were unable to think or act on their own as responsible adults, which would imply that they are individuals. By marking them as corporeal and wanting only to “make whoopee,” Myer’s attempted “outing” of the Hilton sisters sought to reify them as abject Siamese twins, not individual human beings. Possibly because of this, or as a reaction to it, the dramatized Daisy and Violet are sexual beings as well, though they are forced to deal with sex on other character’s terms. In *Side Show*, even when Daisy and Violet explore romantic or sexual feelings on their own, society demands that the very act is deviant, even though Daisy and Violet are not behaving in a deviant manner in the script. To combat this, Daisy and Violet address sex in their own individual ways in *Side Show*.

In *Side Show*, the first notable reference about sex is in regards to how Daisy and Violet became conjoined twins in the first place. When The Boss is introducing Daisy and Violet during the performance in the Midway, he talks about how they ended up stuck to each other. The Boss tells the audience, “Scientists believe that Siamese twins come from the same life germ and that their complete separation was retarded in some way-perhaps, while pregnant, their mother witnessed dogs stuck together copulating” (12). The Boss believes, or at least allows for the possibility, that Daisy and Violet are conjoined because their mother saw two dogs having sex. This line indicates that, back in the 1930s, certain folk tales in circulation portended that any pregnant woman could also be cursed with conjoined twins if she witnessed such a horrific
sight. Indeed, part of the folklore surrounding conjoined twins, according to Andrea Stulman Dennett, is that such persons were cursed even before they were born: “An expectant mother who saw dogs copulating was supposed to have reason to fear the birth of conjoined twins” (77). The Boss’ statement about Daisy and Violet’s mother’s viewing of such an atrocious act implies that they are forever marked because of their mother’s deviancy, which, by extension, causes Daisy and Violet to be deviant.

The fear of becoming sexually deviant by Daisy and Violet carries through the musical. Other characters wonder if they, too, will become tarnished by a romance with the Hilton sisters. However, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests,

the freak is an object of simultaneous horror and fascination because, in addition to whatever infirmities or abilities he or she exhibits, the freak is an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life.

(57)

No matter how horrifying the “freak” is, she is also alluring and must be explored. Buddy and Terry first consider this exploration in the song “More Than We Bargained For.” As the men sing about Daisy and Violet, and how they have grown fond of the sisters, Terry questions the twins’ affection, thinking it is driven by a desire to become vaudeville stars. Terry sings that he has “known lots of women” (36) and then goes on to describe some of them: “The lovely/The gruesome/I’ve seen things/I’ve tried things/But never a twosome!” (36). When Buddy sings, “I’m not interested in that,” Terry replies, “Then close your eyes” (36). When Buddy professes he does not understand, Terry sings, “Just a little joke,” which triggers Buddy’s reaction, “It’s no joking matter” (36). Even though Terry has known Daisy and Violet for a brief amount of time—for example, he says earlier in the script that he will return in “a couple of weeks”—this
line reveals he is already willing to make insensitive jokes about Daisy and Violet. This is simply the first expression of interest that Terry and Buddy have in pursuing Daisy and Violet.

Later in the musical, Daisy, Violet, Terry and Buddy all go on a ride at a fair so that they may have some time away from all of the publicity surrounding the planned wedding of Buddy and Violet. During this scene, as the characters sing the song “Tunnel of Love,” Buddy reconsiders his marriage to a “freak” while Terry cannot suppress his desires for Daisy any longer. After Buddy sings that he fears being with his wife and her sister, Terry sings, “I had planned to keep the temperature cool/She’s raising my Fahrenheit/Don’t let passion rule you/Don’t be a fool/Don’t feed that appetite/Oh what the hell-why fight?” (97). Russell notes that when Terry and Daisy are having sex, Violet can feel a difference in her body because of Daisy’s pleasure. “Why do Daisy’s shivers run/Up my spine/Much more passion from her side than mine” (97).

Once the ride is over and Terry and Daisy are finished having sex, Terry wonders if he has made the right decision in pursuing Daisy. Terry sings “Was this a mistake/The tunnel of love?/Passion could not be controlled” (99). Terry is questioning himself because he knows that he can never love Daisy, as he will always see her as corporeal, always connected to her twin. The attraction that he felt for her before the ride has now turned into revulsion, because he realizes that Daisy is no different from other women. Therefore, in his opinion, Terry has now been tainted by his attraction/revulsion to Daisy, whereas in actuality Terry is the sexual deviant in this scenario. However, he is not the only character to believe that Daisy and Violet are perverse; other characters fall prey to it as well.

In the press conference that follows Daisy and Violet’s first performance after leaving the side show, Terry has gathered numerous reporters who ask probing questions of the sisters. Some of these questions are about how they sleep and if they could be separated. Once the
reporters are satisfied by the answers to these questions, they continue with more personal queries. Reporter 1 asks, “What about romance?” (61). This question is followed rapidly by Reporter 5 and Reporter 6 asking, “What about love” and “What about beaux?” (61). The twins’ responses to these are nonchalant, even whimsical. Violet sings, “Oh those/I suppose/It’s bound to happen” (61). At this point in the musical, Violet and Daisy are still in a flirtatious phase with Buddy and Terry, respectively, so they are responding rather coyly. The questions the reporters ask Daisy and Violet next come at a lightning fast pace, and the questions turn quickly to requests for explicit details regarding their sexual behavior. Reporter 4 asks Violet and Daisy how close they are to Buddy, Terry and Jake, since they all work together. Right after this question, Reporter 8 asks “very close?” (62). Violet says, “We wouldn’t be here/Without their help,” to which Daisy adds, “We share the applause with them” (62-63). Reporter 6 and Reporter 1 share a quick one-two punch of questions after this: “Anything else?” “Your room?” “Your bed?” (63). Terry strikes back at the reporters, singing “Not to throw cold water/On your sick fantasizing/But this is business/No romance involved” (63). Terry is quick to remind the reporters that even though he works with conjoined twins, he finds the very thought of having sex with them “sick” and that he is in “business” with them. Buddy’s response, while dressed up as virtuous, is equally defensive: “We’d never take advantage/Of these girls” (63). While Buddy is trying to appear to be a gentleman in front of the press, his qualifier “these girls” indicates that he might consider taking advantage of girls who are not conjoined twins. This line could conceivably be interpreted as a valid comment Buddy makes about his motives (and Buddy as an honorable fellow), which I acknowledge. However, I will illustrate later that Buddy is not quite as admirable as he appears to be. The humiliating questions the reporters ask of Daisy and Violet points to the power that “normal” society (embodied by the reporters) holds
over those who do not fit. As the “normal” members of society, at least physically, the reporters work to degrade Daisy and Violet during the press conference. In short, then, Russell and Krieger invert the power dynamic, and make these reporters despicable, while at the same time elevating Daisy and Violet by allowing them to ignore such questions and not emotionally explode or crumble upon hearing such perverse suggestions. As former members of the side show, Daisy and Violet would not be considered high status. Yet, because of the dignity and grace in which they carry themselves throughout this scene, they are elevated to a higher status. In this respect, Krieger and Russell succeed in valorizing the Hilton sisters.

The reporters do not stop after Terry and Buddy come to the rescue. More questions are thrown at Daisy and Violet, faster than they can respond:

REPORTER 6.
Don’t you need a man?

REPORTER 3.
Don’t you want to get married?

REPORTERS 1 & 7.
Husbands?

REPORTERS 2, 3 & 6.
Children?

REPORTERS 1, 4, 5, 6 & 8.
Fam’lies?

REPORTER 8.
Don’t you feel like nuns?

REPORTER 6.
Will you always be virgins?
REPORTERS 1, 2, 3 & 7.
Old maids?
REPORTERS 4, 5, 6 & 8.
Spinsters?
ALL REPORTERS.
Barren? (64).

Violet responds to this barrage of questions with, “Like any girls our age/We dream of getting married/A wedding” (64). Daisy then sings, “A husband,” and Violet sings, “A fam’ly to come home to” (64). Upon hearing that, Four Reporters all sing the same lyrics “How would that work?” and then the other Four Reporters sing “How would that work?” (65). Daisy’s response to this is “Anything’s possible” and Violet follows this with “When everything’s right” (65). This also suggests that Daisy and Violet consider themselves individual people who could marry and have children at some point, which the Reporters doubt by asking how such a life could work. Once again, the Reporters set traps for Daisy and Violet to fall into, yet the twins transcend such obvious tricks and consider the same options as any other women their age.

At one point during the barrage of questions about the sexuality of Daisy and Violet, Reporter 7 asks the entire group (Daisy, Violet, Buddy, Terry), “So none of you has interest/In a double-header?” (63). This crass comment receives no response from either of the twins, or from Terry or Buddy. However, at this point Jake steps in and tells the reporter, “No one talks to them that way!” (63). Likewise, when Reporter 6 asks Daisy and Violet if they share their bed with Terry, Buddy or Jake, it is Jake who warns him with, “Watch your mouth, Mister” (63). Interestingly, in this musical the only male character who demonstrates true generosity and
benevolence to Daisy and Violet is the only character who was presented as a cannibal during the sideshow performance: Jake. Krieger and Russell’s drawing of Jake as a complex and caring figure adds an unusual dimension to the play. Indeed, throughout the play Jake operates as a symbol of equality. In so doing, he is positioned not as a one-dimensional freak, but as a caring and thoughtful individual.

At the beginning of Side Show, Terry and Buddy decide to attend the freak show in which Daisy, Violet and Jake all work. When Terry and Buddy are watching the show, they watch as the freaks all perform their signature acts. The stage directions to this section read “the Cannibal King is ‘tamed’ by the Roustabouts and The Boss. He breaks free and terrorizes Terry. The Roustabouts ‘recapture him and drag him off’” (12). Even though we do not know if Jake is an actual cannibal at this point in the play, Russell writes that he has been “tamed,” as though he does not need to be tamed and he is performing the role of a cannibal for the freak show. When The Boss is introducing the members of his sideshow, he singles out Jake. The Boss sings, “From the inky jungles/Of the darkest continent/You will witness firsthand/The ferocity of the cannibal king/We keep him chained up/Because we know he’s hankering/For a taste of one of you/And you are here for enlightenment/Not as stock for cannibal stew” (9). Even though The Boss tries to mark Jake as a freakish cannibal, the audience soon realizes that he is not. Once offstage, all of the members of the sideshow, save The Boss, gather to celebrate the birthday of Daisy and Violet. Jake sings “/Being the only available king/Hereby declare today a holiday/To honor/The most beautiful maidens/In the land/On the birthday they share/Along with everything else/Including our love” (15-16). In short, it is Jake who makes sure that Daisy and Violet are treated well on their birthday.
Another example of this sympathetic and complex drawing of Jake takes place immediately following the first performance that Daisy and Violet give after they have left the freak show. The performance is a rousing success, and Buddy and Jake are standing backstage going on about how successful it was. Buddy sings, “I knew they were meant to sing/But tonight they did more,” and then Jake sings, “Did you hear that crowd?/They hollered so loud/I bet their throats are sore,” to which Buddy replies, “This isn’t a dream/Did you hear them scream encore!” (58). Clearly, Buddy and Jake are celebrating the success of the performance, and, significantly, Buddy does not care at all that Jake is African-American, speaking to him as though he is a friend. In fact, during this moment in the Broadway production², Buddy hugs Jake during this scene because he is so excited about the sisters’ success. Jake is at first uncomfortable with this hug, but then briefly puts his arms around Buddy. After this, Terry enters and shakes Buddy’s hand, congratulating him for such a successful performance. Terry then does the same to Jake. These actions suggest that Jake may have been a freak in the side show, but now that he has left he is treated not as a freak, but as a man similar to Terry and Buddy. Jake accepts such treatment, as earlier in the musical he was perceived as a cannibal and not a human being who deserved to be treated as an individual.

Daisy, on the other hand, treats Jake as though he is less than her. When Jake professes his love for her, in “You Should Be Loved,” Daisy tells Jake that, “The world won’t let you” (92). Then, when Jake tells her that he doesn’t care what the world thinks of a conjoined twin loving an African-American, Violet sings, “I want to be like everyone else/I couldn’t bear/What they would say/If I loved you that way” (93). It seems, then, that Daisy has some feelings for Jake that might be more than friendly, but she will not allow herself to act on them because of

² I viewed a videotape copy of the Broadway production of Side Show at New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, call number NCOV 2132.
what she fears society would say about their relationship. This interchange is cut short when Terry and Buddy enter, telling everyone that they have procured a marriage license for Buddy and Daisy. Terry, excited about this development, says, “Let’s go celebrate!” and Buddy responds, “Jake, you come too. You’re part of the family” (93). Nobody scoffs at this remark, as everyone does consider Jake part of this small family that has been created out of a professional bond. Daisy says to Jake, “That’s right, Jake. You’re family and always will be” (93). However, instead of going out to celebrate with his new “family,” Jake stays behind to be alone and fume about this new information, singing, “If I can see/Past your affliction/Why can’t you see past mine/Why do you care/What people might say” (94). Jake does not understand how Violet could care about the values of a society that oppresses her and makes money in the process. When the wedding day arrives, Jake decides to tell everyone that he is leaving Daisy and Violet to go work in the Chicago blues scene. After an argument with Terry about the timing of his resignation, Jake tells Buddy to “be good to Violet. She deserves better” (104). After Jake leaves, Buddy gives this charge credibility by agreeing with Jake. Buddy sings, “He’s right, Violet/You deserve better;” (105) and admits that he cannot be married because he will always see her as a Siamese twin. He also gives Jake credit for understanding that Buddy never loved Violet in the first place, which Buddy subsequently reveals. What Buddy was unable to articulate, Jake easily made clear to the other characters: that Jake loves Violet and Buddy does not her love. Jake seems to know that Buddy is marrying Violet so that he can be a vaudeville star, not because he loves her. Jake’s departure is also the impetus for Buddy’s admittance that he cannot love Violet. Therefore, Jake is the only honorable man in the musical, and he is denied love similar to how Daisy and Violet are denied love.
Jake ends up leaving Daisy and Violet because he must begin the next chapter in his life away from them, as he can no longer be around Violet because she spurned his advances. Further, Jake is a sympathetic male in a musical populated by oppressive men of varying degrees. Jake is as complex and intriguing as Daisy and Violet are in *Side Show*, and Krieger and Russell successfully valorize another “freak” in the musical other than Daisy and Violet.

*Side Show* gives new value to the freaks in a way that few plays and musicals have done in the past. It is a complex, multi-layered musical that attempts to humanize those who are often viewed as disgusting and grotesque. However, when “freaks” are not represented as freakish one wonders how freakishness is constructed. O’Neal writes that “freakishness is not only stipulated by a physical deformity: freakishness may also be dictated by our perceptions and treatment of others” (172). To continue that line of thought further, freakishness is dictated by our perception and treatment of others. Therefore, there is no static signifier of freakery, but rather the coding of “freak” is a fluid, evolving perception created by the interpreters of freaks, not solely the freaks themselves. Therefore, in the words of O’Neal, Russell and Krieger “implore the audience members to empathize with the state of Daisy and Violet” (159). I agree that Russell and Krieger are trying to inspire an emotional response from the audience. However, they do not always serve the freaks in *Side Show* in these representations, especially by trying to elicit an emotional response. In the next chapter, I will examine how Russell and Krieger fail in trying to revalorize the freaks in *Side Show*. 
CHAPTER THREE: FAILING THE “FREAK”

With Side Show, Bill Russell and Henry Krieger created a wonderful homage to Daisy and Violet Hilton, providing modern audiences with a glimmering view of not only these two women, but also of carnivals and freak shows of the past century. While it was not their direct intent to do so, they have also given audiences a sense of how central these shows were to U.S. culture. It is not too much to suggest that these now near-forgotten performance venues were, in their time, what the movies are to today’s audiences. Instead of going to see The Bourne Identity or Office Space at the nearest multiplex cinema, spectators would go to the local fairgrounds to see fat men, bearded ladies, and conjoined twins. While carnivals and side shows slowly went out of fashion over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, the memories live on in works like Side Show.

Even though Russell and Krieger have made Side Show as a reminder of our past, the musical does not always pay loving or appropriate tribute to the actual Hilton twins. As I have noted, the musical is specifically written to be performed by two women who are not connected to each other, synthetically or naturally. I find this directive troubling. Thus, while I argue that the musical does, at least in some respects, grant the Hilton sisters agency (see my consideration of this in chapter two), I also hold that it does so in ways that are not always historically accurate or ethically responsible. In seeking to grant individuality to the actual Hilton sisters with Side Show, which is admirable and praiseworthy, Russell and Krieger have nonetheless taken away part of what made Daisy and Violet unique. The same representational tactics that worked to valorize the Hilton twins in the musical also bring with them severe limitations, which work against Russell and Krieger’s presumed objective of giving agency and granting individuality to the actual Hilton twins. To that end, in this chapter I will chart the ways in which Side Show
fails the “freaks” it attempts to valorize. To do so, I will return to Roach’s concept of surrogation and apply it to Side Show. I will then look at and critically evaluate the extensive Production Note and stage directions in the published script that separate Daisy and Violet. I acknowledge that even though such notes and directions are sometimes ignored in rehearsal and performance, Russell and Krieger nonetheless intend for the text to be produced a certain way. I will then focus on how Daisy and Violet, once innocent and even naïve at the beginning of the musical, are through the course of the play so victimized and even polluted by such a harsh world that, at times, they become as cruel as many of the other characters. Once again I will apply Roach’s concept of surrogation to Side Show, evaluating the ways in which Side Show falls short in surrogating the actual Daisy and Violet. I will conclude with a consideration of some instances in which Daisy and Violet are presented as weak and powerless over their own lives.

In applying Roach’s concept of surrogation to Side Show, it is important to consider all aspects of the work, including historical accuracy, settings and time periods, music, dialogue and the like. However, for the purposes of this study, I am interested in how the musical depicts the characters Daisy and Violet as historically-correct representations of the actual Daisy and Violet Hilton. Specifically, I am focusing on how a musical that appears to be constructed to valorize the Hilton sisters is able to do so when it does not represent the part of them that was connected. If Side Show is attempting to portray Daisy and Violet as being individuals who are simply connected to each other, as I claim that it does, how can it do so without having the performers connected to each other? While a noble attempt by Russell and Krieger, Side Show does not succeed in surrogating the Hilton sisters. One reason for this is because of the detailed Production Note and stage directions in the published script.
To begin, I would like to critically consider the assumptions that come with Russell and Krieger’s refusal to stage the small part of Daisy and Violet’s bodies that held them together. I believe that a useful parallel to this may be found in Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *Venus* and her treatment of the Venus Hottentot. In their study of Parks’ play, Harry J. Elam and Alice Rayner address the lack of representation when they write:

> Parks’s stage presentation recuperates and refigures [Venus’s] body as a sign of opposition to colonial exploitation and dehumanization. On the other hand, the play represents and reinscribes these same systems of oppression and degradation by putting her once again on display before the gaze of an audience. (267)

Similarly, since *Side Show* gives the twins agency and allows them to make their own decisions, the stage becomes a site of resistance toward any dehumanizing factor. However, this advance is undercut by the display of them in front of an audience for amusement and entertainment. Further complicating the work is the fact that *Side Show* specifies that the performers playing the twins not be conjoined. In this respect, then, *Side Show* cleans up the Hilton twins, refusing to stage the primary corporeal feature that led to their abjection. Even though Krieger and Russell presumably did this in order to highlight the individuality of the dramatized Daisy and Violet, this treatment inevitably reinscribes normalizing notions of what an individual is and is not. In short, then, as Russell and Krieger make the Hilton sisters more palatable for contemporary audiences, they ultimately fail the actual Hilton twins. The lack of the spectacle that connects Daisy and Violet is denied staging. This calls to mind Mary Russo’s remarks on female grotesqueness. Russo writes that “for a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries” (Russo 53). While I agree that the actual Hilton sisters were defying boundaries in performance, as well as their public lives, *Side Show*
disregards this spectacle and instead opts to represent freakery without any elements of freakishness.

In *Side Show*, Daisy and Violet are constructed as two individuals, yet society prevents them from leading “normal” lives because of their conjoinedness, thereby making the Hilton twins abject. As Julia Kristeva writes about abjection, “It is [. . .] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (391). That which disturbs the system on the part of the Hilton sisters is erased in *Side Show* since the two leads are not connected in any physical way. In the musical, the Hilton twins, who are simply trying to lead lives similar to those who attend their performances, are disturbing “identity, system, order” by their mere existence. Yet the appearance of Daisy and Violet in *Side Show* is similar to the appearances of the other non-conjoined or “normal” characters, which indicates that this abject treatment of them is contradictory to what is performed on stage. The abject is absent, and, by extension, so are the Hilton sisters. To be sure, in a way *Side Show* works to raise the visibility of Daisy and Violet Hilton. Nevertheless, surrogation of the Hilton sisters in *Side Show* fails because we do not see an accurate representation of all of Daisy and Violet Hilton. The dramatized Daisy and Violet are confronted with reactions of hostility, fascination and even disgust, but these reactions are inconsistent with what *Side Show* dictates Daisy and Violet look like. The abject, according to John Limon, is “something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role [. . .] that has become your only character” (4). As there is nothing tangible to “slough off” in *Side Show*, the treatment the Hiltons receive seems incongruous with the presentation of them as abject characters. For example, in the Samuel French acting edition of *Side Show*, a Production Note reads:
In the Broadway production of *Side Show*, Daisy and Violet’s connection was created by the two actors standing side by side. They were never literally connected by corsets, velcro or any other costume piece. This allowed the audience to participate in creating the twins’ connection with their collective imagination and made the actor’s achievement of appearing to be joined all the more impressive (especially when dancing). (5)

While I do not know for certain if Russell and Krieger considered the possibility of connecting the two actors, it remains clear that if they did, they discarded that option, preferring to ignite the audience’s “collective imagination.”

Of course, if this was the only specification of the two actors not being connected, it might conceivably be side-stepped in production. Nevertheless, such designations in the script proper indicate that Krieger and Russell, in their attempts to portray the historical Daisy and Violet as individuals, have actually separated the dramatized Daisy and Violet from each other, thereby failing to achieve successful representation. A comparison may be made with the play *The Elephant Man*.

*The Elephant Man*, which places the fictionalized Merrick on a pedestal, seeks to stage Merrick without any naturalistic prosthetics, even though Pomerance suggests that the actor playing Merrick may employ a “twisted position” or appear “contorted” (xi). On the other hand, *Side Show*, which seeks to individualize and “normalize” the actual Hilton sisters, uses a similar tactic to Pomerance’s, except by separating them, Russell and Krieger diminish the importance that being connected had to the Hilton twins. However, by not staging the difference that the actual Daisy and Violet had, the fictional Daisy and Violet fall short in valorizing the historical twins. If Russell and Krieger wanted to hagiographize Daisy and Violet Hilton, their tactic of
keeping the twins separated would work. However, the way the musical is currently configured, this element works against them. Further, this is not the only note in the script that requires the performers playing Daisy and Violet to be detached.

At the beginning of *Side Show*, the members of the Midway sideshow enter and sing the first song, “Come Look At The Freaks.” The stage directions read, “the Company, costumed as average citizens of the 1930s, enters and sits facing the audience. There is a moment of silence as the Company and audience stare at each other” (7). While Russell may believe he is placing the action of the audience members squarely in their laps, he instead reinforces the very systems of power that he is critiquing. When he writes that the Company is costumed “as average citizens” he may believe he is giving the costume designer an idea of the look of *Side Show*, but he falls into the trap of describing the characters as “average,” which may be read as being synonymous with “normal.” In short, then, a literal reading of Russell’s stage direction suggests that his work reifies existing notions of normality. After staring at the audience, the Company begins to sing the opening number, “Come Look At The Freaks.” The Company, in this case the members of the Midway side show, sing, “Come look at the freaks/Come gape at the geeks/Come examine these aberrations/Their malformations/Grotesque physiques/Only pennies for peeks/Come look at the freaks” (7). In this moment, Russell and Krieger establish what will continue throughout the rest of the musical: the “freaks” in *Side Show* may not appear to be abnormal or disabled in any way, yet are determined “freakish” by the other characters. This is reiterated when The Boss “introduces his attractions” and they “stand and become the acts he’s describing” (7). Again, they become “freakish” because a non-freak deems them so. While Russell and Krieger are to be admired for trying to give new value to those who performed in side shows and carnivals, they fall into a trap from which they are unable to escape. In fact, the
performers who are playing Daisy and Violet do not stand next to each other, indicating connection, until The Boss, a non-freak, refers to them as Siamese twins. In trying to lure audience members into buying a ticket into the sideshow, The Boss begins singing about “The stars of our show,” referring to “the Siamese twins” Daisy and Violet, who subsequently reveal themselves. The stage directions read “Daisy and Violet cross Downstage, face each other and sing” (10). As they are doing this, they are singing, and the stage directions read, “Daisy and Violet face front, connect, pivot Upstage and enter the tent, now conjoined at the hip” (10). This scene is constructed to highlight the individuality of Daisy and Violet. It is also telling in that it sets up how the world of the musical works: that conjoined twins have the ability to separate and connect when they please.

Further problematizing this lack of tangible connection between Daisy and Violet is the constant mention of its existence. When Terry, a talent scout who is interested in making Daisy and Violet vaudeville stars, approaches the Boss about this possibility, the Boss sings, “Are you blind?/Is that why you didn’t notice/That these two are joined together/With a little flesh between them/Making it impossible /To go in two directions” (Russell 24). Again, a non-freak marks Daisy and Violet as different from the other characters in the musical. Notable to this song is that none of it appears to be ironic. There are no stage directions written for this section, neither are there any suggestions to perform this moment tongue-in-cheek, which suggests that Russell and Krieger do not intend for this moment to be satiric or ironic in any capacity. If the stage directions dictated that The Boss acknowledge that Daisy and Violet are not conjoined, such as waving his arm in between the two performers while singing these lyrics, then this moment would be less problematic. However, as it is currently scripted, these lyrics, as well as other lines and lyrics similar to them, do not carry the same weight as they would if the two leads
were connected some way. This idea harkens back to the intent of the piece. In *The Elephant Man*, Merrick is meant to be seen as superior to the other characters, while in *Side Show*, Daisy and Violet are meant to be like everyone else, as they sing in one song. The difficulty with this is that the performers are “normal,” yet the treatment of them as something other than “normal” is problematic.

Another scene in which the actors playing Daisy and Violet are standing in different locations on the stage involves Terry dreaming about Daisy. Terry, who through the course of the musical falls in love with Daisy, sings a solo about how much he loves Daisy but cannot be with her because of her abnormality. When Daisy appears to Terry in his dream, the stage directions read, “Daisy appears alone, Upstage” (81). Daisy tells him that he should not fight his feelings for her, singing that he should not, “object/Let’s connect/Let’s unite” (81). Terry responds to Daisy, “But you can’t lose your shadow/That tie you can’t unbind” (81). Since Daisy and Violet have the ability to separate when they choose (in the world of the musical), Daisy detaches from Violet and appears in Terry’s dream alone, which makes sense, as Terry’s ideal image of Daisy is a person not connected to her twin. However, the very strategies of *Side Show* that help to give value to the actual Hilton sisters simultaneously work against it. This moment stages Daisy as an individual, which succeeds in valorizing both of the twins, as it suggests that not only Daisy, but also Violet, are separate people. Nevertheless, at the same time, Violet’s absence from the stage implies that Violet may be blinked away at whim, which is consistent with the world of the musical that Russell and Krieger have previously established, but ultimately fails the actual Hilton sisters. After more lyrics similar to these, the stage directions read, “Violet appears Upstage” (82). Daisy tells Terry, “you have to share me” (82), and Terry proclaims, “Oh no/I want you alone” (83). The stage directions read, “Daisy joins
Violet and they disappear” (83). While methods such as these help in presenting Daisy and Violet as distinct individuals, at the same time they also prevent the dramatized Daisy and Violet from successfully representing Daisy and Violet as they really were.

A scene similar to this one occurs in the film, *Chained for Life*, with a similar conclusion. When Maurice, a marksman in the same variety show as Vivian and Dorothy (played by Violet and Daisy), declares that he really does want to marry Dorothy (the two were engaged in order to garner more publicity and sell more tickets), he charms her and treats her as though he loves her, though he is only trying to take as much money from her as possible. One night, when Dorothy and Vivian are in bed, Maurice calls Dorothy on the telephone and serenades her with his guitar. After his serenade is over, Dorothy falls asleep (Vivian is presumably already asleep) and she has a dream. Dorothy dreams that she is no longer connected to her sister and she gets out of bed to go outside and enjoy the beautiful weather. As she dances around the garden, Maurice appears from nowhere. He tells her that he loves her and they dance together. As they are dancing, Dorothy wakes up from her dream. It is clear, from the wig and the body type of the dancer, that Dorothy is played by a body double in this scene. Most noticeable is that any camera shot that requires the audience to see Dorothy is a close-up, yet any shot of Dorothy appearing onscreen without Vivian hides Dorothy’s face or places Dorothy far away from the camera. Similar to Terry’s dream sequence in *Side Show*, this scene is an ideal representation of Dorothy’s desires. However, it may have been the inspiration for Terry’s dream, as it is not representative of Daisy or Violet and, therefore, fails to surrogate the actual Daisy and Violet.

Another instance in which Daisy and Violet separate from each other in *Side Show* is at the end of the musical. After Daisy realizes Terry will never love her, and Buddy, Violet’s fiancée, calls off their public wedding, Daisy and Violet come to the realization that they are
“freaks” and will always be seen that way. The final song, a reprise of “Come Look At The Freaks,” involves The Boss and the other members of the freak show returning to be with the twins. As the Company sings, “Curiosity satisfied/Come and give them/A strong ovation/An acclamation/But no critiques,” the stage directions then read “Daisy and Violet split apart and sit” (112). As Daisy and Violet join in the singing, the musical ends. As if to drive this point home, Russell divides Daisy and Violet, highlighting that they are individuals. But doing so creates a void between the two characters. As Daisy and Violet have the ability to separate at will, the abjection that mired the lives of the actual Hilton sisters is lost. To simply exclude this abjection when dramatizing their lives not only fails in surrogating them accurately, Russell reduces the presumable importance that being conjoined had to the Hilton sisters. Additionally, Russell and Krieger’s construction of Daisy and Violet not only falls short here in that they are not conjoined, but also in that Daisy and Violet become cruel and weak-willed.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Jake expresses his deep love for Violet, which she spurns, claiming that the world would not allow them to love each other. After Violet reveals this to Jake, Jake accuses Buddy of not deserving Violet, then Jake leaves. At this point Buddy admits to Violet, Daisy, and Terry that he cannot marry Violet. Buddy is unable to love her in the way that she loves him. As the wedding is a planned public spectacle, with thousands of tickets already sold, Daisy suggests that Terry ought to marry her, since Violet is upset about Buddy’s last-minute confession. Unfortunately, Terry is not interested in this scenario. He sings, “I was weak” and “I lost control” (107). When Daisy asks him why it was wrong for him to lose control and express his emotions for her, Terry sings that it was, “Not the behavior/Of a normal guy” (107). “Normal” is again offered as the opposite of what Daisy and Violet are. In this moment, Terry treats Daisy as inferior, in a way similar to how The Boss made Daisy and
Violet feel inferior when he would verbally abuse them and call them “freaks.” Daisy says that she will not marry Terry, but the point is moot. Even if she begged Terry to do so, he would not marry Daisy because, to Terry, she is not and will never be a woman, but instead he will always see her as a “freak.”

After Daisy says that she would not wed Terry either, Daisy sings “Marry you Terry?/No, I want you out!” (107), implying that she refuses to work with him any longer. Daisy then tells Violet that Violet will indeed marry Buddy because, as Daisy sings to Violet, she “Stepped to the side/For your dream/You can do the same for mine” (107). Further, at this point in the play Tod Browning, the director of Freaks, has already verbally expressed interest in hiring Daisy and Violet to appear in his film, but if they do not hold a public ceremony, he must withdraw the offer because they will not be as famous from “the publicity of the wedding” (106). When Buddy voices his concern in marrying Violet not because he loves her but because of a publicity stunt, Daisy tells him, “the most decent thing you can do for all of us, not to mention your own future, is to go through with the ceremony” (108). Buddy and Violet agree to this situation and Daisy informs Terry that they are “through working together” (108). Daisy then asks Browning the title of the film in which her and Violet are to appear, and Browning responds “Freaks” (108). As soon as Daisy and Violet are briefly given agency, since this is one of the few times in the musical in which they make a decision for themselves, they are once again made weak and powerless. Indeed, the only way they are allowed to have agency is when they agree to be labeled as “freaks.” After Browning informs them of the title, he exits the stage, as do Buddy and Terry. Violet and Daisy, alone, voice their concerns about the future.

VIOLET.

What have we done?
DAISY.
Learned the truth
VIOLET.
Closed a door
DAISY.
Opened more
VIOLET.
I’m scared
DAISY.
Of what?
VIOLET.
Being alone (108).

In this song, Russell and Krieger take away any strength and power that the twins showed throughout Side Show. No longer do we see the strong Daisy and Violet who broke their successful partnership with Terry. Instead, we see two weak, defenseless women who do not know what they will do next, apart from appear in Freaks, which, from the title, appears to reinscribe Daisy and Violet as freakish after they worked hard to be seen as separate individuals. Daisy and Violet then sing to each other about how they always have and always will be with each other, even when Violet sings that she can “feel my spirits sinking” (110). Together, Daisy and Violet sing, “Come and give them a strong ovation/An acclamation/But no critiques” (111). As this section of the song ends, the same members of the side show reenter and sing a reprise of “Come Look At The Freaks” with Daisy and Violet. The Company sings, “See love glorified/See love glorified/Come hear how love speaks/Come look at the freaks!” (112). While
the members of the side show might be trying to reclaim this marking on their own terms, they are still on display for the audience. Further, they are once again playing the roles of “freaks,” implying that they have chosen to be freakish and exploited by not only the audience watching the musical, but by an oppressive society. Again, this moment would be stronger if Russell and Krieger included some sort of ironic comment from the characters. If the performers in the side show demanded that the audience look at Terry, Buddy, The Boss and the reporters as the “freaks,” this moment would be much stronger, commenting on how the oppression came from these characters, not the members of the side show. As the musical is scripted, the side show members merely begin where they started, with the stage directions reading, “The Company sits as at the beginning of the show. Blackout” (112). In this Beckettian ending, the responsibility is placed in the laps of the members of the side show members, not the oppressive society that holds them back.

The venture to represent Daisy and Violet Hilton is tricky, as they were once high-profile conjoined twins who were popular and successful as performers. Resurrecting actual deceased people for the purposes of theatrical performance is a challenge, one that Elam and Rayner examine so well with Venus. Regarding that play, they suggest, “Parks theatrically resurrects the body of the Venus and doing so places her in the liminal space of theater, neither live nor dead, caught between the texts of Baartman’s life and the illusions of theatrical representation” (267). In an analogous manner, by choosing to specify that they are never physically connected, Russell and Krieger do a disservice to the actual Daisy and Violet Hilton. Side Show attempts to restage the spectacle of Daisy and Violet for new audiences, thereby allowing these new spectators to realize not only how such side shows and carnivals oppressed its members, but how society
reinforced such oppression. In essence, the dramatized Hilton twins are not complete in this representation, since that piece of skin connecting them is not placed on the stage.

Performing Side Show, complete with the stage directions as written, without commenting on the devalorization Daisy and Violet, is a disservice to the actual Hilton twins. In her dissertation, The Anxious Double: Twins in plays of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, O’Neal writes that “the freak’s existence depends upon the audience’s invention of the freak” (173). The problem is that Russell and Krieger place it solely in the lap of the audience without giving them much with which to create freaks in Side Show. I agree with O’Neal’s statement, but Russell and Krieger have not helped the audience in this mission by representing freaks onstage. Even if the presentation of the “freaks” is meant to be ironic, which I believe that it is not, it still does not follow with Russell and Krieger’s understood objective of valorizing them by giving them agency. In order to valorize Daisy and Violet Hilton with Side Show, and, indeed, all of the “freaks,” a new mode of presentation is needed, one that is not outlined in the stage directions of the published script. In the conclusion that follows, I will propose such a mode; a way of performing the text without changing the dialogue, lyrics or music that will help to give agency to the actual Hilton twins and, at the same time, stay true to the spirit of Side Show.
CONCLUSION

Bill Russell and Henry Krieger have done a great service to the legacy of Daisy and Violet Hilton. Garnering Tony nominations for the Broadway production and, in turn, produced all across the country, Side Show presents the conjoined Hilton sisters as individuals, which, by many accounts, is how they thought of themselves and wanted to be regarded by others. Yet at the same time Side Show fails to accurately represent the lives of the actual Hilton sisters, dictating that the two leads perform the roles unconnected. Despite this shortcoming, I do not believe that Side Show should be banished from the stage, only to be studied on the page without the benefit of future productions. Instead, I would like to suggest that a different mode of representation is needed.

In Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-In-Process, Bruce Kirle argues that the Broadway musical and, by extension, other musicals and plays, are always evolving, never finished works of art whose meanings change in performance throughout different times and locations. This change in meaning is spurred by the artists and constructed by the audience. Kirle suggests that Broadway musicals

[A]re open and fluid, subject to a great deal of variation, even subversion, in the way they are performed. As such, in their original productions or over time, they often assume lives of their own that can be quite independent from the original intentions of the authors. (1)

Thus, the text becomes malleable. Given this, a future director of a production of Side Show, along with cast members, designers and dramaturg, are granted authority to reimagine the show, and develop alternative approaches to the ones set forth in the Production Note conceived by
Russell and included in the published script. I would like to suggest that one alternative to this approach as set forth in the Production Note may be taken from an article by Bruce McConachie.

In his essay on living history performance, Bruce McConachie criticizes Colonial Williamsburg for performing a slave auction by employing what he dubs “the rhetoric of theatrical realism” (72). McConachie recounts the slave auction, summarizing that it presented the slaves as resisting the auction block and a wife objecting when her husband is sold to another buyer. McConachie writes, “Instead of putting on a mask of servility, sexuality or jollity, the performers played what we in the audience imagined might have been the full range of authentic emotions of slaves in those oppressive circumstances” (71). Instead of working in the realistic mode, McConachie proposes that the performers working for Colonial Williamsburg acknowledge the situation in performance. To do this, he suggests taking a cue from Robbie McCauley, who, in the performance in her own play, Sally’s Rape:

slides gracefully among a variety of rhetorics, sometimes speaking directly to the audience as an actor, at other moments invoking a poetic, scat-song mode of address, all the while never allowing the audience to forget that her occasional immersion in a character is strategic and consciously performed. (78)

While I do not mean to suggest that Side Show would benefit from a “poetic, scat-song mode of address,” I do believe that inclusion of direct address, as well as a level of irony from the performers, would be welcome to this script, especially at times in which the musical would not automatically warrant this mode of performance. Doing so would remind the audience that the performers are playing characters (not embodying characters) and would change the reception of the piece. This irony would communicate another meaning to the audience, acknowledging that
the performers are not meant to be seen as the actual characters they are playing. McConachie writes that his point

[I]s the superiority of mixed modes of theatrical communication that both represent and present-modes, like McCauley’s, that draw in the viewer to observe realistic portrayal but also distance him or her from the degradation of the role-over the conventions of realism. (79)

While Side Show is not always realistic (as a musical, it acknowledges that characters are not always expressing themselves in a realistic manner) it does employ, to a great extent, realistic and representational devices, especially with the book scenes. In fact, the musical, as written, is meant to be representational, except for the lack of connection between Daisy and Violet. By incorporating some of these distancing and ironic techniques in performance will help the audience recognize that the actors playing Daisy and Violet are, in fact, performing roles in a musical instead of attempting to realistically portray conjoined twins. This will convey to the audience that the performers, while not conjoined, are acknowledging that they are not and are not pretending that they are. One example of this ironic detachment may be employed in the song “When I’m By Your Side,” a song that Daisy and Violet perform as entertainment to the other members of the side show before they leave the side show for good. When Daisy and Violet sing the lyrics, “Can’t fit a needle between us/When I’m by your side,” they might separate from each other, recognizing that they are not connected to each other at all. It would make for an amusing moment in a song that is not very funny, and also add another level of meaning for the audience.

McConachie continues with a description of McCauley’s performance mode:
Sally’s Rape does not completely avoid the degradations of the auction scene—as a momentarily realistic Sally, she evokes pity, desire, and embarrassment from the audience—but McCauley’s performance strategies allow her and encourage her audience to confront and historicize the realities of female slave life. (78)

Similarly, the actors in Side Show would not need to suffer the humiliation of being treated the way “freaks” were in the 1930s (with oppression, degradation and even physical attacks), but confronting such issues in performance will allow the audience to access the musical on another level. One instance of this is would be an example I proposed earlier: the end of the musical. Instead of having the members of the side show singing “Come Look At The Freaks,” having Terry, Buddy, The Boss and the other non-freaks sing this song would encourage the audience to confront its own biases and assumptions about “freaks.” Incorporating presentational modes does not change the intention of Russell and Krieger’s script. In fact, such tactics will help the actors clarify that, while they are not connected, they are acknowledging this separation and are going beyond it. This mode of performance will add to the intricacies that the musical already contains, as well as layer on new ways of understanding the piece as representative of freak shows in the United States during the 1930s.

One production of Side Show in Denver has already explored the possibilities of such a mode. The Physically Handicapped Amateur Musical Actors League (PHAMALy), mounted a production of Side Show in 1999. PHAMALy, as is clear from its formal name, is devoted to enabling “persons with disabilities to showcase their talents and abilities through live productions and to make the performing arts more accessible to everyone” (www.phamaly.org). In PHAMALy’s production of Side Show, Kathleen Traylor, who is one of PHAMALy’s cofounders and who is in a wheelchair, played Daisy to Katrina Weber’s Violet. Weber, who is
ambulatory, consistently stood behind Traylor’s wheelchair, making the connection between the
two of them metaphoric. In this instance, the performers help the audience to collectively
imagine (as the authors wrote in the Production Note) the connection between Daisy and Violet.
However, instead of pretending to be connected, either naturally or synthetically, Traylor and
Weber were throughout the show close to each other without any pretense about dancing or
walking without separating from each other. In the July 2001 essay published in American
Theatre on this production, the reviewer noted that, “Weber [. . .] placed her back against
Traylor’s wheelchair and the two propelled themselves about the stage while facing away from
each other for nearly the entire show” (Lillie 33). With neither prosthetics nor costumes
connecting the two performers, Weber and Traylor became stand-ins for the actual Daisy and
Violet Hilton in a way that nobody had done before. Even though neither of the actual twins had
to live in a wheelchair, having a performer in a wheelchair playing one of the twins makes sense,
as the audience cannot deny the physical disability of Traylor. Seeing Traylor wheel around the
stage while Weber walked no doubt added to the understanding of how Daisy and Violet had to
walk in a particular way. Bill Russell saw the production and remarked, “It’s one thing to have
actors playing exhibits in a sideshow; to have disabled actors play them brought the show a
whole level of meaning that wasn’t there in just a regular production” (quoted in Lillie 33).
Even the librettist/lyricist agreed that watching the musical in a way that did not follow what he
dictated greatly changed his reception of Side Show, seemingly for the better.

Ultimately, Russell and Krieger must be applauded. They have introduced Daisy and
Violet Hilton to a new generation of audiences who now know their story—or, rather a version
of it—which provides a more complete understanding of how these special performers may have
been treated, what and where they performed, and opportunities, or lack thereof, available to
them. **Side Show** is certainly not the first drama focusing on the Hilton sisters, and it very well may not be the last. Other dramatists and composers may continue to find different ways of representing San Antonio’s Hilton sisters. For now, however, **Side Show** is the most accessible, most recognizable drama about Daisy and Violet, as well as the most popular. By experimenting with new modes of presentation and representation, future theatre artists will have the opportunity to engage this story of conjoined twins in new and exciting ways. In so doing, they will continue the work started by Russell and Krieger, by helping to valorize Daisy and Violet Hilton in our culture in ways that these legendary performers deserve.
WORKS CITED


