

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL OF THEATRE

A CLIMATE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT OF A MUSICAL THEATER  
SCENE IN LATIN AMERICA

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SPRING 2013

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Musical Theater  
with honors in Musical Theater

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## ABSTRACT

With Broadway musicals gaining higher levels of acceptance in the United States through TV shows such as *Smash* and *Glee*, it is only appropriate to then evaluate how this audience base might be farther expanded, even past the borders of our own country. However, as the musical theater scene thrives in European and Asian countries, Latin American countries do not have such the booming industry. This paper is a study of the acceptance of musical theatre differences between US and Latin American audiences, raising the question of whether Latin America is simply "behind" the US in developing a more complex relationship with musical theatre as a genre. From the history of the development of musical theater to how cultural climate differences may have an effect on the support of this facet of the entertainment industry, this paper offers a glimpse into the world of musical theater in Latin America.

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## Chapter 1

### The History of the Development of the Musical Theater

Musical theater: it's considered a very "American" art form. London had previously taken the opera form and transitioned it into light musical comedy in the form of operettas, most notably with works such as *H.M.S Pinafore* by renowned lyricist/composer team W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. However, it wasn't until that operetta form came over to the United States and was meshed with the existing performance avenues that it truly began its journey to becoming the "musical theater" that is known today. In order to appreciate this final product, it is important to start at the beginnings of the historical development of this genre.

For years, blackface performers had been doing performances in the United States with touring shows and travelling circuses, featuring the stories of the American Negro in the form of comedic song and dance. However, it wasn't until the 1820s, when Thomas Rice, a white entertainer and entrepreneur, used blackface in his one-man show that it became truly popular. (Kenrick 52) Herein lie the roots of the minstrel show, which later developed into the first step of creating the form known as musical theater in America.

While minstrel shows remained popular, variety shows also began to spring up throughout the United States. P. T. Barnum, in the early 1850s, came to recognize the popular sideshow exhibits he had included in his circus acts and brought them together to create shows full of special talents and tricks to entertain the masses. These acts were often in saloons and surrounded by an atmosphere of heavy alcohol intake, so the

audience base eventually became slightly limited. More conservative audiences began to ask for performances that would be geared towards their needs—thus the vaudeville act was born:

In the early 1880s, impresario Tony Pastor, a circus ringmaster turned theatre manager, capitalized on middle class sensibilities and spending power when he began to feature "polite" variety programs in several of his New York City theatres. The usual date given for the "birth" of vaudeville is October 24, 1881 at New York's Fourteenth Street Theater, when Pastor famously staged the first bill of self-proclaimed "clean" vaudeville in New York City. (Musicals101)

These vaudeville acts paved the way for the revues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Then came the evolution of the integrated “book musical” that began with Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s 1927 Broadway hit *Show Boat* (IBDB)--considered the singular platform to the evolution of musical theater. This was the first time that the songs in the show actually supported and advanced the plot line, rather than being inserted purely for entertainment value. Revolutionary at the time, this is now considered a benchmark for what makes a successful musical.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II started the “Golden Age” of musical theater with their release of *Oklahoma* in 1943. (IBDB) It followed in the precedent set by *Show Boat* by being a “book musical,” setting the standard for integration of dance into the storyline, and fully delving into character development while breaking old conventions of musical comedy.

Contemporary musical theatre runs in multiple veins, from the rock/pop musicals of the 1970s-1980s (such as *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*), to jukebox musicals of the

1990s-2000s (such as *Mamma Mia* and *Saturday Night Fever*), to our current Broadway scene in 2013, heavy on commercial aspects such as spectacle. However, the “book musical” has remained the accepted form of musical theater writing, setting musical theater apart from the concert or recital forms. People come to see a story musicalized.

In her article “The Modern Musical: Recent trends and the narrowing gap between Broadway and the West End,” Christina Belter states, “today’s musicals are designed to appeal to the widest possible audience” (1). Broadway, for economic reasons, has become extremely commercial. It is a huge financial risk for producers to back a show because the cost of production these days is so high. A New York Times article entitled “The Staggering Cost of Broadway” explains:

Some intimately sized musicals that hold down expenses can be capitalized in the ballpark of plays — the musical *Next to Normal*, for instance, cost \$4 million — while bigger-scale musicals tend to cost \$10 million to \$15 million these days. (The hit musical *The Book of Mormon* cost about \$9 million.) The most lavishly produced musicals are even higher: Dreamworks has confirmed that *Shrek the Musical* cost \$25 million to mount on Broadway, while the producers of *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* have confirmed that the show cost \$75 million to stage. (Healy)

In order to make sure that mass appeal can be achieved, a current trend of musical adaptations of movies/books/TV shows has been observed. This provides a built-in audience base because people are familiar with the story, and name recognition brings

ticket sales, especially from the New York City tourists, who are a large part of the Broadway economy. As of 3/10/13, 14 out of 20 of the Musicals currently running on Broadway were adaptations of previously published works, including comic strips, books, movies, plays, etc. (Appendix A) Of the five highest grossing musicals currently running (indicated in Figure 1.1 below), three are adaptations, farther indicating the financial importance of the adaptation trend seen in contemporary musical theater.

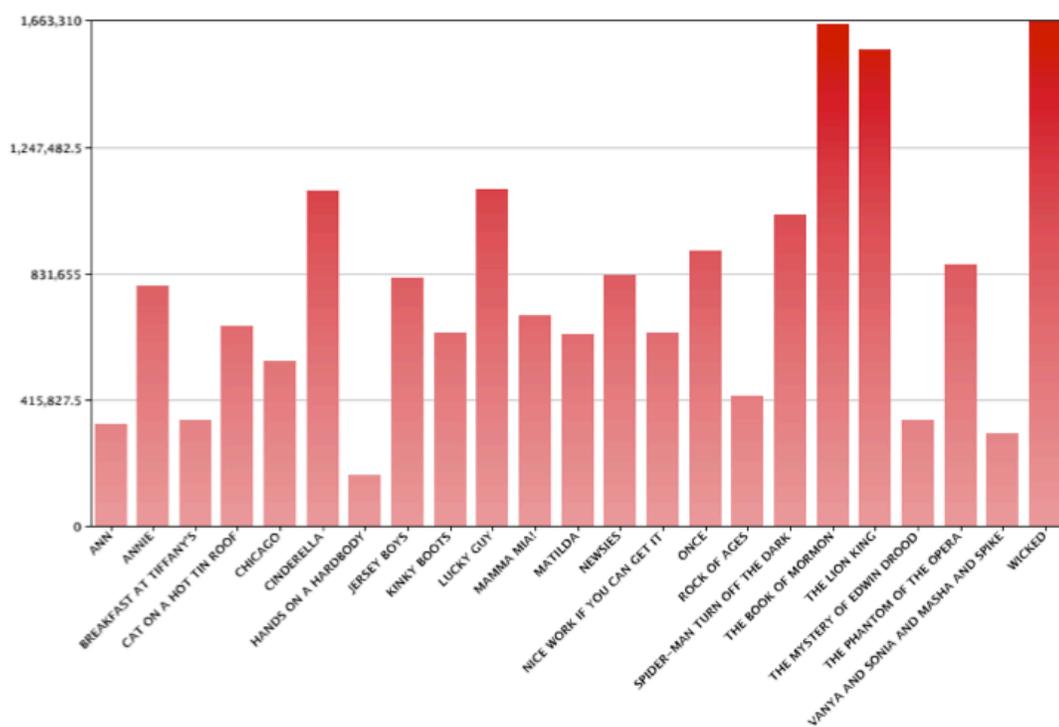


Figure 1-1: Broadway Grosses (in dollars) for week of 3/10/13

([www.BroadwayWorld.com](http://www.BroadwayWorld.com))

As long as this method of bringing audiences into the theater continues to prove successful, one can expect the trend of musical adaptations on Broadway to continue.

## Chapter 2

### Hispanic Influence in United States Musical Theater

As indicated in Chapter 1, musical theater truly has its historical roots in the United States culture, but was influenced by ideas such as the operetta coming in from London and other European countries abroad. This reflects how America truly is a melting pot of ideas from elsewhere. We also see this influence in the kind of musicals that are being developed in the United States.

Immigration has always been a founding principle in the United States, and is a topic that is consistently in the news. It has also captured the interest of people in all art forms, including musical theater. For years, musical theater has been a leader in many movements, calling the attention of the world to the pressing needs of the times: from civil rights in the 1960s, to the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s and 1990s, and now to the rights of immigrants (especially those of Hispanic background). This is evident in the famous musical *West Side Story* and, more recently, in the 2008 Tony Award winning musical, *In the Heights*. These two shows impart aspects of the Latin American culture to the general public (such as customs of dance, music, and life struggles)-- sometimes in controversial ways, but they offer an exposition of the culture nonetheless.

*West Side Story*, an American musical based off of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with a book by Arthur Laurents, the music by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, has been praised as one of the classics in musical theater repertoire. However, it also holds great importance because of its ability to share bits of

the Puerto Rican culture with audiences in the United States, especially focusing on relations issues between the Hispanic immigrants and the native born Americans. For many Puerto Ricans, "*West Side Story* is a morality play about 'our' everyday problems: racism, poverty, and the destructiveness of violence" (Negron-Muntaner).

The plot of *West Side Story* is a classic: Two street gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, are in a constant battle for power. When they decide to fight one another in a dance in the gymnasium, Tony (the leader of the Jets) falls in love with Maria, the sister of Bernardo (leader of the Sharks). The story follows their quest for love in this prohibited atmosphere.

In the year that *West Side Story* was written, 1957, violence was a very large problem among immigrants, especially in New York City. At the very least, the play illuminated the life of these immigrants and the struggles they faced on a daily basis. In the song "America," the lyrics proceed to describe the battles the immigrants faced:

I like to be in America

Okay by me in America

Everything free in America

For a small fee in America

Buying on credit is so nice

One look at us and they charge twice

I'll have my own washing machine

What will you have though to keep clean?...

Lots of new housing with more space

Lots of doors slamming in our face

I'll get a terrace apartment

Better get rid of your accent

Life can be bright in America

If you can fight in America

Life is all right in America

If you're all white in America

These lyrics perfectly illustrate the fights of the immigrants in this era in the United States. Poverty, discrimination, and oppression were rampant in the immigrant society.

More recently, another musical, *In the Heights*, also centers around the theme of Latin American immigrants to the United States, specifically the large population in Washington Heights, a neighborhood on the upper west side of Manhattan where the Hispanic culture is a big part of life. The setting is the current day, and the writer, Lin Manuel-Miranda, used his own childhood experiences growing up in Washington Heights to create the work, which is highly evident in the specificity of the allusions. Cultural references, as "piraguas" (a type of shaved-ice), dance stylings, stories of specific people who have immigrated to the States, the daily struggles in the neighborhood, and also the inclusion of the Spanish language help to illuminate the lives of immigrants who come to New York City from varying Hispanic countries.

The story of "In the Heights" centers on the character of Usnavi, who is growing up and coming of age in the Washington Heights neighborhood in New York City. It tells of his relationship with Vanessa, who wants to get out of the stifling Washington

Heights area and create a new, better life for herself elsewhere in America. Things get complicated when Abuela (Grandmother), who basically raised all of the neighborhood children, wins the lottery and decides to give some of the money to Usnavi. The secondary characters, lovers Nina and Benny, try to fight for their relationship while Nina drops out of college, much to the dismay of her parents, who want her to bypass the stereotype of the “uneducated, useless Hispanic.”

The song "Carnaval del Barrio" describes the pride of the people and their desire to preserve the culture of their motherlands, while still integrating themselves into the fabric of the United States culture. The lyrics of the song state:

Alza la bandera (Raise the flag)

La bandera dominicana (The Dominican Flag)

Alza la bandera (Raise the flag)

La bandera puertorriqueña (The Puerto Rican Flag)

Alza la bandera (Raise the flag)

La bandera mexicana (The Mexican Flag)

Alza la bandera (Raise the flag)

La bandera cubana (The Cuban Flag)

Arriba esa bandera (Raise that flag up high)

Álzala donde quiera (Raise it to wherever you want)

Recuerdo de mi tierra (A reminder of my land)

Me acuerdo de mi tierra... (I remember my land...)

Esa bonita bandera (That beautiful flag)

Contiene mi alma entera (It has my entire soul)

Y cuando yo me muera, (and when I die,)

Entiérrame en mi tierra (Bury me in my land)

These lyrics show the true pride in their native lands that these new immigrants to the United States maintain.

*In the Heights* also concentrates on the different generational views held among immigrants. This varies between the need to integrate into the culture of the United States (mostly for the younger immigrants) and the fight to preserve the culture of their native lands in this new place (especially the older generations).

Art reflects the times, and while immigration remains a hot topic in this country, one can expect artistic works that mirror this. Artists and their products may have different views on this theme, and because of the freedom to express their own ideas, this dialogue is able to capture the attention of the world to bring to light the true realities of Hispanic immigration to the United States. Though there may be problems and struggles facing these immigrants, new people bring new culture and rich customs that increase our diversity and enrich the culture of our country.

## Chapter 3

### Current Musical Theater Scene in Latin American Countries

With Hispanic immigration to the United States influencing the New York musical theater scene so drastically in the past few decades, it would only be appropriate that interest in musical theater in Latin American countries would increase accordingly. With such a focus to preserve the Hispanic culture, it would be presumed that these musicals would be developed with these customs in mind, chronicling the stories of their lives and their specific customs.

However, visit BroadwayWorld.com's Argentina section. The musicals you will see currently playing (as of March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013)? *The Who's TOMMY* and *Schoolhouse Rock Live*, both written by American and European creative teams. Broadway World Brazil lists American shows like *Footloose*, *Annie*, *Fame*, and *Singin' in the Rain* as top sellers in São Paulo, their largest city. Finally, the musicals listed as playing in Mexico City are currently *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*, *Fame*, *Spring Awakening*, and *Next to Normal*. So if new musical theater works are coming out of Europe, and even as far away as Asia, why are they not coming out of the United State's nearest neighbor, Latin America? Why have 100,000 audience members seen "Mary Poppins" in the first 10 weeks that it has been playing in Mexico City, instead of a show written by a native of the country? MejorTeatro.com.mx, the website of the producer of this production, states that it is "without a doubt the most elaborate spectacle of a

production that has been mounted in our country.”\*\*\* Money is being filtered into these shows, rather than shows native to these countries.

It is clear that “transplant musicals,” musicals that have been written in English and originally produced for a United States/New York audience base, certainly prevail in these Latin American countries. These shows certainly draw the crowds based on their spectacle and recognizable name from their success in the United States, but many believe that some artistic elements are lost in translation. Roberto Sinha, a Penn State University MFA candidate for Musical Directing in the Musical Theater (the only program like it of its kind), is half Puerto Rican and still has strong familial ties back to Puerto Rico. In an interview on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 regarding his experiences with musical theater in Puerto Rico, he states, “Lyricists such as Stephen Sondheim, or even [William] Finn, have developed such an elevated lyric pattern that elements of artistic merit are sometimes lost in translation. Aspects such as scansion get lost when you have to add in extra syllables to phrases to make the translation make sense.”

Recently, a small but mighty group has realized these types of issues that present themselves in “transfer musicals” and is working to bring original Mexican works to the stage. OCESA TEATRO, part of Grupo CIE (Corporación Interamericana de Entretenimiento [Interamerican Entertainment Corporation]) is the largest producer of theater in Mexico and Latin America. Created in 1997, it now partners with companies in Argentina, Spain, and Portugal, helping to produce and promote stage plays and musicals, primarily among the Spanish-speaking population. They specify one of their main goals as helping to reduce costs and risks linked with big budget productions and to share copyrights, music, adaptations, sets or even cast members among the associated

theaters\*\*\*. Since their start in 1997, they have produced 22 musicals, along with numerous straight plays. Four of these musicals have been original OCESA productions, based on Mexican music with original storylines, with one additional original Mexican musical produced in part with another company. However, in order to be able to market these types of original Mexican (or any Latin American) productions, there must be an evaluation of the Latin American market and what factors influence audience attendance at such events.

## Chapter 4

### Cultural Influences in Latin America

John Kenrick, in his book *Musical Theater: A History*, states what he believes to be the “essential criteria” for musicals to thrive in cities:

1. A population large and prosperous enough to support an active theatrical culture.
2. A thriving artistic community that nurtures successive generations of creative and performing talent.
3. A shared sense of optimism in regards to the community and its future.
4. Freedom from extensive government censorship and/or political oppression.

(11-12)

In order to properly evaluate the musical theater scene in Latin American countries, it is then important to evaluate based on this criteria. For case-study sake, primary focus will be placed on evaluating Mexico (the United States’ nearest neighbor and largest Spanish-speaking country by population), Puerto Rico (to represent the countries in the Caribbean), and Argentina (the largest Spanish-speaking country by land area.) However, glimpses into the musical theater scenes in other countries will also be provided.

#### **Population**

First of all, Kenrick assesses the point of population. In terms of Spanish-speaking population, Mexico comes in at 106,535,000 people and Argentina claims

41,000,000 people—both of which are figures above the overall Spanish-speaking population in the United States (34,000,000). (Spanish Linguist) Although it is a much smaller country, Puerto Rico lists 3,991,000 people as its Spanish-speaking population, still above the figure of 3,506,711 Spanish-speakers claimed by the U.S. Census Bureau in the New York/ Northern New Jersey Metropolitan Area. Knowing that there is such a booming musical theatre scene in New York City, one would assume that the population of these three countries would not be a factor to negatively affect the success of their musical theater scene.

### **Thriving, Nurturing Artistic Community**

Kenrick indicates “a thriving artistic community that nurtures successive generations of creative and performing talent” as the second factor in his essential criteria. This is where Latin American countries fall behind the United States in their opportunities. As Roberto Sinha states in the previously mentioned interview, “It is well known that if you want a quality education in musical theater, you must go to the [United] States. There are highly-acclaimed conservatories and university programs for instrumental music performance, but they lack in the integration of drama and dance.” In fact, The University of Puerto Rico does have a drama department, but does not have a specialization in musical theater. The highly renowned Conservatorio de Música de Puerto Rico also does not offer a musical theater program.

In the article “En México, ‘no hay escuela de teatro musical’”, popular Mexican performer Alan Estrada echoes the same sentiments:

The young man also expressed the need for institutions that prepare the new generations of actors who want to pursue musical theater as a career, and also an

industry that gives sources of employment. “There are not any formal musical theater schools or sources of preparation. I had to complement my studies of singing, acting, and dancing in other places. There is not a single school that offers classes focused on a career in the musical theater, because there also is not an industry [of musical theater here in Mexico] that is able to provide enough jobs. Many of the actors that work here studied in New York and fulfilled their careers over there”, he said. \*\*\*

There is no official licensure program for musical theater in Mexico at an accredited University.

Though there is a higher level of availability of musical theater training opportunities in Argentina, mostly in Buenos Aires, none are officially associated with a University degree program. Instead, they are classes run through the private sector, not monitored or accredited by any group.

### **Optimism/Political Censorship and Oppression**

Kenrick’s third and fourth points can be combined because of their interwoven nature. Governmental censorship and political oppression obviously stifle creative affluences, which leads to a lack of optimism about the country’s future. According to an article published last year in the Seattle Times, “the beginning of 2012 finds much of Latin America suffering the worst wave of press censorship since the rightist military dictatorships of the 1970s” (Oppenheimer). However, the majority of this censorship is centered on newspapers, rather than the arts, which is reassuring for the musical theater development scene.

However, this limited censorship does not seem to have a drastic influence on the happiness of the people living in the affected Latin American countries. In fact, despite often low incomes and some political turmoil, “Latin American countries are among the most upbeat in the world’ according to a Gallup poll...when people were asked whether they had smiled, laughed and felt respected, rested and other positive emotions the previous day” as stated in a December 2012 *Los Angeles Times* article by Emily Alpert.

With attention paid to Kenrick’s four points, and where certain countries lack in different areas, it is possible to isolate what needs to be improved to help to foster a truly successful musical theater scene in these Latin American countries.

## Chapter 5

### The Elements of a Musical and Their Appeals

After attention has been paid to the cultural climate of a Latin American nation and its aptness for a successful musical theater scene is assessed, it is then important to look at what these Hispanic audiences crave in their entertainment. Roberto Sinha states:

In Puerto Rico, people don't really take Musical Theater seriously—they only go to see a show if they know someone in it. However, they love entertainment. The cinemas are a bit hit, the people love going to movies. Advertisement is mostly done by word of mouth.

This word of mouth advertising helped the success of the national tour of *In the Heights* when it came to Puerto Rico for the first time in 2010. In the Playbill.com article, “No Me Diga! Lin-Manuel Miranda Stars in Puerto Rico Leg of *In the Heights* Tour,” author Kenneth Jones states that the show “makes history on Nov. 30 when it docks in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the ancestral home of its librettist Quiara Alegría Hudes and its star and Tony-winning songwriter Lin-Manuel Miranda. This is the first time a first national Equity tour of a Broadway musical has played San Juan.”

Although this was truly a milestone for the musical theater industry in Puerto Rico, it was not the historical importance of the tour that drew the crowds. According to Sinha, “When the *In The Heights* tour came to Puerto Rico, it was a big hit...not because

it was an equity tour coming to Puerto Rico, but because the public loved it and everyone told their friends to go see it.”

Other factors contribute to the lack of touring productions that are able to stay a stint in Puerto Rico. In the same Playbill.com article, Presenter Adam Troy Epstein says, “It is very expensive to get a show to Puerto Rico due to the shipping expense; and time off necessary to get the sets, costumes, etc., to San Juan make it complicated to route tours there. I'm always working to bring more shows to San Juan, but it is very difficult.”

The only way to encourage touring productions to make the journey is if the cost payoff is worth it financially. If word-of-mouth is truly the biggest marketing tool for Latin American musical theater, it is important to look at the elements of a musical theater show and isolate which of these are most appealing to that specific audience. If elements in a show can appeal to the initial audience base, word of mouth will allow that audience base to grow, increasing ticket sales and making it more financially viable to bring touring productions to these areas.

Leigh Mackintosh in her article, "Flash and Smoke: The Importance of Spectacle and Music in Theatre" helps in outlining the elements of a show and their changing levels of importance:

In “Poetics,” Aristotle ranks the elements of theatre in the following order: plot (action), character, thought, diction (dialogue), song, and spectacle. Though these elements are essential to modern plays, the order of importance has changed in regard to modern musical theatre. In her lecture, “Musical Theatre: Fluff or Fury” (2005), Professor Brown Cardwell asserts that plot and structure are vital to an effective musical but that song and spectacle also carry a leading role in the

vehicle of the show. (1)

This idea is supported by several sources: Latin Americans like to be entertained. It is less about a yearn for a deep, emotional, connective experience, but more about escaping into a world of entertainment for a few hours. Choreographer Jason Sparks, who has done extensive work in New York City, states, “when I went down to Brazil to work on *Eramos Gays*, I had no expectations of what it was going to be like. While down there I saw a new show that was written by Brazilians... in Sao Paulo. The biggest difference I saw in the audience was that they were there to be entertained and they didn't care how... When I went to [El] Salvador [also with] *Eramos Gays*, I found the same statements to be true.”

These statements about spectacle and songs being more important to the Latin American audiences than plot would lend itself to a belief that the “book musical” form, created by *Show Boat* and *Oklahoma* that has become par-for-the-course here in the United States has not achieved the same level of importance to the Hispanic audience. Sparks agrees with this statement:

The biggest difference that I saw was that there is no transition from written word into song or dance, and the audience was ok with it. There were "stock" characters that had nothing to do with the plot, whose only purpose was to make you laugh, and the audience was ok with it. Dance would come out of nowhere, not fit the period at all, and the audience was ok with it.

Herein, then, lies the difference between Latin American and New York City musical theater audiences. Adhesion to the “book musical” form that is so important to a United States theatergoer lacks the same prominence to a Latin American theatergoer, who

primarily longs to be entertained. If Hispanic creative teams are able to gear their writing toward this vein, filtering money into the spectacle of these productions, the audience base is sure to grow, developing a true path toward the success of musicals native to the performing country.

## Appendix A

### Currently Running Broadway Musicals and (if applicable) their Adaptive Source

**Annie-** comic strip > musical  
**Breakfast at Tiffany's-** film > musical  
**Chicago-** play > musical  
**Cinderella the Musical-** folk tale > film / book > play > musical  
**Hands on a Hardbody-** documentary > musical  
**Jersey Boys-** musical  
**Kinky Boots-** documentary > film > musical  
**Lucky Guy-** musical  
**Mamma Mia-** musical > film  
**Matilda-** novel > film > musical  
**Newsies-** novel > musical  
**Nice Work If You Can Get It-** musical  
**Once-** movie > musical  
**Rock of Ages-** musical  
**Spider-Man Turn Off The Dark-** comic > film > musical  
**The Book of Mormon-** musical  
**The Lion King-** animated film > musical  
**The Mystery of Edwin Drood-** unfinished novel > musical  
**The Phantom of the Opera-** novel > film > musical  
**Wicked-** novel > musical

As indicated by yellow highlight, only six of the 20 currently running Broadway musicals can be considered non-adaptations. However, even some of these lie in grey territory, such as Jersey Boys, which is a dramatization of the true story of the rock group, Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons.

\*Show names taken from information in Figure 1-1, non-musical plays have been omitted from the list

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\*\*\* Throughout the text indicates that I have translated from a source originally written in Spanish.

## **ACADEMIC VITA**

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### **Education**

B.F.A., Musical Theatre, 2013, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

### **Honors and Awards**

- Musical Theatre Endowment Scholarship, Penn State University, 2009-2013
- Academic Excellence Scholarship, Penn State University, 2009-2013
- Gerald Bayles Memorial Scholarship, Penn State University, 2009-2013

### **Association Memberships/Activities**

- Golden Key International Honour Society, Penn State University Chapter
- Mission Mexico, Catholic Campus Ministry, Penn State University
- Student Advisory Board representative for The School of Theatre at Penn State University
- Shades of Blue Acappella Group (Librarian/Treasurer), Penn State University
- Catholic Campus Ministry, Penn State University

**Professional Experience (Sampling of Theatrical Productions)**

- Patsy in “Crazy for You”, Ocean City Theatre Company
- Brigitta in “The Sound of Music”, Troika National Tour
- Gloria in “Wait Until Dark”, Pennsylvania Centre Stage
- Performer in “Broadway on Allen”, Pennsylvania Centre Stage
- Daisey in “How Can You Run With a Shell on Your Back?”, Penn State Centre Stage
- Lily in “The Giver”, Penn State Centre Stage
- Alice in “Hollywood Arms”, The Showboat Majestic