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A Broadway Musical's Leading Man: Forgiveness, Benefits, and Ease

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ABSTRACT

Mirroring much of American culture, the male protagonist of a Broadway musical, usually coined “The Leading Man,” is granted many privileges over his female counterpart. Historically, the leading male in a Broadway Musical can vary greatly depending on the piece. Men are depicted as sweet and charismatic in one show, while in a theatre nearby the leading male is vengeful and vicious, much like the titular character in *Sweeney Todd*. Society allows for this duality in portrayal and reception, whereas female counterparts are often not granted differing portrayals. Historically, female characters are often depicted as sexual objects, dependent on their male counterparts, or as a means to be poked fun at by other characters. It took decades for female characters in Broadway musicals to have representation outside of these archetypal portrayals. As seen in society, critics are quick to berate women for not complying with societal standards, whereas men are often given free rein with little backlash. These archetypal portrayals then prohibit the female characters to be granted the forgiveness awarded to men when they fall out of line. The leading man’s actions in a Broadway musical are much more easily forgiven than that of the leading woman. Only with continued depth and an understanding of cultural context can the differences in portrayal between these two genders be acknowledged, and then used to create female characters of equal standing to “The Leading Man.”

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1.

Introduction

For a country founded on the sentiment “freedom and justice for all,” many contradictions still exist in the way the nation functions almost two hundred and fifty years later. When our founding fathers signed *The Declaration of Independence*, they did not sign a document that protected all people living in the United States, and later on when they drafted the *The Constitution*, it was exclusive in who it gave freedom to. When our nation first formed, slavery had yet to be abolished, and women were not of equal legal standing to men. If you were not a white male, you were not deserving. The archetypal way in which women were seen at the time set a precursor for the still-continuing fight they would have to make to be seen as equals. As the women’s rights movement claimed more recognition in the early twentieth century, even though the first feminist wave began breaking ground in the late 1800’s, musical theatre continued to comply to the mainstream and stereotypical way of portraying women. They were often sexy, dependent on men, or poked fun at by other male characters. They were rarely seen in any other light. The acceptance that men were somehow superior to women gave men the ability to royally mess up and yet still be redeemed for their actions. Women were not granted this privilege and are still not given the pass that men are when they are not perfect. The double standard that has existed since the formation of our country expects women to be flawless, and when they are not, they are not given any kind of buffer to improve. Historically men in musical theatre are given quicker reprieve than women because of a woman’s ever-changing, decade

specific role in society, and examining how musicals reflected the major cultural and social happenings proves this point.

Women Post 19th Amendment Ratification

Both leading up to and after the year 1920, when the ratification of the 19th amendment gave women the right to vote, musical theatre portrayed them in a light that never strayed from their inferior social status. During this time, and the end of the first feminist wave, women still had little to no agency over their own bodies and were not granted the same privileges that men were. With the creation of The Equal Rights Amendment of 1923, Alice Paul, the founder of the National Women's Party, tried to constitute a law that would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. When it first appeared on the house floor in 1923, people were not yet ready for the equality of the sexes, therefore denying it. It would then be defeated again in 1973 during the second feminist wave (Lila Thulin, 2019). With most women still not granted full agency and equality, the only people who had any kind of freedom over their bodies were flappers, who used their sexuality and physicality as a way to not comply with the standards of the time. Unlike most women, they would wear calf-revealing dresses, smoke cigarettes freely, drink alcohol, and dance at clubs. They flaunted their femininity and used it as a sort of armor to advance their role in society and their own freedom; however, other women did not enjoy these freedoms (Kelly Boyer Sagert, 2019). Most women were men's property, had no way of making money, and would have no ownership over the children they would give birth to. Throughout this period, women's lives were governed by an overwhelming amount of discourse that would instruct them on how to live their lives. The majority of the writings were how-to manuals giving lessons on

cleaning, cooking, and conforming to the stereotypical notions of womanhood. Of course, the glorification of The Bible led people to believe its sentiments like, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to be silent” (The New Testament, 1 Timothy 2:12). This idea, coupled with the lack of equal rights legislation, kept women disempowered and unable to advance their place in society. Instead, they were strung to their homes with an often-strict schedule of household duties. Women of the prairie specifically were on a weekly schedule that, “included laundry on Monday, ironing and mending on Tuesday, baking on Wednesday and Saturday, daily tidying of kitchen and parlor, and thorough cleaning on Thursday and again on Saturday” (Conner Prairie, 2020). This was expected on top of caring for their children, hauling water from nearby wells, and preserving fruits and vegetables for use later on in the week. These extreme demands placed on women would then make it harder for them to ever fall out of line, for if they were not able to keep up with their everyday tasks, the lives of their families would fall apart. If women did not follow through with their household duties, men could punish them for not complying to a standard of excellence without any legal repercussions. It would not be until 1994 that a Spousal Abuse Act would be written into law. The cultural attitude and pressure on women to maintain the lives of their entire family would then make it more difficult for them to ever gain any kind of reprieve for their actions, for a slip up would hurt everyone. Men could be more easily forgiven for their actions, for they were superior in the social hierarchy and did not have the everyday, familial burdens that were placed on women. Yes, they had the pressure of holding a job to support their families, but they expected that all other aspects of their life were to be taken care of. Overall, a lack of forgiveness given to women stems from the sexist roots of them having to maintain so much of their families’ lives.

The Ziegfeld Follies

While these daily pressures helped to cement women's role in society as the nurturer and caretaker of the family, some musicals of the time portrayed them in a different light; however, it was also not one that would help to advance their social status. Musical theatre as an artform does not have its roots in naturalism. It took decades for musicals that portrayed everyday people in a natural, realistic light to emerge and then gain popularity amongst theatregoers. The origins of musical theatre, and the most archetypal images of the form, are flashier and more oriented towards entertaining an audience. "Art" was, and frankly still is, never the forefront of conversation when creating a commercial musical. *The Ziegfeld Follies* has acquired the most notoriety since its opening for being the archetypal, show-stopping Broadway revue. The musical revue focused more on its large production numbers than having any kind of traceable, real story. For this reason, theatregoers bought tickets. Everyone wanted to see the scantily dressed women in the production numbers because these female singers and dancers were the peak of entertainment at the time. In fact, they were advertised as, "the most beautiful women in the world" (PBS, 2003). Now having these women on stage may have been entertaining for the audience members watching the show, but this kind of female representation, and it was really some of their only representation at the time, began theatrical tropes that would remain until today. The portrayal of women as only sexualized, objectified beings would prohibit them from being seen as an equal professional to men. Never were they depicted in a way that portrayed them with any kind of intellect, or in a manner that saw them not attached to a man. Much like the pressures of a woman having to uphold many aspects of her family's life, their portrayal onstage also created a pressure for them in a different way. They were expected to be sexy and perfect. The pressure this expectation of perfection creates for these women makes it

harder for them to be accepted when they do not live up to these unrealistic standards. The pressures on a woman to be perfect then make it more difficult for them to be granted any kind of forgiveness, when men can look and act however they want, and never be critiqued. Men's bodies have rarely faced public objectification or scrutiny.

The Merry Widow

Franz Lehar's popular operetta *The Merry Widow* also portrays women in a light where societal pressures make it difficult for them to once again be seen positively. The story revolves around two pairs who are at different stages of their relationship. Hanna, a recent widow, has a great deal of money, and wants to marry Danilo, a former lover, so that as a woman she can hold onto her fortune. Hanna wishes to rekindle their relationship, and yet Danilo would rather hang around the dancing girls at Maxim's house. The other couple, Valencienne and her husband Baron Zeta, face issues as Valencienne flirts with a Frenchman, Camille de Rosillion, and is seen as unfaithful to her husband. He then spends the majority of the show enraged by her interactions with other men. These two portrayals of women, which are different from *The Ziegfeld Follies*, show the reality of women's dependence on men for social acceptance and the tendency for women to be seen as a default of guilty until innocent. This line of thinking comes from a society and culture that places women at the bottom of the hierarchy, therefore giving them little room to ever be seen as capable of "men's work." Having Valencienne depicted as unfaithful for the majority of the piece only reinforces the pressures in which exist to oppress women and puts them in a place where they are seen as inferior or wrong. It takes the entire piece for Valencienne to be deemed pure and innocent by her husband, when if it were him that were flirting with other

women, she would just have to accept it. Once again, her pass comes much later than any man's would. Hanna, having to fight for a man's love simply to maintain her social class also shows the ways in which women are pressured and therefore forced to rely on sexual relationships to keep them afloat. She spends the majority of the piece fighting for a man she loves to stay with her, and yet other men criticize her for they "never understand women." Women in the real world would never receive a pass leading up to the ratification of their right to vote, and frankly after, even if their intentions were genuine. Decades later, women remain trapped by the same pressures that have existed since the formation of our nation (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

2.

Portrayal in the 60's

Forty years after the ratification of the amendment that granted women the right to vote came the 1960's and the second feminist wave, in which women were still yearning for equality. Much like life during the first feminist wave, a great deal of women still felt as if they were trapped to their homes and were only ever seen as a caretaker or nurturer. In fact, the perfectly dolled-up housewife was glorified throughout the 60's. Images of women cooking their families' meals, fixing their hair, and dropping their car full of children off at school circulated every aspect of pop culture. Even those women who graduated from the top universities the nation had to offer were still homeward bound to their children while their husband worked to support the family. Many women did not work because it became nearly impossible after having children. Once they gave birth, their jobs were not understanding of the circumstance, and it was quite literally more affordable for the mother to stay home and care for her child than put them in daycare. All of this only gave way to continuing the fetishization of the domesticated housewife. In fact, this praise of the archetypal mother led to one of the most polarizing feminist writings yet, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. In this book Friedan retaliates against the societal notion that women could find pleasure beyond, "housework, marriage, sexual passivity, and childbearing only" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). In over two hundred pages Friedan argues that women wanted the luxuries men were granted, like a college education, employment, and political status. *The Feminine Mystique* would help to propel the second feminist wave, and forever change the dialogue around women's rights and desires. Friedan's critique focused primarily on women confined to their homes, but the women who were lucky enough to occupy

a job during this time also did not receive treatment in the same manner as their male colleagues. This included a substantial difference in pay for equal work and much less opportunities for advancement. Anti-feminist, right-wing women fervently opposed Friedan's book and beliefs. One of the most infamous anti-woman women to ever live was Phyllis Schlafly, who began to rise during the 60's and 70's when protesting The Equal Rights Amendment and other feminist movements. Though she proclaimed this late in her life, her belief was that the, "reason a woman gets married is to be supported by her husband while caring for her children at home. So long as her husband earns a good income, she does not care about the pay gap between them" (Schlafly, 2015). Though women like Schlafly tried to prevent the continuance of the feminist's movements' progress, the presidential election of John F. Kennedy brought about greater political change. The creation of The Equal Pay Act in 1963 made it illegal for any place of work to not pay each gender the same for equal work. This and The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also prevented employers from discriminating against female employees. Many people did not see these efforts as sufficient for many job advertisements continued to be segregated by gender, and many states continued to prohibit the sale and distribution of contraceptives. It was during this movement that women also took a stand for their bodies and demanded reproductive rights. Feminist Gloria Steinem would radically change the dialogue and fight for reproductive rights when she coined the term "reproductive freedom." Steinem fought that any attack on or legislation that would try to limit a woman's choice over her own body was an act of authoritarian control. Steinem continued her fight when many women suffered from instances of domestic abuse and rape, with no punishment for the perpetrator. It was during this second feminist wave that many different types of feminism began to form, in which each would focus on different oppressing factors that hurt women's lives. Liberal feminism, which became the

more unanimous, mainstream form, focused on concrete, governmental/policy changes that could have influence at an institutional level. This view became popularized by Betty Friedan and the creation of NOW, or the National Organization for Women. Their formation began with the intention of making sure women could partake in all aspects of society with the same status as a male. The spearheads of this organization rallied and protested for the equal treatment of women in society; however, not all feminists entirely subscribed to Friedan's ideology. Contrary to liberal feminism, radical feminists, led by Carol Hamish, formed to take down the patriarchy, and move women into more positions of leadership. These feminists argued that women's inferior mindset came from the governmental structures that were making them feel that way. Hamish and other radical feminists thought Friedan and the liberal feminists were too concerned with trying to amend the current, oppressive structure to gain equality. Hanisch believed that the current societal structure needed to be demolished to start anew, and the only way of doing that was dismantling the patriarchy, which they believed to be the root of all feminist issues. Cultural feminism, created and led by the journalist Ellen Willis, emerged to celebrate the differentiating of female qualities from men to prove that they are not intrinsically the same. Through her writings, Willis and other cultural feminists criticized the other two forms because they believed that putting women in male dominated areas would just make women suppress their feminine, special characteristics. These women tried to maximize the biological differences between men and women and how they made them unique. Celebrating feminine biological characteristics would then chip away at the culture that would normally suppress them. Finally, Womanism arrived to discuss the intersectionality of women's rights and rights for people of color. Author and womanist Alice Walker first coined the term in 1983 saying that a "Womanist is to a feminist as purple is to lavender" (Linda Napikoski, 2019). The feminist movements leading up

to the creation of womanism received backlash from women of color for they did not feel as if they were included in these beginning discussions. Many of them felt that others' energies were focused on changing the lives of solely white, upper-middle-class women. By creating the womanist movement, women of color finally found a stronger voice amongst other feminist movements (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017).

How to Succeed in Business

The 1960's found some women moving into the workforce, but they were mostly lesser roles like a secretary or assistant. The musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* took the archetypal working woman and put her right on the Broadway stage. The character Rosemary Pilkington is a secretary at The Worldwide Wicket Company where "the leading man," J. Pierrepont Finch, tries to find a job. After reading a how-to manual on quickly rising the ranks in business, Finch bumps into the head of the company, J.B. Biggley. He apologizes profusely for his mistake, and then charms his way into nailing a job. When first brought into the office, Finch is then introduced to Rosemary, whose primary duty is to help place Finch in his first job at the company. The scene goes as such: Finch walks into her office, the pair discuss his job placement and who he will report to, and the moment Finch leaves, Rosemary breaks out into song. Unlike a great deal of musical theatre songs, the beginning does not come directly out of the dialogue. After Finch leaves the room, she is left there with another co-worker Smitty, and the minute Finch leaves she proclaims, "New Rochelle," to which Smitty replies, "huh." Rosemary then sings her most infamous song, "Happy to Keep His Dinner Warm" in which she fantasizes over being a stay-at-home wife to her loved husband. She sings

I'll be so happy to keep his dinner warm

While he goes onward... and upward

Happy to keep his dinner warm

'Till he comes wearily home from downtown

[Sound Example 1: “Happy to Keep His Dinner Warm”, From the Album *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Try* the Broadway Comedy]

She also dreams of the day when he returns home from work and she can surprise him with “Good Evening dear, I'm pregnant; what’s new with you from downtown?” (Burrows, Gilbert, Weinstock, 1961). For the rest of the show, she kind of remains the sweet, more virginal woman compared to the other female principal: Hedy La Rue. Ms. La Rue is the CEO’s mistress, who, unlike Rosemary, has dreams beyond staying home. She aches to be a successful businesswoman. Her character foils Rosemary Pilkington for the stay-at-home woman longs to work, and the working woman wants to wait at home for her husband. Besides her dialogue with the other characters, Hedy does not have many musical moments. Her two shining moments are the song “A Secretary Is Not A Toy” in which another character sings to warn their coworkers that they cannot objectify her, when the song itself ultimately objectifies her. The other is “Love from A Heart of Gold” in which La Rue sings to J.B. Biggley about wanting to quit her new secretarial job after she is not satisfied. Overall, in trying to show women from two, dramatically different angles, the authors do not give their female characters agency. In fact, they just reinforce archetypal versions of them from the male gaze. The authors of *How to Succeed* have only written women who like the many generations of theatre before them, value their relationships over their success in the workforce, which at the time was the key to the advancement of a woman’s role in society. After examining texts like Betty Friedan’s, *The*

Feminine Mystique, this seems to be an inaccurate representation of the time. As stated, women wanted to work and were fed up with the monotonous lifestyle of being a shepherd to their husbands who were able to act in whatever way they wanted to. In this piece Friedan discusses the unhappiness in the female's life saying,

“The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—Is this all?.....We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (Friedan, 1963).

This inaccurate assumption that the housewife was content with her life in the 1960's only led to misleading portrayals of women that reinforce the pressures on them to be perfect and try to live up to male standards. It did not seem to reflect their own wants. These pressures once again reinforce a culture where women are given less room to fail and make mistakes. Their inferior position in society and then inability to inhabit all of the many, and mostly contradicting, attributes of the perfect woman make it near to impossible for them to be given the professional and social status of men. This is also reinforced when musicals like *How to Succeed* involve two female characters that viewers can easily pit against each other.

In Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review of the most recent Broadway production that opened in March of 2011, he says little to nothing about Rosemary, but rather focuses his praise on the character of Hedy. By refraining to comment on Rosemary, which the show probably does to itself with writing a female lead that is hard to remember, Brantley chooses the value of one woman over the other. Brantley values the spunky, flashier woman who uses sex appeal as a way to advance and maintain her status over the working 1960's woman. It is almost as if the show,

and then the viewers/critics, pit these women against each other, which only hurts them in their societal standing. The audience favors the traits of someone like Hedy La Rue, but in reality, a woman of this sort would be less likely to be hired for a major job position, for in the show she actively distracts, disrupts, and easily tires of her work. She focuses her time on her male interactions. These contradictions continue to perpetuate the pressure on women to be perfect for our culture tells them that “sassy and brassy” are more favorable, fun characteristics, but they will not necessarily help you be hired for a position that could advance the status of women. Hedy does not do her secretarial work as well as Rosemary does, yet she comes out the winner in all the reviews. The show contains starkly different female characters yet expects the women of society to be a hybrid of the two to ever secure a job. This lack of advancement then makes it harder for these women to ever have a margin of error, for their standards are simply unrealistic (Brantley, 2011). While the representations for women continue to halt their progress, the leading male can act however he chooses. Pierrepont Finch spends the entirety of the show scamming those around him, and rarely are his motives questioned or heavily critiqued by anyone. No matter the consequence of his actions, the show closes with Pierrepont winning the job, career, and woman he loves. This difference in portrayal only further highlights the male’s free rein and dominance in musical theatre.

Sweet Charity’s Flawed Depiction

Another musical of the 1960’s that delivered a flawed, complicated woman at the center was Bob Fosse’s *Sweet Charity*, but like most musicals of the time, it just further proves that the standards and expectations for women are nearly impossible to meet. The audience finds the

titular character Charity, her full name being Charity Hope Valentine, in a park waiting for her current boyfriend Charlie. She speaks directly to the audience and stands there with her now iconic handbag slung over one arm with a tattooed heart on the same. Less than ten minutes into the show the boyfriend she waits for pushes her into a river when deciding he no longer wants to be with her. Charity is a poor taxi dancer, she is accustomed to heartbreak, and therefore brushes it off and moves on with her life with a huge smile. As the show progresses, she comes in contact with two other men, one being the famous movie star Vittorio Vidal and the other Oscar Lindquist, a kind, nervous, yet compassionate businessman who becomes Charity's next boyfriend. Unlike Charlie, who the majority of her friends hated, Oscar treats her well and shows her compassion. Charity is so unaccustomed to this kind of treatment that she begins to cherish his love. This then causes her to worry that he may leave her if he were to ever find out her real profession, so she lies to protect herself. When she does eventually confess that she is a dance hall hostess, he admits that he followed her one night and already knows. He does not care and asks her to marry him. She decides to leave her job to continue her life with her love, but this comes to a halt when Oscar unexpectedly decides that he cannot go on with the wedding, and that he no longer loves her. Like her previous boyfriend, Oscar, unsure of how to end his relationship with Charity, pushes her into the same river that Charlie does. The musical bookends with the same act, a young, hopeful, kind woman being pushed into a river, or punished, by men who do not want to commit to her. Musical theatre scholar Stacy Wolf writes that, "these two violent actions render literally the dominant theme of the musical: that Charity wants a man but will be rejected by all, from the sleazy, conniving thief who pushes her in the water at the beginning, to the sweet and neurotic man who shoves her in at the end" (Wolf, 2011). Like some of the female characters we have seen before, Charity attempts to comply with the standards of

womanhood as best she can by trying to dedicate her life to men, but she fails, proving that no matter the circumstance, women can never “win” like men do. Her relationships with men fail and leave her feeling even more alone, whereas when she is not dependent on a man, she works in one of the lowest professions in society: prostitution. Wolf also states that, “*Sweet Charity* ultimately makes a feminist case for sexual freedom and financial independence, but its ideological route is circuitous and riddled with obstacles, reflecting the contradictory messages about women and female sexuality that circulated in 1960s culture” (Wolfe, 2011). *Sweet Charity* provides just another example of how the societal implications for women make it nearly impossible for them ever to live up to everyone’s standards, thus never giving them the power or ability to be forgiven that men have. Men on the other hand, can do as they please

3.

Sondheim Women

Stephen Sondheim, often praised as the greatest musical theatre writer to ever live, has garnered notoriety for writing complex, female characters in a time when women were often limited in their cultural portrayal. Though Sondheim did create female characters that strayed from the archetypes usually seen on the Broadway stage, the women were still confined to stricter standards than their male counterparts. In fact, many of their counterpart's actions would never be possible for women, for the criticism they would receive would ruin their lives.

A Little Night Music

One Sondheim show that highlights the differences in actions between genders is *A Little Night Music* which premiered on Broadway in 1974. The musical follows Desiree Armfeldt, an actress beyond her prime, rekindling a relationship between a former partner Fredrik Egerman who she has not seen in years. When they meet again, he has remarried to a much younger woman: an eighteen-year-old. Fredrik and his wife Anne attend a performance of a travelling show that Desiree stars in, and Anne panics, racing out of the theatre. Fredrik then follows her home to put her to bed and returns to the theater to visit Desiree's dressing room. Once there, he goes on to describe the sexual dreams he often has of her. After reminiscing over past memories, he pursues her, and they sleep together. The show unfolds as their relationship becomes tumultuous as Desiree yearns to be back with Fredrik, and he teases her for he is married. She eventually sings the show's most famous song "Send in the Clowns" over how she

feels foolish to have let him lead her on, when they both knew he was incapable of committing to her. The same is true of the characters Carl Magnus and Countess Charlotte Malcolm. Carl spends the duration of the show chasing after Desiree, while The Countess laments and sings beautifully crafted love songs of unrequited love (Sondheim, Wheeler, 1973).

The two relationships at the center of *A Little Night Music* emphasize the differences in ability for female characters in a musical. Both the Countess and Desiree stay true to their loved ones, while the men are able to act in whatever manner they choose. This is standard for the leading male; he can be multifaceted and wreak havoc on other people with little to no consequence. In fact, it is common for him to be completely blameless. Both couples end the show together and it is as if they have not spent the past two and a half hours scarring their loved ones. They are given forgiveness in an instant, when female characters are likely to never be awarded it. If either Desiree or The Countess were to cheat on their husband, the repercussions would be significant. They would most likely be disowned by their spouse, and then left with little to no ability to support themselves. Women of the early 1900's, when the show takes place, and even the 70's when it premiered on Broadway, would be mostly disowned by their partner, unable to find work, and struggle to ever find another partner. The societal standards for women to stay pristine and collected cannot be broken, whereas the leading male regains trust in a moment's notice. Though Sondheim does make progress for female characters in musicals, they are still hindered by a society that straight-jackets them to unachievable norms.

Sunday in the Park with George

Another Sondheim show also features male and female counterparts who are held to different standards, with the male's actions more easily forgiven than the females. *Sunday in The Park with George*, a winner of The Pulitzer Prize for Drama, follows artist George Seurat and his occasional muse, occasional model Dot. George, obsessive and unemotional, cannot see beyond his work as an artist. He paints for hours and ruminates over his pieces incessantly, giving little time and affection to Dot, who craves his attention. As she models for him, she feels him slipping away from their relationship. Midway through the first act Dot discovers that she is pregnant, and George is the father. She has already terminated their relationship for she cannot maneuver his emotional distance. One day when she comes to collect a painting of her before she leaves for a trip to America she states, "I want something to remember you by." George then looks at her pregnant stomach saying, "You do not have enough already?" (Sondheim, 1984). George acknowledges that the baby is his but refuses any kind of responsibility. A woman bearing his child will soon move across the world to a new country, and he is in no way required to support the mother or child. As Dot confronts George on his actions and he tries to explain the amount of work he has, she sings of feeling like she was never enough for him. Sondheim crafts her lyrics

I am diminished

I am unfinished

With or without you

We do not belong together

And we should have belonged together

[Sound Example 2: “We Do Not Belong Together”, From the Sunday in the Park with George: 2017 Cast Recording]

The character Dot once again reflects a culture in which men are able to act as they please with immediate forgiveness, and women are expected to brave the consequences. Later in the musical Dot does eventually forgive George, signifying the almost mandatory act for women. There is no world in which Dot could have bore no responsibility for her child, because women of the time, with even remnants still affecting modern culture, were seen as only figures of their households and children. Little to no musicals exist in which a woman can abandon her child and continue to be a compelling character in the story. Men are not expected to be the primary caretaker in their child’s life and can therefore be forgiven; however, if a woman were to do this the story could not continue. Laura Dern’s character in the film *Marriage Story* states exactly this in her central monologue. Dern’s character Nora says, “We can accept an imperfect dad. Let's face it, the idea of a good father was only invented like 30 years ago. Before that, fathers were expected to be silent and absent and unreliable and selfish, and we can all say we want them to be different. But on some basic level, we accept them” (Baumbach, 2019). American culture’s obsession with women as household figures would not allow the audience to see past this occurrence. Once again, the expectations for women prohibit an audience to see them as beyond perfect, whereas men are given more opportunity to be dynamic and flawed.

4.

Forgiveness in The Modern-Day Musical

By the end of the 1980's, the Second Feminist Wave had come to a close with women gaining even more economic and societal power. This then gave way to the Third Feminist Wave of the 1990s that would emerge from the media and rock culture. With the freedoms gained in the previous two feminist movements, women were now able to focus on an even more ambitious agenda while a few unresolved issues still required their attention. Third wave feminists began to devote their efforts towards abolishing the wage gap after working women became a normality. Their other efforts included providing female education worldwide and solidifying their reproductive freedom. The third feminist waves' agenda found more global representation when famous artists of different disciplines stepped forward and proclaimed themselves as feminist. Prior to this, famous feminists had spent their lives devoted to the cause and were authors or historians on their areas of expertise. Some of the most famous third wave feminists include Oprah Winfrey, known at the time for "The Oprah Show," and the best-selling female recording artist of all time, Madonna. These women used their pre-existing platform to propel feminist movements to the mainstream and reach more people. This exists today with many actors and artists contributing greatly to the feminist movement like actress Emma Watson, Beyonce, Patricia Arquette, and more. In her 2015 Academy Award speech, Arquette exclaimed, "It's our time to have wage equality once and for all, and equal rights for women in The United States of America," while Meryl Streep and Jennifer Lopez rose to their feet in agreement (Arquette, 3:02-3:10). Feminism infiltrated pop culture in the third wave and has remained there since.

Janet Jackson Controversy

Though feminism did begin to infiltrate pop culture by its third wave, sexism was not eradicated. Many instances in American pop culture continue to display the double standard towards women in perilous situations, and how men are more easily forgotten when controversy arises. One of the most prominent examples of this occurrence is the Halftime Show performance at the 2004 Super Bowl in which Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake both headlined the event. The ten-minute-long performance culminated with Timberlake and Jackson circling each other on stage with a rendition of Timberlake's megahit "Rock Your Body." At the end of the song, and thus the entire halftime show performance, the two had rehearsed an outfit change in which Justin would remove Jackson's top layer to reveal another underneath. After having rehearsed the moment multiple times prior to the broadcast, the change did not go as planned. Timberlake accidentally removed an entire portion of Jackson's top uncovering her breast. The television networks were unable to catch the incident in time and Jackson's body was broadcast to the millions of viewers watching the event. The accidental clothing removal created an entire cultural revolution, that led to censoring on television and the term "wardrobe malfunction" entering the public discourse. From this moment on, Jackson's career would continue to decline with her management leaving her and her following albums delivering some of the worst sales of her career (Ogunnaike, 2006). Timberlake on the other hand, would go on to a robust career, and continue to release music with increasing success both financially and critically. The success of his later albums would land him another Halftime Show performance as the sole headliner in 2018. Though both performers were involved in the incident, Timberlake was quickly taken out of the topic of discussion, which emphasizes the pressures on the female body and image. Jackson's career was decimated because the public could not forgive her for

having her clothes accidentally removed, whereas the man who actually caused the issue was deemed not responsible. Even if the roles were reversed, the pressure in which women, and women of color specifically, face to fit society's preconceived notions of them make it near impossible for them to gain their forgiveness. Jackson released an apology a few days after the incident, and prior to recording the message, she recalls asking her management why she had to apologize at all considering that the entire incident was an accident (Jackson, 2006). In American culture, women must apologize for situations they could not have prevented, and then never receive forgiveness. It is this culture that is then reflected in Broadway musicals of the modern day, and how male treatment onstage is unfairly prejudiced towards women.

The Female Relationships in *Wicked*

Maybe one of the most influential Broadway musicals of all time *Wicked* easily reflects the inequity in treatment between men and women on the Broadway stage, and how this treatment then leads to the lack of consequence for a leading male's actions. The story is a prequel to the famous *Wizard of Oz* and follows the story of the two witches before they become known as "Glinda the Good Witch" and "The Wicked Witch of the West." Elphaba, the eventual "wicked" witch, is an outcast at her new boarding school for her skin is an unnatural green, whereas Glinda reigns as one of the school's most beloved students. As the two try to navigate being roommates and their eventual friendship, the romantic leading male enters the picture: Fiyero. As he enters the school, he becomes the hot commodity amongst the female students, and Glinda quickly scores him as her date to their annual dance. Later on, after an engagement to Glinda, Fiyero decides to pursue Elphaba, and the show ends with the two together. The male

lead's ability to maneuver between female characters once again only emphasizes the difference between male and female characters on a Broadway stage and the difference in the way they are able to act. Fiyero leaves Glinda for Elphaba and it is barely even discussed, in fact it is commonplace. The women in the show are already criticized for their relationships with men, imagine if they were to leave their partner for a different one? It would not be possible. The double standard that allows for the decimation of a career like Janet Jackson's also creates musicals in which female's relationships are hyper scrutinized and men can act as they please.

Mean Girls vs. Dear Evan Hansen

With every feminist wave, women seemed to gain more and more freedoms, thus making them more of an equal to men, but musical theatre continues to forgive male characters more easily than women. The musicals *Dear Evan Hansen* and *Mean Girls* opened on Broadway only a year apart, yet their portrayal of male and female characters affirm the lasting stereotypes that men are more easily forgiven for their mistakes because they are not pressure-cooked by society with unrealistic standards. In *Dear Evan Hansen*, the titular character spends the majority of the show lying that he used to be friends with a boy in his class who commits suicide. He lies to his own mother, deceives the fallen boy's entire family, and starts a relationship with a woman based on deceit. When he finally comes clean in the song "Words Fail" it is as if his actions have been erased. All of the people he has hurt forgive him, and he is given a chance to start anew. This is not the same for the titular "mean girl" Regina George of the *Mean Girls Musical*. Much like Evan Hansen, George spends the majority of her show spreading lies and sabotaging other women. This includes writing a book with insults on every female in her grade, lying to a good

friend in order to win back her boyfriend, and then subsequently cheating on this same man. Unlike Evan, when George is exposed for her ways, she is literally hit by a bus, and then given little to no more stage time. One scene exists in which George and the other female lead Cady forgive each other for poor treatment, but George is in a neck brace. It takes a near-death experience for George to learn her lesson, yet Evan only has to cry and apologize for the world to forgive his track record. George may have permanent physical damage, and Evan has nothing to show for the trauma he caused other people. These two shows, both winning and being nominated for many of Broadway's highest accolades, once again prove that the standards of society on women make it nearly impossible for them to gain reprieve for their actions, whereas men can act in whatever way they want, and people will still be inclined to forgive them. Feminists' waves may push the boundaries and open up new possibilities for women, but mainstream musical theatre does not always work congruently. Old tropes and archetypes continue to harm the progress of women in everyday life and musical theatre, while allowing men to continue their oppressive tendencies.

Tootsie

Tootsie, 2019's Tony-Award-Winning Musical, is yet another example of the difference in ability and forgiveness with male and female characters on the Broadway stage. The musical, a film adaption of the Oscar-Winning film of the same name, follows actor Michael Dorsey who is notorious for not being able to hold on to an acting job. In many ways, it is his characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, which scholars Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins define as, "aggressive, decisive, competitive, focused on winning and defeating the enemy, taking

territory from others,” that prevent him from doing so (Andersen, Collins, 2018). Unable to secure work as himself, Dorsey decides to dress in drag and audition as an elderly woman by the name of Dorothy Michaels to try and revitalize his career. Almost immediately, Dorothy begins to book work and becomes the lead of a hit Broadway show. Though now dressed as a woman, his toxically male characteristics continue to seep into his life as an actress. Throughout the show he genuinely ruins others’ lives. His female costar Julie confides in him, for she believes she is gaining advice from an older actress who understands the confines the industry places on women. Michael, dressed as Dorothy, endlessly lies to her, and eventually when Michael does reveal his true identity to Julie, she feels betrayed. This kind of betrayal and narcissism is true of many of Michael’s relationships throughout the show. Michael betrays and manipulates his male co-star Max, his agent, and his former girlfriend Sandy who still has feelings for him. Near the end of the show, once Michael reveals his true identity, onstage during a performance of the show Dorothy is in, it does not take much time for the show to forgive him. Much like with Evan Hansen, those he has betrayed quickly warm to him again, and forgive him for his actions. The show ends with Michael seated across from Julie on a park bench where they will start again, and she can meet the person behind the façade. A female character with personality traits like Michael’s would never be tolerated on a Broadway stage. Traits like aggression, being competitive, and decisive are ridiculed when young women possess them; however, when a man acts this way, it in fact helps him succeed. Men are quickly forgiven for traits that society suppresses in women. After Michael ruins lives and acts however he chooses, the show concludes with a giant dance number and Michael reenters as Dorothy in a big reveal. Is fifteen minutes ample time to warrant forgiveness? Even in modern day musicals, men are still given free rein in their actions. The forgiveness given to them for acting poorly would never be granted

to women. The difference in portrayal only reinforces a culture that then allows for the same outside of the theater.

5.

Broadway Post-Pandemic

Prior to the Coronavirus Pandemic shuttering Broadway for almost a year, progress was seemingly approaching with the lineup of shows slated to open. Most notably, lauded director Marianne Elliot had recruited Tony Winners Katrina Lenk and Patti LuPone to headline a revival of Stephen Sondheim's *Company* in which the gender of the lead had been switched. The show, which usually follows a commitment-fearing 35-year-old man as he grapples with his failed relationships, will now follow a single woman doing the same. The complexity and nuance that the gender reversal now brings to a female character has vastly gone uncharted on Broadway stages. This revival would allow a woman to have a chance at portraying the flaws that women share with men and actually gain acceptance and acknowledgment of them, which usually does not occur. It will be interesting to see how the show is received once theaters can safely reopen after the pandemic ceases.

As the cultural climate has vastly changed since the onset of the pandemic, theater has remained dark. This has given Americans ample time to reevaluate their stance regarding issues on race, gender, and more. The stories that will begin to be told on Broadway stages will hopefully reflect an America that now further understands how it has marginalized and deprived oppressed individuals. Hopefully the new stories that light up the marquees will reflect an America that understands gender bias and allows women to be the complex and flawed individuals they are, while also giving them the chance at forgiveness the leading male character receives. Art is a reflection of a culture, and if the culture does not accurately represent the social dynamics of a society, there is less of a chance to make progress towards social equity.

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