Millie Taylor’s Musical Theatre, Entertainment and Realism is a scholarly review of musical theater—a genre often dismissed as mere entertainment—that examines the theory behind the art form’s mass-appeal and expands its place in the literature. The author attributes the allure of musical theater to its integrated structure, which she defines as the combination of music, song, dance and spoken dialogue to tell a story, producing a “musico-dramatic text” (4). Taylor argues that because such an integrated performance represents plot, character, theme and action through an interdependent relationship between music, song, dance and spoken dialogue, musical theater has the capacity to engage audiences in a unique way. Building on the work of David Savran, Taylor argues that musical theater is ignored in the theater studies’ literature because of a socioculturally constructed distinction between art and entertainment—musical theater considered the latter.\(^1\) Taylor rejects this conventional dichotomy and proves the two are in fact compatible, legitimizing musical theater as an art form as well as justifying the inherent worth of entertainment itself. Applying the theoretical framework of cognitive science and semiotics in theater studies, she argues the genre ought to be considered more than “just” entertainment and be elevated to the status of an entertaining yet also complex and serious art form (3).

Taylor considers the ephemerality of musical theater as inhibiting to one’s study of musical theater (3). Unlike great libretti, films, and novels—art forms rendered

\(^1\) David Savran, "Toward a Historiography of the Popular," Theatre Survey 45, no. 2 (2004): 221-222.
relatively permanent through recording or published texts—musical theater is disposable because it is a witnessed, fleeting spectacle; its performance texts rarely become objects of publication or public possession. Taylor however identifies this as a distinct strength of the genre, relying on the work of both Savran and Bruce Kirle to argue that the disposability of musical theater is what makes it pleasurable, preventing closed and fixed readings. As players, including actors, musicians, and choreographers change in each performance, the text is subject to new interpretations. The author makes a convincing case that a creative team can make changes to blocking, delivering lines or dance steps that introduce parody, satire or nostalgia into a text which in itself is not coded with these intentions.

The first two chapters of Taylor’s book discuss how text and performance in musical theater, enhanced and altered by music and song, are rich in signs that suggest varied readings of the piece. Using many musical examples, Taylor makes a strong argument that a musical’s style, both orchestral and vocal, is encoded to indicate characterizations and foreshadow plot. Furthermore, the audience refers to cultural conventions to interpret music and song, mediums typically not addressed by traditional plays. In one example, Taylor draws upon The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Dr. Frankenfurter and the Transylvanians perform in the style of glam rock, ripe with sexual energy and subversive attitudes while Eddie sings hard rock framing him as rebellious and dangerous. Brad and Janet perform pop rock, which marks them as fun-but-harmless, and at times even foolish, characters. Moreover, Taylor shows how the evolution of Janet’s vocal style throughout the performance also indicates development of character. Turning to musical examples from various shows, including Jesus Christ Superstar and Show Boat, the author demonstrates the signs disguised in musical style which playfully convey meaning, emotion, and narrative and while seemingly unnoticed by the audience, have a profound effect on the way in which they interpret a piece.

Taylor then examines how, while orchestral music lays a foundation for the manner in which audiences understand characters and action, vocal music relays both semantic information and extralinguistic detail, creating emotionally charged nuances. Taylor shows that lyrics and style convey plot, as do vocal range, timbre, tone, genre, style, intonation and accent. The author argues that musical theater adopts vocal conventions from opera, using Stephen Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd and Gilbert and Sullivan’s HMS Pinafore to illustrate that in many instances musical theatre replicates the stereotypes of other genres: the soprano is the romantic heroine, the tenor is the courageous rebel, the baritone is the plotting opposition, the mezzo-soprano stands for

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betrayal, and the contralto and bass are spiritual voices (38). By tying these conventions of musical theater to its roots in great operatic traditions, the author aims to showcase the musical’s complexity in its system of signs and motifs. Moreover, by proving that musical theater borrows operatic archetypes, the author aims to prove its legitimacy by its very association with one of the oldest and arguably most well respected of Western art forms.

In the third chapter, Taylor explains that while music and voice can convey meaning, they also have the potential to confuse it when dialogue, song, and dance work against each other to disorient the audience, alienating the viewer such that s/he enjoys filling the gaps subjectively. Dissonant ellipses and chaos on stage allow viewers to construct and insert meaning, especially relevant to themes like chaos, war or madness, and to genres such as black humour, parody, or satire. Taylor draws again on Sweeney Todd for her chief example while also considering other unconventional narrative structures in Sondheim works, such as in Merrily We Roll Along, where the story is told in reverse chronological order. Taylor pursues her idea of audience-alienating musical theater strategies in the fourth chapter by examining textual techniques such as narration, as seen through the Emcee in Cabaret, a character who frames the narrative within his interpretation, rather than the audience’s. She also shows how the sequence of scenes or musical numbers can also be a disorienting effect, disrupting mood, such as in Sweeney Todd when Todd sings alone of revenge in “Epiphany” but then immediately flows into his comic waltz with Mrs. Lovett, “A Little Priest.” (67). These musical examples make Taylor’s argument both credible and accessible.

Strategies of audience alienation can also be outlined musically. The author explains that, giving numerous musical examples, when a piece of music emphasizes artificiality it prevents audiences from being entirely absorbed in the story. Taylor defines sound painting as the “use of a musical phrase that sounds like the object it imitates” (66). Using an orchestra to suggest factory whistles or church bells, rather than using sound effects to reproduce them, highlights the artificiality of their construction (66). Mickey-mousing—the term used to describe actions neatly choreographed to echo the score—consciously disrupts the music and scene as the actor interrupts the song to make room for emphasized and rehearsed action like pushing or spitting, as in the case of Mrs. Lovett in Sweeney Todd (67). Taylor convincingly shows how such strategies, both textual and musical, create gaps and discontinuities that both distance the audience during the performance and engage them, heightening viewers’ awareness of the madness, dystopia, and black comedy viewed on stage (71). Taylor’s analysis of the

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layers of representation in musical theatre is particularly effective given the author’s goal to elevate it to a legitimate art form. Her approach in these chapters convincingly shows how an audience is enfolded actively in the construction of meaning, marking this a necessary process if we are to take musical theater to be a sophisticated, complex art form, rather than merely frivolous entertainment.

In the fifth chapter, discussing alternatives to linearity, Taylor explains that narration can also be accomplished through meta-narrative, a secondary storyline that interacts with the main plot, such as in Chicago, Cabaret, and Kiss of the Spider-Woman. The author presents non-linear storylines as yet another indication of musical theater’s sophisticated artistic merit, demonstrating that such instances of thematic and structural complexity upset the predictability of lighthearted song and dance. In Cabaret, the diegetic performances located in the Kit Kat Club comment on the sociopolitical situation outside its imaginary walls: the rise of the Third Reich. In non-linear storylines, the collage of sounds and images, as permitted by the artistically integrated structure of musical theater, allows audiences to experience satire, irony, comedy and tragedy differently, critically questioning its perspectives (95).

Conversely, the multimodality of musical theater can thoroughly engage the audience by weaving coherent character development and plot into various artistic mediums, such as the character’s choreography, spoken dialogue, and songs. Here, Taylor cites Larry Stempel, whose research explains how the integrated musical accomplishes this feat unlike its predecessor, the musical comedy, where dialogue scenes are essentially “fillers” between trite song and dance numbers. Taylor argues that as new information is introduced during the progress of a show, the meaning and interpretation of perceived signs—including props, costumes and lights—evolve. Thus, interpreting musical theater is complex but also entertaining for audience members whose job it is to extract meaning from signs playfully in flux, whether they are in song, dance or spoken dialogue (73). Taylor thus insists that musical theater’s ability to entertain justifies its artistic merit, rather than negating it.

Musical theater’s entertainment value is rooted in how its integrated elements affect an audience. Though integration in musical theater can distance and confuse an audience, as discussed in the third and fourth chapters of the book, Taylor explains in chapter six that integrated elements can be manipulated to provide for a coherent, uninterrupted plot. The author foreshadows this idea in chapter three when she considers, for example, how the transition between scene and song is never truly fluid—though underscoring can ease the transition from one to the other, a notable example

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of which occurs in Sweeney Todd’s “No Place like London” (64). In chapter six, however, Taylor presents a fully developed argument that the relationship between song, dance, and dialogue can draw an audience in with convincing storytelling. The author argues that the emotion conveyed through song often contributes so much to the psychological realism of a performance that it compensates for the inherent disruptions of realism found within musical theater. The audience must suspend their disbelief in order to accept song and music as “true” and “real” so as to allow for an illusion of realism.

For example, in Tony’s “Something’s Coming” in West Side Story, the repetitive harmony indicates his anticipation of a better life despite his current stagnation. The intonation and rhythm, with sustained notes as well as rising and falling patterns of pitch, suggest excitement and slight disbelief. All the while, the lyrical phrasing and vocal range frame Tony as the romantic hero, reinforcing in a more emotive and entertaining fashion what the audience already knows about Tony through spoken dialogue (118-119).

“Something’s Coming” is but one example in West-Side Story where song manipulates time. Bernstein plays with time by pausing for a thoughtful soliloquy, such as in this number, or accelerating it to account for emotional connection, like the conflict resolution in Maria and Anita’s fight and resolve in “A Boy Like That” (127). Taylor argues that the convincing emotion that bolsters these numbers, adding credible dimensions to the characters and twists to the plot, compensates for the lapse in realism, engaging the audience and entertaining them all the while. The author successfully demonstrates that, in this way, musical theater intertwines entertainment and complex interpretation of the art at once. The author’s earlier discussion of audience-alienating integration techniques is persuasive, but this section in chapter six comfortably reminds readers of perhaps a more familiar feeling: enjoyment. Taylor methodologically explains how musical theater can spellbindingly capture the attention of viewers, luring them into a world where song and dance seem natural and realistic mediums of storytelling.

Later, Taylor explains how storytelling manifests differently in musical theater, pointing out that the integration of music, voice, dance, and dialogue allows musical theater to take on a wide diversity of forms, ranging from the dance-centric Cats to the through-composed Les Misérables. Moreover, integration of the elements within musical theatre facilitates the treatment of a range of themes and content, from the political implications of Cabaret to the light-hearted love story of Mamma Mia. Then, she considers how different interpretations of a performance multiply its meaning.
especially when cultural capital, personal opinions, and cognitive processing of spectators are taken into account.

Taylor is perhaps most convincing in chapter five, when she draws upon work in cognitive science to help explain why musical theater is so enjoyable, pointing out that the complexity and abundance of signs found in the integrated art form make for playful and fluid reading (93). She presents the work of Amy Cook, who is herself interested in the relationship between cognitive science and performance theory and suggests individuals learn and think according to “conceptual blending,” constructing meaning from combinations of images, metaphors, and experiences (91-92).7 When watching a performance, the audience is actively involved in selecting signs to include in their conceptual blend, interpreting the narrative based on their understanding of these signs. Cook explains that audience members are active spectators because performance inspires many in an audience to imitate or feel as if they were experiencing the action on stage themselves. Mirror neurons do not distinguish between witnessing and experiencing, and they therefore produce mimetic responses in audiences, such as causing them to hum along to a song or tap their feet to the rhythm of dancers.8 In chapter seven, in which the author identifies why people go see live theatre, Taylor explains that due to proximity, the sense of participation is intensified when watching a performance live, which is why musical theater produces a more distinct sensation of belonging than film (141-143).9 By framing musical theater’s entertainment value through a scientific lens, Taylor engages in a sophisticated academic discussion of the genre’s appeal from yet another interdisciplinary angle, thereby legitimizing it as more than “simply entertainment.”

In the final chapter, the author somewhat breaks from her academic discussion and begins to turn towards a more personal reflection of the subgenre of jukebox musicals. She explains how the live performance of a jukebox musical differs from that of other musical theater, identifying the nostalgia the audience feels for existing and popular songs, members’ connection(s) to characters in bio-musicals, and the enthusiasm for these elements experienced during upbeat song and dance numbers. Audience members often know the songs featured in a jukebox musical and their experience is thus an intertextual interpretation of the show based on their previous knowledge and its context. Compilation shows such as Mamma Mia or We Will Rock You have relatively unimportant storylines whose sole purpose is to revive popular songs


8 Ibid, 588.

9 Ibid, 591.
from the past. Unlike the other chapters, this final section reads more like a conclusion than a self-contained academic essay. Nevertheless, it contributes to the reader’s understanding of the variety of subgenres of musical theater as well as the reasons for its immense popularity.

Overall, Taylor successfully demonstrates how musical theater engages and entertains. However, though she draws parallels with other scholars, she neglects to draw sufficient attention to theories that diverge from hers, such as that of the late Scott McMillin. In his work, McMillin argues against the cooperation of integrated elements in musical theater to tell a coherent story. Instead, he writes that song and dance are artificial constructs “inserted into the book as a different element, a change of mode, a suspension of the book in favour of music,” and trying to interpret them as anything but isolated aesthetics is exaggerated theory.\footnote{Scott McMillin, \textit{The Musical as Drama: A Study of the Principles and Conventions Behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.} Taylor refers to McMillin’s work to bolster her own, but does not sufficiently address the inconsistencies and disagreements between the two. The author would have done well to weave contentious arguments throughout her text or specifically address the relevant competing theories at each chapter’s end.

Taylor’s arguments are also at times crippled by the lack of variety in the musical examples cited. Though she convincingly demonstrates musical theater’s ability to alienate audiences, she illustrates this using \textit{Sweeney Todd} only. Later, she effectively argues how musical theater can depict psychological realism, but refers only to \textit{West Side Story} to do so. In fact, it is surprising that Taylor virtually ignores some of the most popular musicals, including recent shows such as \textit{Wicked} and \textit{Spring Awakening} and older ones like \textit{The Lion King}, \textit{Rent} and \textit{Les Misérables}. Indeed, her work feels lacking without considering productions such as these.

Furthermore, while she persuasively unpacks how the conventions and styles of the musical theatre genre developed from opera, she relies upon an overrepresentation of operatic works in her examples, turning to Gilbert and Sullivan’s \textit{HMS Pinafore} and Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s \textit{Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny} to support the bulk of her argument for musical characterization in Chapter 1 and layers of representation in Chapter 4, respectively. Given that musical theater evolved from opera, drawing parallels between the two can be fruitful, but the use of operatic works to illustrate her arguments undermines Taylor’s argument about musical theater’s unique complexity and distinct artistic value. She insists musical theater is its own genre and that McMillin gives accurate insight into the unfair assimilation of musical theater into other genres when he wrote that musical theater is often wrongly considered “an “integrated” form of theater or an inferior sibling of opera.” However, she herself too often collapses
musical theater and opera into a single genre, making sweeping arguments and claims about them both (5).

A final drawback to the book occurs when Taylor discusses the jukebox musical as well as when she assesses her experience of a specific live performance. She largely abandons her earlier logic based on semiotics and cognitive science, resorting to an argument based on nostalgia and personal experience. This contributes little to her thesis, lacking as it is in academic analysis and critical research. Lastly, there are terms she neglects to comprehensively explain, such as that of the concept musical, which would have fared better with reference to secondary sources such as Christine Margaret Young’s research.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite some drawbacks, Taylor produces an accessible, readable analysis of musical theater that contributes original and interesting material to the field, comprehensively assessing the elements and structure of musical theater as well as its audience and reception. She emphasizes that the immense success of musical theater is credited to the integration of song, dance and dialogue in a production and convincingly explains the effect this can have on an audience. As a recent addition to the literature, Taylor’s work fills gaps in the field by including references to more contemporary musical works and theories and speaking directly to a generation exposed to the megamusicals, marketing, and profits of twenty-first-century Broadway. She, for the most part, draws upon scholarly sources and original research and successfully argues the worth and complexity of musical theater as an art form, elevating it to the status of “high-art” genres.

\textbf{For Further Reading:}


