

## Modernism and Musicals in the 1920s

During the 1920s, writers, performers, and creators of every stripe engaged in a variety of artistic experimentations that could loosely be grouped together under the banner of “modernism,” a groundbreaking movement that called for the rejection of the old and the glorification of the new. Despite their positioning within very different artistic fields, modernists placed a similar aesthetic value on the deconstruction of artistic norms and hierarchies, often leading them to eschew barriers between their crafts and embrace a culture of interdisciplinary production. Still, for all the ink that has been spilled over modernism’s influence on creative fields ranging from literature to dance, relatively little has been said of how modernism interacted with the artistic institution of the decade that arguably most epitomizes interdisciplinarity: musical theatre. Because critics often relegated Broadway musicals to a distancing status of low art, many have neglected evidence that 1920s musical theatre, while not strictly modernist, certainly participated in critical conversations with modernism as the Broadway tradition increasingly made use of its interdisciplinarity to explore characters’ inner consciousness and to broach topics that many previously thought were too taboo for the stage.

Scholars have given modernism what seems an infinite number of definitions, but the one that perhaps provides the clearest lens for understanding its mutually influential relationship with musical theatre is that which Michael Borshuk supplies in his analysis of a similarly reciprocal interaction between 1920s music and poetry. Artists from both of these crafts participated in the modernist movement away from realistic, regimented representation and towards subjective, personal expression. Borshuk discusses the origins and implications of this shift in his article “‘Noisy Modernism’: The Cultural Politics of Langston Hughes’s Early Jazz Poetry,” in which he makes a distinction between two essential components of any modernist experiment: the “folk

collective” from which the modernist style emerges, and the “individual voice” with which the modernist must insert himself into and even above the collective. Borshuk introduces this two-pronged analysis in order to give an account of jazz, in which the performer draws on common conventions (such as a twelve bar blues pattern) but still crafts his own, improvisational style to serve the modernist end of privileging individualized experience over common understanding (13). Though Borshuk’s definition is aimed at jazz, it has implications that extend beyond music and into all forms of modernist production that experienced a tension between, on the one hand, their impulse to differentiate themselves and, on the other, their sense of belonging to a larger artistic and historical movement.

In particular, Borshuk’s mode of analysis has important implications for discussing 1920s theatre, an artistic institution that, as a whole, was particularly well suited for participation in the “folk collective” of modernist style that emerged during the post-World War I era. In her book *Modernist and Avant-Garde Performance*, theatre professor Claire Warden argues that performative works, including any enactment of art, but particularly theatre (7), provided an essential context for modernist conversations that took place in the 1920s. Much like jazz, which epitomized modernist ideals of individuality and freshness as an improvisational musician's art, live theatre had the potential to epitomize modernity as an actor’s art that allowed performers to respond to the moment of performance rather than to predetermined convention (49). In part due to its rich aesthetic possibility, theatre increasingly absorbed modernist elements. The German school of Expressionism, which concerned itself with distorting reality for the explicit purpose of maximizing the emotional intensity of a work (“Expressionism”), became particularly influential for playwrights across the globe, leading them to prioritize the depiction of profound inner experiences over the rendering of realistic plot or performance. These playwrights often penned

bleak narratives centered around isolated individuals, profound dream states, or other subjects that allowed them to explore the human psyche (Warden 61). In order to most poignantly tell these stories, they also embraced new and often unconventional approaches to visual and aural presentation. For example, expressionist playwrights like W. B. Yeats and Eugene O'Neill began to make masks central pieces of their plays, believing that the caricaturing costume pieces, though unrealistic, helped reveal the true essence of the people they represented by exaggerating characters' physical features and expressions (Warden 109).

As these modernist playwrights searched for more and more ways to reveal the complex forces moving within their characters, they also increasingly turned to interdisciplinarity, believing that visual artwork, poetry, music, and movement could express what words could not. Even if they wrote straight plays that would never see the lights of Broadway, expressionist dramatists no longer trusted dialogue alone to convey their ideas. Instead, they embraced "gestic" performance, in which bold movement embodies bold emotions (Warden 26), or "schrei," in which actors perform a "scream" either literally, or figuratively through a "powerful physical and vocal performance ... enacted in a state of intense painful emotion" (Warden 62). Some playwrights and artists even went so far as to craft shows like Wassily Kandinsky's *Yellow Sound*, which consists mostly of music and color. Kandinsky's work was based on his concept of "total theatre," which sought to produce "spiritual experiences" through an interaction of artistic styles, as well as on the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total art," which, as articulated by German opera composer Richard Wagner, argues that crafts like music, poetry, and dance are not only compatible, but so inherently interdependent that none can produce authentic experience without the others (Warden 116-117).

These radical ideas about art did not emerge from a vacuum, but rather, drew on innovations that preceded modernism, including innovations that had found a home on Broadway. Expressionists' focus on interdisciplinarity followed precedents set by sources as ancient as Greek drama, Shakespearean plays, and opera (Warden 25), but did so in an organic way that hearkened to more recent American musical theatre traditions. Certain aspects of these traditions, especially their use of a common vernacular (Stempel 133), already rendered them compatible with definitions of modernism given by the likes of paradigmatic poet Ezra Pound, who stated that modernists, unlike Elizabethan playwrights or opera composers, must "use the language of common speech" (Pound vi). And though musical theatre, particularly in its variety formats, was still often thought to be too lowbrow and commercialized to be of consequence to true artists (Stempel 133), modernists as esteemed as T. S. Eliot frequently rejected this imagined divide between high and low art and deemed many aspects of the form admirable. In particular, Eliot praised variety's lack of a linear plot, its participatory nature (especially in cabarets), and its focus on provoking emotion through movement and music rather than word and lyric (Warden 25-26). Such responses to musical theatre from modernists who never participated in it makes it clear that Broadway was involved in the type of intertextuality, or communication between artworks, that Borshuk considers to be a defining feature of the "collective folk" he proposed (9).

Intertextuality, however, never consists simply of one tradition drawing on another, so as modernism took note of musical theatre's incorporation of multiple disciplines into one work, musical theatre took note of the intentionality modernism showed as it used the various disciplines it drew on to imbue productions with greater emotional significance. The lessons in character depiction that an expressionist era could provide were greatly needed on Broadway.

The decades leading up to and including the 1920s saw the openings of countless musical comedies that featured extremely shallow plots and musical numbers with little substantive connection to the characters who sang them (Leve 69). As the decade wore on, however, several Broadway writers and composers awoke to an artistic spirit of the era that went beyond such mindless play and began to break away from trends that propagated superficiality in score or story. As he contemplated the music for his 1924 musical comedy *Lady Be Good*, composer George Gershwin remarked “[I want to] write an absolutely new type of musical show, with modernist words as well as modernist tunes” (Stemple 251). The result was a jazz-infused production that would be partly responsible for making jazz tropes a standard of 1920s musical comedy (Leve 75).

The emerging presence of jazz on Broadway was a tangible sign of modernist intervention in the theatre district, and as the decade continued, such intervention only became more profound. In his article, “Theatre in the Jazz Age: The Search for America’s Soul,” scholar David Savran argues that Gershwin in particular began to incorporate jazz into his shows on a more thematic level. For example, in his 1925 hit comedy *Tip-Toes*, he specifically used jazz and its lowbrow aesthetic to represent lower-class characters, while using classical music and its highbrow aesthetic to represent upper-class characters. The still fairly novel interaction of both of these musical styles in one score symbolically represents a key aspect of the plot, a romantic intermingling between two socioeconomically differentiated groups of characters that might have been a bit more shocking had it been put on stage just a decade earlier (Savran 460). Fresh musical and dramatic choices like these all reveal Gershwin’s consciousness that music, particularly modernist music, could be used in character-specific ways to help the audience actually feel—in true expressionist fashion—the situations a musical presented.

Beyond even Gershwin's works, however, no show better reveals the influence of modernism on musical theatre than composer Jerome Kern and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat*, a 1927 musical that arguably represents a culmination of many of the modernist currents that had flowed through Broadway during the decade. Like previous modernism-influenced works, *Show Boat*, which tells the story of staff and passengers aboard a Mississippi riverboat, makes use of a common American vernacular and a diverse range of musical styles, including jazz (Stempel 194), blues, and spirituals (Leve 79). It also uses these styles to add depth to its characters. For example, towards the beginning of *Show Boat*, a secondary character named Julie La Verne performs the well-known number "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" in a distinctly blues style, leading a black servant to comment that she's never heard a white woman sing the song as Julie does. This remark foreshadows the revelation that Julie, though passing as a white woman, is, in fact, of mixed race. It also sets the foundation for a later scene in which the protagonist, a white ingénue named Magnolia Hawks, reprises "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" in a European, operatic style. The stark contrast between her rendition and Julie's functions in similar ways as Gershwin's use of contrasting musical styles in *Tip Toes* does, revealing cultural differences between characters from distinct social backgrounds. However, the racial implications of this contrast as it appears in *Show Boat* strike more closely to the heart of modernism than Gershwin's works ever did, at one point even appearing to comment on the racialized process of making modernist art. After Magnolia sings "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," the white accompanist and club owner she is auditioning before asks her to "rag" the number, making it more similar to the African-American style of ragtime (*Show Boat*). Magnolia complies, doing just what countless other white artists like Gershwin or Kern and Hammerstein

themselves did as they drew on African-American artistic styles to evoke what they believed, in part due to racial stereotyping, to be an invigorating and even primal aesthetic (Savran 459).

*Show Boat* is a watershed production, however, not only because it draws on such an aesthetic, but because it uses it in a way musicals never had before—to tell a serious and sweeping story that was unprecedentedly tuned into modernist concerns with intense emotion and disillusionment. For example, the show's central theme, "Ol' Man River," is a relatively severe number sung by a jaded black stevedore, who characterizes the Mississippi as a symbol of natural power and progression by employing a black spiritual form and alluding to African peoples' history with rivers (*Show Boat*) in a similar fashion as earlier, modernist works like Langston Hughes's poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" did (141). "Ol' Man River" is reprised at several key points throughout the show, such as after the protagonist enters a doomed relationship (*Show Boat*), and ties the production together artistically and thematically. It thus represents an application of a modernist-inspired aesthetic not just to a single, comedic scenario (the fare previous musicals dealt in), but rather, to a three-generation story of a family's encounter with relatively shocking topics, including spousal abandonment and racial miscegenation (Leve 81). This scope and seriousness of the show, coupled with its organic style, made it uncategorizable as either European operetta or the usual light American production; as music historian Larry Stempel summarized, "There simply was no cultural frame of reference at the time adequate to describe the piece" (194).

Returning to Borsuk's definition, then, if scandalous social intermixing, experimentation with black music forms, and more character-driven scores demonstrate musical comedy's participation in the "folk collective" of modernist theatre, then *Show Boat's* boundary-breaking exploration of these elements represents the filtering of that folk through the "individual voice"

that Borshuk was most concerned with. Just as poet Langston Hughes participated in modernism by “[transporting] the source material of the folk into a new context” with his written jazz poetry (13), Hammerstein and Kern participated in modernism by distorting the usual rules of genre, removing characteristics of musical theatre’s various formats from their parent contexts and creating a new mode of storytelling. In the production that resulted, music, story, and dance flow together to render a show that, although heavily commercialized, was not unlike what Kandinsky and Wagner envisioned with their theories of “total theatre” and “total art.”

Kern, Hammerstein, and even more conventional dramatists like Gershwin undoubtedly created what Borshuk would describe as a “self-signature” (13) as they participated in and redefined a musical theatre heritage that was increasingly responsive to many of the modernist impulses sweeping 1920s art. Their innovations as Broadway artists only serve to strengthen the modernist assertion that barriers between different disciplines, and especially between highbrow and lowbrow art, are artificial and, often, unhelpful in evaluating art. Musical theatre, as an institution focused on mass entertainment, did differ in fundamental ways from more purely modernist experiments that loathed commercialization and superficiality; and yet, it still was far from isolated from revitalizing urges that brought the 1920s into an era of drastic experimentation. Like all art, but like modernism-influenced art in particular, musical theatre could simply not ignore contemporary, cross-disciplinary conversations surrounding it that, although centered during the Roaring Twenties, would help shape it for decades to come.

## Works Cited

Borshuk, Michael. "‘Noisy Modernism’: The Cultural Politics of Langston Hughes’s Early Jazz Poetry." *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, pp. 4-21.

Borshuk’s article surveys the jazz poetry of Langston Hughes and argues that it epitomized modernity’s emphasis on individualism as it translated aural elements of jazz into written poetry, thus allowing Hughes to participate in a distinctly modernist tradition from his own unique vantage point as a writer. As he crafts this argument, Borshuk pays close attention to intertextual analysis, and particularly to its racialized implications. He takes care to avoid isolating the black, Harlem Renaissance movement that Hughes responded to from larger artistic trends of the era. He notes that Hughes and his contemporaries should not be confined in analysis to the realm of “black modernism,” as their works had a significant impact on the development of modernism as a whole during the 1920s.

"Expressionism." *Funk & Wagnall’s New World Encyclopedia*. 2016.

This encyclopedia entry summarizes key information related to expressionism, a sub-movement of modernism that emerged out of Germany in the late nineteenth century and focused on communicating powerful emotions through art. The article gives a brief functional definition of the movement, as well as a short treatment of its origins, before examining how it manifested itself differently in visual art forms (painting and sculpture), storytelling art forms (literature, drama, and film), and finally, aural art forms (music). In particular, the article focuses on how expressionists in each of these fields increasingly

experimented with distortion of reality in order to produce more authentic emotional experience.

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke, Touchstone, 1999, p. 141.

Leve, James. *American Musical Theatre*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

This introductory textbook gives an accessible survey of American musical theatre from the early 19th century to the modern day. Author James Leve begins his discussion of Broadway by introducing the concept of the modern book musical, a production in which music and dance advance the plot and music and story function as a cohesive unit.

Having established this version of the musical, which became popular in the 1940s, as the ultimate product of Broadway history, Leve goes back to examine its diverse predecessors, such as variety, operetta, and musical comedy, and their gradual evolution towards a more integrated form. In every chapter, which he organizes by decade, he performs a case study on a production he believes embodied the aesthetic attitude of the decade or carried a particular significance to Broadway's trajectory, with his chapter on the 1920s focusing on Kern and Hammerstein's 1927 musical *Show Boat*.

Pound, Ezra. "Preface." *Some Imagist Poets*, edited by Amy Lowell, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915, pp. v-viii.

*Some Imagist Poets* is an anthology of modernist poems that explore specific images rather than "vague generalities." The preface serves to explain the organization of the anthology, as well as to introduce the common principles that poet Ezra Pound believes guided the artists whose works appear within it. Pound's commentary admonishes writers

in general, and poets in particular, to employ an everyday vernacular, “create new rhythms,” freely pursue any subject, and produce a specific, “hard and clear” image by using carefully chosen words.

Savran, David. “The Search For America's Soul: Theatre in the Jazz Age.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2006, pp. 459-476.

David Savran’s paper focuses on the ways in which jazz and modernist jazz aesthetics interacted with Broadway musical theatre during the 1920s. Savran believes that jazz and theatre evolved towards each other throughout the post-World War I era. Jazz became “theatricalized” as it was incorporated into elaborate visual performances at cabarets and speakeasies, and theatre became “jazzed” as white stage composers living in close proximity to those venues became excited by the musical possibilities the genre presented. Savran focuses his analysis on one particularly influential theatre composer, George Gershwin, and examines how Gershwin used jazz to enliven his musical comedy scores and to represent characters who, much like jazz itself, lacked high social standing

*Show Boat*. Dir. Noel S. Ruiz. CM Performing Arts Center. Noel S. Ruiz Theatre, Oakdale.

2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDg618r0IOo> accessed 14 Nov. 2016.

Hammerstein and Kern’s groundbreaking musical follows a cast of both black and white characters who live and work aboard a Mississippi “show boat.” The production is often credited with being the first musical to successfully integrate, plot, music, and dance together into a cohesive and relatively serious story-telling format. Due to its anticipation of the contemporary book musical, *Show Boat* is one of the few, or perhaps the only 1920s musical performed by modern-day theatre troupes and opera companies.

Stempel, Larry. *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theatre*. W.W. Norton &

Company, 2000.

Stempel's book gives a very detailed history of musical theatre that focuses on the Broadway locale but also looks beyond New York to forms as varied as European opera and burlesque. Organizing his book into analyses of genres and movements, Stempel gives a roughly chronological survey of the changing artistic norms and objectives that shaped musical theatre's long and varied history. Most essentially, his book provides an interesting contrast between three different strains of musical theatre that all coexisted during the 1920s: the shallow and non-integrated musical comedy, the jazz-infused production propagated by the Gershwins, and the entirely new invention unleashed by Kern and Hammerstein when they created *Show Boat*.

Warden, Claire. *Modernist and Avant-Garde Performance*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Warden's book argues that modernism and its various sub-movements, particularly expressionism, dada, surrealism and futurism, profoundly impacted theatre in the 1920s. Though her analyses focuses on straight plays, it extends at times not only to musical theatre, but also to any work that fits her definition of "performativity." For Warden, the term performance denotes not only works enacted on a stage, but also any especially active art, including even avant-garde manifestos that commanded readers to reach for specific aesthetic goals. Working within broad definitions like these, and even broader definitions for various modernist movements, Warden attempts to illustrate how modernism impacted three key aspects of performance: its politics, its use of physical movement, and its interdisciplinarity.