

The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity by Raymond Knapp. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. 384pp. ISBN-13 978-0691126135. \$21.95 paper.

Reviewed by Jessica Sternfeld

Musicological scholarship in musical theater has been enjoying an impressive boom in the last ten years or so, thanks to an increase in the number of scholars (both new ones and those more established who are turning to musicals as their second specialty after years spent in more “mainstream” fields) and a general sense of greater acceptance of the area as worthy of study. Even more exciting is that musicologists studying this repertoire are beginning to reach out to scholars in other disciplines—theater, English, history, cultural studies—so that we all might enrich and learn from each other’s work. Raymond Knapp stands among those at the forefront of this new approach to musicals, and his method will surely become one of the models that new scholars joining our field will follow; indeed, I was asked to write this review after having already lived with and taught with Knapp’s book for several years, and I have already suggested it to students as a template for their own work.

As its title suggests, this book approaches musicals with a thesis in mind throughout; it is not a textbook-like narrative of the highlights of musical theater history, but rather returns, with every example, to its central question: how do musicals define America? Knapp argues that one of the genre’s main tasks, whether overt or subtle, whether performed consciously by its creators or not, is to help Americans understand what it is to be American, and how to relate that American-ness to the rest of the world. In reading the book straight through, rather than in sections one might excerpt for teaching or research purposes, the reader might find herself trying to apply Knapp’s approach to each show as it arises. (“I’ve seen how he explains the self-defining aspects of *Oklahoma!*, but that’s a show steeped in American imagery. How is he going to make me see the America in *The Sound of Music*, which contains no American characters and barely even mentions us?”) Both scholars and general musical theater enthusiasts will be satisfied by the payoff in each case, as his arguments about the America each show embodies are persuasive and clearly presented.

Knapp examines each show against the backdrop of a host of American mythologies—concepts such as how we have proud European roots but sought freedom, or how we came here to tame the wilderness and live our ideals, which include religious and racial tolerance. He then pairs the myths with brief but sobering accounts of our actual history, especially America’s struggle with racism. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* teaches us the myth of what Knapp labels “frontier brinkmanship”: America’s “ability to manage the threshold of its domain, to extend its purview carefully, wisely, and inclusively, and thereby negotiate the transition from wilderness to civilization, from lawless to law-abiding, from frontier to community, from territory to state, from fledgling nation to world power” (123). Knapp explains how audiences are included in the myth by virtue of the catchy tunes that inspire singing along. Seeing the cast join in the wedding of Curly and Laurey by singing not a wedding song but the title song in praise of their territory, we leave the theater humming along and feeling like one of the group. Knapp thoroughly bursts the bubble of this myth by reminding readers of the actual history of the Oklahoma Territory, known as Indian Territory. Throughout the nineteenth century it became the locus of a series of treaties with and forced migrations of Native Americans—a sort of dumping ground that was

then encroached upon by the railroads and other industry, displacing an already-displaced population. Knapp draws a parallel between these actions and those of Hitler, making “manifest destiny” and the “Lebensraum” movements seem depressingly (in the face of our treasured American mythology) but fittingly similar. In other words, some who read this account may never look at *Oklahoma!* the same way again—and that’s exactly what insightful and persuasive scholarship should do. The only drawback to the perpetual presence of the thesis of American identity is that it may render the book less teachable to undergraduates, especially non-majors or those taking a survey course about musicals. Someone never before exposed to *Oklahoma!* would surely find the show extremely distasteful—or at least feel socially pressured to declare it distasteful—from reading only this account, since it reminds us of the horrors we committed against Native Americans, then explains how the musical erases those horrors. On the other hand, more advanced or experienced students will surely gain valuable perspective from including this reading of the show alongside others that claim no interpretive bias and purport to be more textbook-like accounts of the show’s creation and reception histories or musical analyses.

For each show examined in detail, Knapp provides a bit of background about its creation and (when relevant) its historical basis, before turning to an analysis of the plot, characters, music, and other elements—always with an eye toward his thesis. In the case of *Assassins* (music and lyrics by Sondheim, book by Weidman, 1991), Knapp demonstrates how Sondheim’s oft-used pastiches of musical styles help embody the show’s argument about the American dream. The near-perfect but slightly tweaked pastiches provide “a familiar musical landscape in which something is noticeably wrong” (168). “The Ballad of Booth” features an irregular meter that throws the lyrics out of predictable rhythm for the purposes of destabilizing the folk song quality of the number. “Gun Song” presents a barbershop quartet that never quite stabilizes, failing to unite a foursome (hence a community) as the genre had so tellingly done in *The Music Man*; here Knapp reminds the reader of an argument he already made. This points to one of the book’s particular strengths: Knapp often reminds readers of the links among shows, perpetually reinforcing his methodology. *Assassins* is linked in terms of myth-making (or myth-deflating, or myth-questioning) to *The Music Man*, but also to *Oklahoma!*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and even Ravel’s *La Valse*. In other cases, the persuasion is in the details. In his discussion of *West Side Story*, Knapp delves into the show’s message(s) about race as embodied in Bernstein’s music and Sondheim’s lyrics; for example, the song “America” is mostly about how horrible Puerto Rico is, and “perpetuating this kind of preconception and prejudice would seem to be a decidedly odd way to promote ethnic tolerance” (206). The show in fact plays up several ethnic stereotypes and boldly mixes up its Latino musical influences, contrasting them with the occasionally serial-influenced music of the American-born characters. Knapp explains that this seemingly disparate collection of musical ideas are actually closely related, but as he himself notes, others have found recurring motives and motivic transformation in the score before; his new and persuasive argument hinges on the idea that it is “the consistency of the musical fabric that creates the effective logic of the piece, gives the basic premises of the world it creates a tangible shape, and thereby encourages belief—without which support the drama would be considerably less convincing” (211). In other words, rather than simply concluding that Bernstein is a genius composer for using motives—the sort of tone taken up by too many scholars talking about too many composers—Knapp uses the analysis to unpack how the musical feeds us its version of America.

Stepping back from specifics to the book's overall structure: Knapp begins in the early years of American musical theater in "Part One: Introductions" (the nineteenth century through Tin Pan Alley), but in "Part Two: Defining America" and "Part Three: Managing America's Others," he links shows by approach rather than chronology. Hence *The Mikado* (1885), *The King and I* (1951), and *Pacific Overtures* (1976) form a chapter on how musical theater handles the exotic. Knapp provides an appendix, especially helpful for students, that provides a plot summary and other information about each show discussed in depth, and each chapter closes with a list of suggested readings, mostly drawn from musical theater scholarship. (Perhaps in a future second edition, these lists could include more scholarship drawn from other disciplines.) Also, impressively copious audio examples can be found on the book's companion website, so while the book uses relatively few notated examples (hence saving the book from possibly scaring away non-musicians), the website invites readers to hear quite a lot of music. Besides those already mentioned, shows discussed in detail include *The Black Crook*, *Anything Goes*, *Little Johnny Jones*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Hair*, *Show Boat*, *Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, and a host of works in early categories like minstrelsy, vaudeville, and Tin Pan Alley songs. Absent are all of the imported shows that succeeded on Broadway beginning in the 1970s, although these seem ripe for the Knapp-style treatment: how do shows by non-Americans, yet destined for American audiences, define America? In a broader sense, the book leans heavily on earlier repertoire, it discusses only two shows from the last thirty-plus years (*Pacific Overtures*, 1976; *Assassins*, 1991); both are by Sondheim, and while both are fascinating case studies and Sondheim is undeniably one of the composers worthy of study from the last thirty years, neither show seems like it meets one of his basic criteria, that a show "has mattered to a lot of people over a long period of time" (xvii). Some readers, especially students or young scholars, may be eager to learn how the book's issues apply to the more culturally high-profile shows that may matter more to them.

But these points can be thought of as invitations to other scholars, not faults of this book. The yardstick by which Knapp measures these musicals and the analytical tools he applies to them are persuasion enough that every musical is about America in one way or another. I have already begun to see how this approach is influencing other people's work, so I am sure this book—and Knapp's companion volume, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (2006)—will continue to impact our field and our understanding of this most American of art forms.