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**“Tradition! Broadway Composers
and their Jewish Identity”**

**by Ryan Kramer
December 5, 2009**

When I got to my major project, I wanted to do something that I could identify with. I started by looking at my strengths, what I was good at. Theater was the first thing that came to mind. I decided to do my major project on Jews and Broadway. Now normally, when people think of Jewish theater, the classic thing they think of is something like this

[Ryan plays a little of “Tradition”]

but I’m not going to go over that.

Jews and Broadway go way back. It was Yiddish Theater that began the connection. Yiddish Theater was the Jewish theater in Russia, Germany, and other places where the Jews lived in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Yiddish Theater also came to the U.S. when Jews began immigrating to America. Oddly enough, it was in the U.S. that Yiddish Theater blossomed. During World War I, there were more than a dozen resident Yiddish theaters in New York, concentrated on the Lower East Side, as well as troupes that toured from city to city.

Yiddish Theater told stories about what was going on in the Lower East Side. They were telling stories about the struggle between the Jews from the old country and their American born children. In addition, they would do more traditional pieces, such as Shakespeare or Ibsen. In Yiddish theater, melodrama was the preferred type of play; audiences would attend the more cultural plays as long as their favorite actor was the star. Also, the Yiddish theater made efforts to make the more serious plays less so, by adding in song and dance numbers before returning to the original plot. This brought in people from all over, and made the Jews feel more connected to America.

To do this project, I decided to research three main points: why so many Broadway composers are Jewish, whether you can tell if a Broadway composer is Jewish by his works, and how Jews used Broadway to assimilate into American society.

One of the traits that helped put so many Jewish names on Broadway was the fact that Jews weren’t discouraged by the difficulties of the immigrant experience. In fact, they made sure that they kept up their children’s education in both academics and the arts and encouraged them to develop careers. They took every disadvantage that was flung at them, and turned it around. Harold Prince, who produced several famous shows, including;

[Ryan plays two bars of “Tradition”]

Oh wait, we’re not covering that. Anyway, Harold Prince explains, “Most people who are high accomplisheers come from behind some psychological eight ball where they feel disenfranchised and they have to create something. There are other religions out there and they don’t always turn adversity

into creativity.” The Jews were able to take this disadvantage and turn it into an advantage. This was a catalyst to the first big wave of Jewish names on Broadway and made it easier for later generations of Jewish composers, such as Stephen Sondheim. In fact when Sondheim was asked if he had ever experienced any anti-Semitism in show business, his exact response was, “My God-in the theater? In musicals? Name me three gentile composers.”

Sondheim has stated that he’s not a very religious Jew. He never had any formal Jewish education, and he didn’t have a Bar Mitzvah either. However, when he was asked about his Jewish identity, Sondheim said, “It’s very deep. It’s the fact that so many of the people I admire in the arts are Jewish. And art is as close to a religion as I have.”

Sondheim’s art includes the lyrics, or music to many famous shows, such as *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Sweeny Todd*, *Company*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which features the song:

[Ryan plays a little of “Comedy Tonight”]

That moves me to the second question I asked myself, which was can you tell that a composer is Jewish based on his works? To answer that question I chose to look at one of the most famous composers on Broadway, Richard Rodgers.

Rodgers had always had a deep interest in music. His mother used to play the piano while his father sang. Rodgers soon replaced his mom as the family accompanist. At age six, Rodgers went to his first theatrical production. It changed his life. To borrow his own words he was carried into a world of glamour and beauty he never new existed. After this experience he started to go to the theater as much as humanly possible.

Rodgers wrote his first songs at age 11 while at a Jewish summer camp in Highmount, New York. A strange twist was that his first partner, Lorenz Hart, had attended the same summer camp a few years earlier. In addition, Steven Sondheim’s dad had gone to the same camp. Everything seems to be connected. Rodgers composed his first full musical score at age 15 for an amateur musical called *One Minute Please*. Rodgers originally worked with Lorenz Hart, but then worked with Hammerstein starting with their first production.

[Ryan plays a little of “Oklahoma”]

Rodgers worked exclusively with Hammerstein for the remainder of the latter’s life. The two of them literally created Broadway history, writing one famous play after another. *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I* are a few of these famous plays. It is in these plays that Rodgers’ Jewish identity comes out more. Hammerstein was also Jewish, so he had some influence in that area as well. *The King and I* is a fine example of how they used the Jewish immigration story in their works.

In *The King and I*, a schoolteacher and her son come to Siam in order to teach the royal children, the sons and daughters of the king. The king struggles with how modern the world has become. This is much like the story of the Jews when they immigrated to America. The children are much more adaptable than the parents, so the parents have a harder time adjusting to the modern world. The parents must do the best they can to help their children in the new country. Whether or not Rodgers wrote this based on some conscious Jewish motives or not, I don’t know. However, it was probably a subconscious point in the writing.

Several songs in these plays have a Jewish tie in. They show that people need to overcome their fear, just as the Jews were able to overcome their fear and move to the U.S. This is revealed in songs such as this one.

[Ryan plays a little of “I Whistle a Happy Tune”]

This, however, is only the beginning of the Jewish tie ins I found while researching Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Another place where Rodgers and Hammerstein used a Jewish theme is in their show, *South Pacific*. *South Pacific* takes place during World War II, on an island in the Pacific Ocean. All through the play, there is racial scandal. Many characters have issues with the native people, the Polynesians. This is similar to the anti-Semitism that the Jews sometimes experienced when they first came to America. People were afraid of the Jews because they were different. They couldn't accept the Jewish practices because they weren't familiar. Whether or not Rodgers' grandparents found this kind of behavior when they got to America, I never found out. However, there seems to be no doubt that this theme influenced the duo in writing this play.

One of the songs that address anti-Semitism the most is “You've Got To Be Carefully Taught”. The reviewers heavily criticized this song, and several people tried to get Rodgers and Hammerstein to take it out of the show. They refused. It shows how in the story, everyone from outside the island was taught to dislike and distrust people different from them. . It also addresses the anti-Semitism directed at the Jews. This comparison intrigued me when I saw it. The song was a very risky gamble by the pair as you can hear.

[Ryan may play a little of “You've Got to Be Carefully Taught”]

Hammerstein died on August 23, 1960. Rodgers was heartbroken. He went on writing songs after Hammerstein's death, but he never again had another permanent partner. He worked with several others, including Steven Sondheim, and was responsible for several of the best-known plays of all time. When he died on December 30, 1979, Richard Rodgers left the world a richer, more musical place.

Since I've been going backwards on the timeline, I will now go back further to talk about how Jews used Broadway to assimilate into American culture. Neither Rodgers, nor Sondheim had to worry about assimilation, because they were both born in America. However, another composer, Irving Berlin, did. Berlin was born in Temun, Russia on May 11, 1888. He was the youngest of eight, and given the name of Israel, although everyone just called him Izzy. In 1892, the family joined the momentous flow of people immigrating to the U.S. However, when he turned thirteen, Izzy's father died, leaving the family without money. Izzy took to singing in the streets for spare change.

Izzy's first real job was singing at a Chinatown café. During this stint, he made his first move as a songwriter. He began writing his own songs for the café. This was his first step to becoming a success. In 1926, once he had begun to become important in American society, he eloped with Ellin MacKay, a 22-year-old writer for the New Yorker. Her outraged father, Clarence MacKay, a telegraph tycoon and a devout Catholic, disinherited his daughter for marrying a Jew. I don't know this for certain, but it is hard to imagine that this reaction from his father in law did not have a huge affect on him. The Berlins had three daughters during a marriage that lasted sixty-two years.

Twenty years later, Berlin had the biggest success of his lifetime. Reluctant at first, Berlin eventually decided to write the lyrics and music for the show *Annie Get Your Gun*. It was an immediate success. *Annie Get Your Gun* became the longest-running show of the 1940's and the biggest Broadway success of Berlin's career. Interestingly enough, *Annie Get Your Gun* was produced by Rodgers and

Hammerstein. The more in depth research I do, the more apparent it is that everything is connected. There is a Jewish tie in here as well. Annie uses her talents in show business to become more connected with her community. By doing this, she becomes less of an outsider. Berlin used this same tactic. He used his talents in theater to assimilate into his new world.

Since we are drawing to the end, I want to pause to talk about certain points in Berlin's life that I found interesting while researching him. One of Berlin's most famous pieces was the song:

[Ryan plays a little of "White Christmas"]

"White Christmas" is possibly one of the most beloved Christmas songs of all time. In fact, several very American style songs were also written by Berlin, including one of his most well known numbers, "God Bless America". The fact that they were written by a Jew is very odd from the point of view of an outsider. However, this shows that Berlin was very successful in his assimilation into American society. Writing these songs probably made it easier for him to connect with the American people.

Berlin died on September 22, 1989, in his home on Beekman Place in New York City. At the time of his death, there was no doubt that Berlin was a genuine American. As Jerome Kern said about him, "Irving Berlin has no place in American music. He *is* American music."

In conclusion, the Jews were very successful in their ability to use Broadway to assimilate into the American society. Yiddish Theater and the immigrants' belief in education and the arts explain the reason why there are so many Jewish names on Broadway. If you examine these composers' works, you can also see that a person's Jewish upbringing or their values show up in their works, as I have shown with Richard Rogers. As to how they used Broadway to assimilate, they wrote songs that enabled them to be known and well received beyond the Jewish community. Some of these songs would eventually be included in the "Great American Songbook." These composers used the piano to create works that would become hugely influential in American theater and cleared the path for future generations of Jewish composers. This is especially important to me because I am an enthusiastic piano player. Or, to borrow the words of Irving Berlin:

[Ryan plays a little of "I Love a Piano"]