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**MUSICAL THEATRE**

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Critical Essay: The Issue of Stereotyping the Women in the Golden Age of Musical Theatre. How did musical theatre emerge? What was the place of women characters in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals? Is *The Sound of Music* one of the musicals that includes the typical character categorisation method of Rodgers and Hammerstein?

As mentioned in the Poetics, the book of the highly known Greek philosopher Aristotle about dramatic theory, music has played a pivotal role in the presentation of theatrical performances in the Western World since Ancient Greek times. In this book, Aristotle suggests that the drama needs to include six main elements: plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. Under the music title, he stated that "Song holds the chief place among the embellishments" (Blair, 2018).

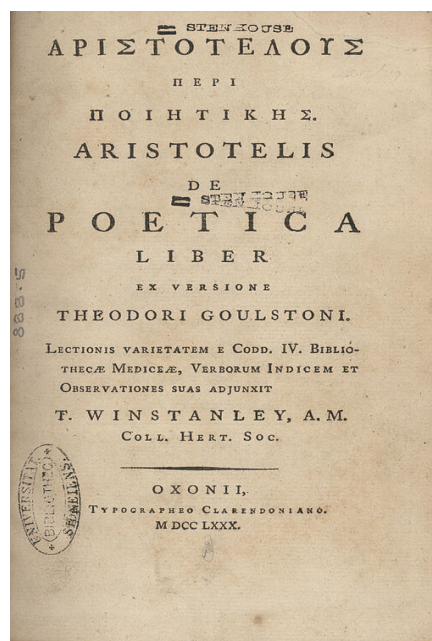


Figure 1: Poetics by Aristotle

In the 16th century, when Greek drama happened to be in a position where it became the musical theatre model, the matter of plays being sung from beginning to end started to be discussed among scholars (Brown, 2001). According to many music historians, the 16th century is also the year opera's early

origins reside. In his article, Howard Mayer Brown suggests that the opera genre has been initially started to develop from the discussions about the informal academy known as the Camerate constituted by Count Giovanni de' Bardi of Florence and his friends 1570s and those discussions led the first operas to arise. Such as Rinuccini's *Dafne* with music by Jacopo Corsi and Jacopo Peri which firstly performed in 1598 (Brown, 2001). Today this genre could simply be described as "an art form that tells a story through music and singing" like English National Opera did. (Anon., n.d.).

It is undeniably possible to enjoy theatrical works without reading, writing or deeply knowing about them. Since it is a visual and audible performance, just listening and watching is already satisfying for many. Realistically, while only a tiny percentage of the audience is experts, most of the audience is not even knowledgeable about the performance they watch. However, when someone decides to get into the magical world of theatrical works, it could be pretty overwhelming to understand the correct definitions, origins, and details.

Since the musical theatre will be the central subject in this essay, as the first thing to do, it would be logical to examine what musical theatre is and how it emerged. In her book *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment*, Millie Taylor musical theatre genre as "a combination of song, visual spectacle, verbal text that is performed live in theatres." (Taylor, 2016).

Even though *musical theatre* is a concept that most people are familiar with (even among those who have not watched any musical works in their lifetimes) nowadays, it is indeed a new title in the history of theatrical works. A kind directly derived from the opera genre! In this case, Geoffrey Block and Kate Van Winkle Keller explain musical theatre as "what was called light opera and musical comedy in the 19th and earlier 20th centuries has since the 1960s been most commonly referred to as the 'musical,' a genre which is often neither light nor an opera nor a comedy (though it can be all or none of these" (Geoffrey Block and Kate Van Winkle Keller, 2014). A kind directly derived from the opera genre!

When it is looked at a geographical perspective, it is not easy to define where musicals rise, but it is certainly valid to say that it got famous with the New York City theatre district known as Broadway. In their article, Geoffrey Block and Kate Van Winkle Keller also explain what was it become famous in the Broadway with these words: "What became known simply as musicals are works for the musical stage that alternate between spoken dialogue and songs, the latter mainly composed for individual characters but also featuring duets, choruses, or other less common combinations." (Geoffrey Block and Kate Van Winkle Keller, 2014)

There are several peak and dip points during musical theatre history where some factors like new technological developments and changing common demands and reactions forced the whole rotation of musical theatre to change completely. However, as Goldstein stated in his article, probably no two names are more respected and admired in the American musical theatre history than Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. In various sources, they are considered as the most successful musical theatre duo of all time (Goldstein, 1989). The Golden Age of musicals!



Figure 2: Rodgers and Hammerstein

Their works were highly influential for the other composer, librettist and artists in the musical theatre sector. According to many critics, their first collaborative work *Oklahoma!* was the one which pioneered the musical plays to be considered a significant art form in America. Rodgers and Hammerstein indeed pioneered several features in musical theatre to develop by their works. One of those features is undoubtedly the 18 minutes long dream ballet sequence in *Oklahoma!* (choreographed by Agnes de Mille) that emphasised on the vital role of dance in musicals. It was even evidence that dance could be pretty useful in enhancing, embroidering or replacing a storyline. They are the ones who strengthen the idea of integrating music, lyrics and dialogue which is firstly originated by also Hammerstein and his earlier collaborative partner Jerome Kern in 1927 with *Show Boat*. Rodgers and Hammerstein were among the pioneers who broke the taboos that only the lives of high-born people are worth being the

subject of theatrical works. As Goldstein remarked in his article "One no longer had to be a princess or a duke to have one's love life treated seriously." (Goldstein, 1989). As Goldstein also mentioned in his article, there are many other features introduced by Rodgers and Hammerstein such as it does not always have to be a happy ending and a musical hero can face tragedy at the end of the musical, and songs can be used in the service of the explanation of the characters' characteristic features (Goldstein, 1989). They were always aiming for creating works the out of conventional, and as Frederick Nolan mentioned in his book, they had even agreed on "the only risky things to do in theatre, was not to take risks" (Nolan, 2002).

Contrary to their several liberal ideas in many areas, it looks like their view of women was quite old-fashioned and narrow by looking at the woman characters in their works. As Goldstein also observed in the same article, only a few "types of" women were represented in their musical works and were all highly fitting into the mould of "feminine woman" (Goldstein, 1989). During World War II women were mostly encouraged to hide their hair from getting seen and wear slacks instead of skirts and dresses. However, the woman image that tried to be created by Rodgers and Hammerstein after the war was completely different. It was almost like they were trying to change the self-sufficient, independent and physically powerful image of women and showing that being a home wife is a privilege and being a mother is the greatest career plan a woman ever could choose by their works (Dees, 2016).

In the matter of Rodgers and Hammerstein's almost stereotypical female characterisation Goldstein used these words; "To recognise her, one only had to look for the female singer of a waltz." (Goldstein, 1989) since because dance was considered as a feminine way to flirt.

As Alison Dees stated in her article, almost all female leads in their musicals were naive women who can magnificently sing and wore flowing dresses with their long hairs. It probably would not be daring to say that the female characters in their plays had pretty narrow behavioural models and they were all women who are pretty satisfied with being "the dainty little homemaker" (Dees, 2016).



Figure 3: Laurey Williams from *Oklahoma!* (1955 film/ played by Shirley Jones



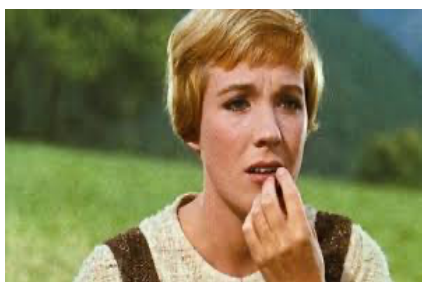
Figure 4: Margy Frake from *State Fair* (1945 film/ played by Jeanne Crain)



Figure 5: Anna Leonowens *The King and I* (1956 film/ played by Deborah Kerr

However, I believe that *The Sound of Music's* Maria was a confusing character because she would break into Rodgers and Hammerstein's typical female heroine stereotypes.





**Figure 6:** Maria Rainer from *The Sound of Music* (1965 film/played by Julie Andrews)

The Sound of Music is the final collaboration between Rodgers and Hammerstein. It has been based on a true story about the Austrian Von Trapp Family's extraordinary life during World War II (Avital Shira Chloe Wintersteen, n.d.). In the musical, postulant Maria Raine is a beautiful young woman who has a free spirit. Therefore, she experiences some trouble fitting into Nonnberg Abbey's rules even though she genuinely sees there like her home. Thus, she was sent to the Von Trapp family home to be the governess of seven children who lives in a wealthy life with an overly strict father. Maria brings the joy, laughter and music back into children's lives. Even though the father of the children, Captain Georg refuses to accept those changes that remind him to her dead wife at first, when he realises how happy his children are, he gives himself into music's power. (The breaking point where the children started to sing with Maria happened with the most known and popular musical number of *The Sound of Music*, *Do-Re-Mi*. Even today in primary schools in numerous countries, the same melodic structure are used with different lyrics and in various languages to teach children the musical notes.) Maria wins both children and Georg's hearts quickly, and the Captain and Maria get married. On their back home from their honeymoon trip, they learn that the Nazi's has taken their beloved Austria over and the Captain is asked (more likely to forcing) to report for service in the Nazi Navy, immediately. He decides to run away with his family, but the Nazis show up at their door and insist on taking him to the navy. Therefore, the Von Trapp family convinces the Nazis that they were going to the festival to sing in the contest. They manage to run away after singing in the contest and hide in the Abbey while the Nazis were searching for them with their friend Max's help. Nuns also help them, and they succeed in getting away from the Nazis and climbing to Maria's beloved mountain where she goes to sing all the time (*Prelude / The Sound of Music*), which symbolises their freedom (Anon., n.d.).

Maria's short-cropped hair, rebellious attitude, and self-ordained nature due to her free spirit make her out of Rodgers and Hammerstein's stereotypical heroine. Nevertheless, undoubtedly, Maria has some traits that perfectly fit Goldstein's rather remarkable conclusion about Rodgers and Hammerstein's ideal heroine's desire to fly by the power of true love and then not return to earth afterwards. In his article, he explains this situation with some lyrics (sung by heroines) gotten from different Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals (Goldstein,

1989). In the case of *The Sound of Music*, it is the lyrics where Maria sings "*Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings/ These are a few of my favourite things*". As mentioned by many others, most female characters in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals tend to stand by their husbands no matter what, and this situation is not much different for Maria. As long as she was not aware of Captain Georg's love, Maria refused to perform Georg's strict rules for his children since they were against her feelings and conception of the world. However, after she realises that they were in love with each other and got married, she also starts to be there for her husband no matter similar to the other Rodgers and Hammerstein heroines. Even when the Nazis force Georg to serve the Nazi Navy, Maria's only response to the situation was "Georg, whatever you decide, will be my decision". This mindset of Maria can also be observed by the scene (in 1956 film) where she sings to her stepdaughter Liesl about if she waits a bit longer love will find her. However, these lyrics she sings "*Gone are your old ideas of life/ The old ideas grow dim/ Lo and behold you're someone's wife/ And you belong to him in*" are almost like a testament to the statement about the heroines in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, that they always stay with their husbands no matter what. In her article Millie Acers explains the same matter as "...many of the female characters in even the most mainstream of musicals remain stunted, two dimensional beings created to serve the interests of the men in their stories" (Acers, 2019).

Goldstein suggests that the ideal relationship for the ideal heroine of Rodgers and Hammerstein is intensely romantic. According to him, all she needs is her perfect man to transform this world's bleak reality into something filled with "the innocent, virginal pleasures of her favorite things" (Goldstein, 1989). Probably the most clear demonstration of this statement in *The Sound of Music* is the song *Something Good* where Maria and Georg does a duet just after their love confession to each other. In this song she states that she had a wicked childhood, but she must have done something good to earn Captain's love.

*Perhaps I had a wicked childhood*

*Perhaps I had a miserable youth*

*But somewhere in my wicked, miserable  
past*

*There must have been a moment of truth*

*For here you are, standing there, loving me*

*Whether or not you should*

*But somewhere in my youth or childhood*

*I must have done something good*

In the meanings of musical holism, the 1965 film version of *The Sound of Music* has done a genuinely magnificent job. Besides the obvious reprises such as *The Sound of Music*, *Edelweiss*, *My Favourite Things*, *So Long Farewell*, it is



possible to hear the "modified" or instrumental versions of some soundtracks of the musical as background music at various points of the film. In the sense of "modified" tracks, Maria and Liesl sing the Liesl and Daniel (her lover boy)'s number *Sixteen Going On Seventeen* again in the mentioned scene where they talk about finding the love, but with some new lyrics adjusted to the current context. *Maria* is another similar example to this. On the other hand, about the background music, it is pretty clear to hear that *My Favourite Things* reprises in the scene where Maria walk with the children in the Salzburg city but this time as background music, firstly as a piano-only version then a symphonic version.

According to Goldstein, there are three other significant "stereotypes" female characters in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals beside the female lead. One of them is someone far more sensible than the female lead, someone, whose "two feet firmly planted on the ground" when the leading female character is more on the clouds. I am not sure if there is any character in *The Sound of Music* who fits this role until up to this point. However, Goldstein also mentioned while describing this character that she is someone "who cannot say no" and sings songs which are "bouncy, humorous ones in contrast to the heroine's slower, more serious offerings." (Goldstein, 1989) In this case, I think she could be the eldest Von Trapp daughter Liesl in some ways, even though I do not believe that her character had written with this stereotypical creation on their minds. Since she is young and excited to experience new things like a kiss, she can act more "springy" than Maria. As Goldstein argued in his article, these second typical female characters in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals are more realistic in terms of the physical attraction between man and woman, unlike the female lead who is obsessed with the idea of "purity" and restricts herself to only an emotional relationship before marriage (still it is possible to watch some small kissing scenes before the marriage). As Goldstein exemplifies about the likes of this second character, "She enjoys being whistled at when she appears in her bikini or being told she is 'sweet as candy' " (Goldstein, 1989). In the scene where Liesl sings to her secret lover boy about the number of her age is getting higher in *Sixteen Going On Seventeen*, she explains what she knows and does not know about the world how she feels about it. In this song, I believe the lyrics where she sings "*I know that I am naive/ Fellows I meet may tell me I am sweet/ And willingly I believe*" is showing an enjoyment towards to getting physical attention. Goldstein introduces this character as a "comic counterpart" to the heroine. Even though I do not believe that Liesl could be presented as a comedic counterpart to Maria, it still would be certainly appropriate to say that her sweet secret love ended with a sad ending at the end of the day (he turned into a Nazi and betrayed the Von Trapp family by telling the Nazi soldiers where the family was hiding), just like the Goldstein's proposition about this second female character in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals.



Figure 7: Liesl von Trapp from *The Sound of Music* (1965 film/ played by Charmian Carr)

In his article, Goldstein asserted that there are other two notable major female types besides the leading female role in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, which one of them might be called "The Independent Woman." (Goldstein, 1989) I believe that in *The Sound of Music* this character is precisely Baroness Elsa Schraeder. Matching what Goldstein said when describing this character, she is Maria's rival and, unlike Maria, she is wealthier and more experienced in relationships. As it could also be observed from her method of convincing Maria that he used to get away from Georg, she is more knowledgeable about the dark side of life than Maria. According to Goldstein, the independent woman in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals do not frequently sing contrary to the heroine who almost lives for singing, and when they do, the songs they sing are mostly sarcastic and energetic, unlike the heroine's genuine, slow and emotional songs. In the case of *The Sound of Music*, this is a pretty interesting matter to discuss. In the original script written by Rodgers and Hammerstein and first performed in 1959 Baroness Elsa Schraeder had two numbers to sing: *How Can Love Survive?* and *No Way to Stop It* with Max Detweiler. However, in the 1965 film version directed by Robert Wise, which probably even more popular than its theatrical performances, we do not see the Baroness while singing at all.



Figure 8: Baroness Elsa Schraeder from *The Sound of Music* (1965 film/ played Eleanor Parker)

The fourth and the last stereotypical female character in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals discussed by Goldstein is "The Advisor" which Mother Abbess in *The Sound of Music* perfectly fits into this role. Goldstein describes this character as a usually older lady than the heroine who is typically unmarried and supports the leading female like a mother with advice and guidance (Goldstein, 1989). As to Goldstein, one of this character's most common traits is her unconditional support to the heroine to find and reach her true love and get her dreams to come true, just like what Mother Abbess behaved in *The Sound Of Music*. She supported Maria no matter what even though some of the other nuns had not liked Maria much because of her unusual behaviours in the Abbey such as getting late to the church service just because she spent much time on the mountains singing due to her free spirit. When Maria realises her love for Georg and returns to the Abbey by leaving the Von Trapp family behind Mother Abbess was the one who tells her not to hide from her feelings and fight for them by the song *Climb Every Mountain*.

*Climb every mountain,  
Search high and low,  
Follow every byway,  
Every path you know.*

*Climb every mountain,  
Ford every stream,  
Follow every rainbow,  
'Till you find your dream.*

*A dream that will need  
All the love you can give,  
Every day of your life  
For as long as you live.*



Figure 9: Mother Abbess *The Sound of Music* (1965 film/ played Peggy Wood)

However, when it takes into the account that in the mid-1900s the majority of society thought that the reason for existence of women was only to be a mothers and wife, it is not shocking to see that women were getting categorized into a few personas in the plays, films and musicals. Whether one liked it or not, there are some norms that we put ourselves and others in. In meanings of genders, these norms have always been changed over the centuries. Julie A. Noonan explain this situation as "The repeated actions which the body performs constitute the definitions of gender assignments. As one performs a behavior associated with "woman," she perpetuates that definition of woman. However, if one already assigned to the category "woman" performs repeated behaviors outside--but not too far outside-- the previous definitions of woman, she redefines 'woman' " (Noonan, 2007). According to Noonan, if someone acts way more outside of the current norms, it could create a denial among the encompassing cultural group. Today, people who fight for gender equality struggles to break these norms by their own unique ways. Therefore, considering nowadays musicals, it would be genuine to say that today many artists work in the creative team of musicals fighting overturning the musicals into a platform that includes much diversity of female characters.

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