

Resurrecting the American Musical: Film Noir, Jazz, and the Rhetoric of Tradition in *City of Angels*

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WHEN IT OPENED ON BROADWAY IN 1989, *CITY OF ANGELS*—a “film noir musical”—was trumpeted as a homecoming for the American musical. During the previous decade, the capacity of the Broadway musical stage had been swamped by a series of long-running British invasion megamusicals, which are perhaps best represented by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s *Cats* (1982). At the same time, the traditional model for the American musical was thoroughly “deconstructed” by Stephen Sondheim in musicals such as *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1985). The dichotomy between spectacle and reflexivity seemed to signal the end of the traditional American musical.¹ American pundits and scholars alike worried incessantly throughout the 1980s about the demise of this peculiarly American form of popular culture. *City of Angels* appeared to critics as a welcome respite from both the mass art of the megamusical and the overly intellectual, deconstructed musical. In the words of one reviewer, “How long has it been since a musical was brought to halt by riotous jokes? If you ask me, one would have to travel back to the 1960s” (Rich ch. 19).

This comment by Frank Rich, chief theater critic of the *New York Times*, demonstrates a clear nostalgic longing for a musical theater of the past, and it also serves to indicate the ideological nature of the “traditional” model of American musical and the tension held within this ideal. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* (1943) has been typically held up as exemplifying this “traditional” model; it is commonly celebrated as the first “integrated” musical.

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Rich reveals the implicit expectation that the American musical should be funny and lighthearted; never mind that the presumed standard, *Oklahoma!*, features a near-rape, suicidal thoughts, and murder. Second, Rich reveals an important internal tension within the genre of the integrated American stage musical, or at least within the idealization of such a musical. All of the elements of the integrated show—words, music, lyrics, dance, staging—work together to further the narrative; they advance what Peter Kivy calls “the principle of textual realism” as opposed to “the principle of opulent adornment” evident in opera (10–11). In the case of music as opulent adornment, the words of a text are set to music without consideration regarding what those words might mean or how the two relate to each other. Whether the actual word to be sung is “mundane” or “extraordinary,” it is there to be decorated beautifully by the music; the music follows its own path and disregards the meanings of the words themselves. If, however, a composer follows the principles of textual realism, the music in some way reflects the meaning and emotional truth of the text. In this way, the word “mundane” would sound dull when sung, while the word “extraordinary” might be sung in an unusual or exciting manner. Of course there are many exceptions to this paradigm. As Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill demonstrated, music can be set so that it works *against* the text to create a sense of irony or distance (Willett 126–38).

However, Kivy’s paradigm can allow for a different understanding of both the pre- and the post-*Oklahoma!* musical by highlighting different modes of thinking about the relationships between music, lyrics, and plot. In this way, a 1920s, nonintegrated (in the *Oklahoma!* sense) musical comedy with song and dance numbers that pop out seemingly at random can be analyzed not as “less than” but as “different from” the integrated musical play (Block *Enchanted Evenings* 5–8). However, if a musical is “brought to a halt” by a song or dance sequence, then perhaps even those musicals modeled after *Oklahoma!* are not as integrated as they have been made out to be, and perhaps the American musical had not gone into the decline many theater critics and scholars had supposed (McMillin 3). In this uncertain situation, it is important to understand how and why *City of Angels* was seen as resurrecting American musical theater after its supposed decline, if not abject death.

The “declension theory” of the American musical, which still holds currency in much current scholarship on musical theater, was even stronger during the 1980s when Lloyd Webber and Sondheim

capitalized on the two poles of the genre.² According to this theory, the American musical has its roots in European operetta and spectacle, emulated by “the first” American musical: *The Black Crook*. First staged in 1866, this show had been regarded in older scholarship as the ancestor for American musicals, but the show is mentioned less frequently now as scholars have moved away from a search for the precise origins of the modern American musical (Smith and Litton 7). During the 1910s, a variety of musical voices were heard on the stage, from Americanized operettas to Ziegfeld’s parade of beautiful girls in his series of *Follies*. The 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of the American musical comedy, when the music came from such composers as George Gershwin and Cole Porter and the plots were made from tissue paper. Then came *Oklahoma!* and the landscape of musical theater was fundamentally altered. The 1950s saw refinements on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s model, climaxing (depending on the scholar) with *West Side Story* (1957) or *Gypsy* (1959). Then, as Glen Litton succinctly summed up the era by heading a chapter in his history *Musical Comedy in America*, the 1960s were “Trouble” (Smith and Litton 252). With rock music taking over the popular music scene and with the skyrocketing cost of putting on a show, “the golden age of Broadway ended sometime in the 1960s” (Grant 3; Smith and Litton 258). Of course there were some bright spots—*Fiddler On the Roof* (1964) is an often cited example—but the age was over when nearly every musical was a quality musical and in tune with its times.³ The authority wielded by composers and librettists such as Rodgers and Hammerstein to ensure the integration of song and story, gave way before powerful directors and choreographers such as Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett in shows like *Chicago* (1975) and *A Chorus Line* (1975). Such directors ho were more interested in concept and spectacle and they thus represent a supposed step backwards to an earlier time in the history of musical theater (Smith and Litton 290–91; Grant 277–83; Mordden, *The Happiest Corpse* 1–2).

This scholarly pessimism can also be found in the popular press, especially within the Broadway musical context of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is important not to underestimate the rhetoric of decline and despair that surrounded the Broadway musical during this time period, as it is with this general gloominess that *City of Angels* had to contend. For example, Richard Hornby from the *Hudson Review* declared that “although more expensive than ever, [musicals] lacked

even the glamour of musicals of yore; instead they just seemed heavy and overdone" (182); *Time* magazine remarked that "*City of Angels* is that rarest of things on Broadway these days, a completely original American musical, not imported" (Henry 92); and rival *Newsweek* took a swipe at Sondheim when it chided those who had forgotten that "musicals used to be called musical comedies" (Kroll and Malone 62).

So what, precisely, are a megamusical and a deconstructed musical? As implied by the term, a megamusical is a musical that has such a large cast and such a spectacular sets that it could only be called "mega." But it is not simply the size that defines the megamusical. The plots lean toward the epic and the grandly historical, the music is sung-through (similar to opera) and tends to be influenced by the more international sounds of soft pop and rock, rather than by the indigenous American sounds of Tin Pan Alley (Burston 209; Sternfeld 1–7). The song "Memories" from *Cats* is a perfect example of how megamusicals sounded differently from American, *Oklahoma!*-style musicals. The creators of megamusicals were typically situated outside of the United States, and explicitly have a global market in mind, a market that requires a high level of technical standardization in order to be profitable when on tour (Burston 205–06). The megamusical appeals to the mass audience, to an audience that might have never seen *Oklahoma!* but which is willing to spend money on a "name brand" that promises a staged spectacle and a certain level of familiarity.⁴ Broadway musicals have always mixed commerce and art; the megamusical perfected this model on a global scale (Sternfeld 3–4; Rosenberg and Harburg 4, 41–47; Adler 4–7).

A deconstructed, or "bookless"/"concept," musical is defined as precisely the opposite of a megamusical. A modern concept musical is constructed around a central idea rather than a straightforward, linear plot, songs punctuate rather than flow out from the story, and the music is determinedly idiosyncratic (Cowser 545; Miller 188).⁵ For example in *Company*, marriage as an institution is explored through a series of discontinuous vignettes, and the show is structured around the repetition of main character's birthday celebration using a variety of perspectives from those in attendance. The creator of the deconstructed musical is not only situated within the United States, but is a creature of Broadway, even if he has broken from most of its traditions. Finally, the deconstructed musical is rarely popular or particularly profitable, although it often garners critical praise, scholarly attention, and a cult

following among the musical theater cognoscenti (Block *The Broadway Canon* 541–44). In part, this binary between the megamusical and the concept exists because two men—Andrew Lloyd Webber and Stephen Sondheim—came into prominence during the 1980s with competing musical and personal styles that polarized fans of the genre.⁶ One is not supposed to enjoy both *Cats* and *Company* (Citron 17–18).

It is because of this historical period of despair over the state of the Broadway musical and the binary between Sondheim and Lloyd Webber that Cy Coleman and Larry Gelbart's *City of Angels* seemed to herald a return to a distinctive American voice—with an *Oklahoma!* accent—to the musical stage. Coleman was a veteran of the musical stage. In 1989 he was perhaps best known as the composer for *Sweet Charity* (1966). Gelbart was a former writer for the TV series *M*A*S*H* and co-author with Bert Shevelove of the musical comedy, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962).⁷ Both men clearly had the pedigree to revitalize the musical comedy, together with the help of relative newcomer David Zippel who wrote the lyrics for the songs.⁸ An all-American team created an all-American production. The show was set in the city of Los Angeles, not some far off European country or fantasyland. According to reviewers, the show allowed itself to be funny and did not neglect serious ideas, but neither did it indulge in intellectual snobbery. The score was proclaimed to be a “delirious celebration of jazz” (Rich ch. 19), with songs that “smolder with film noir sensuality” (Stark 18). In these types of reviews, jazz as a musical form was held up as emblematic of America's distinctive contribution to popular culture, and thus re-enforced the Americanness of *City of Angels*.

Finally, the subject matter of this musical, film noir, was also viewed as a crucial and unique part of American popular culture. *City of Angels* is, in the words of co-creator Gelbart, comprised of “a shred of Chandler, a dash of Hammett” (Gelbart 4). But it is Chandler and Hammett as interpreted through the lens of musical theater, a reinterpretation of the meaning of film noir through musical comedy. The play is thus an exercise in neo noir, although presenting itself as classic noir. As text, *City of Angels* refuses to acknowledge the different ontologies existing between live stage and film and between musicals and film noir. It does so by erasing the debts it owes to both megamusicals and concept musicals, so that it appears traditional in form, and obscures the self-referentiality characteristic of neo noir.⁹

City of Angels tells two stories, one set in “real life” and one set in the “reel life” of a screenplay being written by a novelist called Stine. Both stories take place in the 1940s. The screen story features former police detective turned private dick Stone, femme fatale Mrs. Alaura Kingsley, and Oolie, Stone’s secretary. Mrs. Kingsley hires Stone to find her errant stepdaughter Mallory, but as might be expected in a film noir plot, the task is not really that simple. Mallory has not truly disappeared but has run off for reasons of her own. The second plot, which occurs in “real life,” is perhaps more melodrama than film noir. A crime novelist, first-time screenwriter, and womanizer, Stine attempts to transform his racially charged mystery novel into a film while negotiating his crumbling marriage to Gabby and attempting to remain true to his artistic vision in the face of multiple re-writes by the amoral movie producer, Buddy Fidler. Stine is constantly accused by Fidler of being too invested in words and of neglecting the images on which film relies. Fidler further criticizes Stine’s script for being too intellectual: it employs flashbacks within flashbacks while the crux of the mystery relies on racial tensions between the Anglo-Saxon Stone and his Hispanic former partner in the police force, Lt. Manny Munoz. Instead of racial tensions, Fidler wants more sex, more (nonracial) violence, more streamlining.

Much of the show’s humor noted by reviewers is the result of this duel strategy within the text as it moves back and forth between two worlds. Humor also derives from the stereotypes of various vacuous and vicious Hollywood types in the “real life” plot, particularly through Buddy Fidler. More importantly, *City of Angels* plays with the clichés of film noir through the character of Buddy Fidler. As Stine’s script is re-written by Fidler, and as Stine attempts to meet Fidler’s demands, the language in the “reel world” becomes progressively more “hard boiled” and the situations more cliché-ridden. For example, the tensions between Munoz and Stone are originally revealed to be the result of racism and favoritism within the Los Angeles Police Department: Stone was had been let off scot-free for killing the man who was having an affair with his wife, and Munoz could not bear the cover-up that occurred. The revised script changes the antagonism to that of simple jealousy: Munoz covets Stone’s wife.

City of Angels was not the first such use of film noir. The possibility of reflexive commentary about and parody of film noir occurred as early as 1953. Gelbart and Coleman similarly overload their plot in *City*

of *Angels*, but their parody is of men like Fidler who would corrupt the artistry of film noir, rather than of the form itself. As film noir neared the end of its lifecycle, Vincent Minelli's show-within-a-show musical film, *The Band Wagon*—about a down-on-his-luck hooper, Fred Astaire, who stages a Broadway stage comeback—featured a jazz ballet entitled “The Girl Hunt.” The number begins with spotlights circling the proscenium curtain as music and sirens swell in the background. The curtain flies up to reveal a black inner curtain on which are hung garish mock pulp fiction covers featuring reclining women, men with guns, and titles such as “She Had to Die,” “Stab Me Sugar,” and of course “Girl Hunt.” This curtain is parted by machine gun fire to reveal an abstract cityscape and Astaire, who in voice over, notes, “the city was asleep” and “somewhere a lone trumpet player rehearsed and the lonesome sound crawled up my spine.” In describing Cyd Charisse, who plays both “The Blond” and “The Brunette,” he utters the immortal lines, “she came at me in sections.” The plot of the ballet is nonsensical and features a bizarre death by nitroglycerin, obscure clues, and three men who at various times pantomime beating Astaire's character into oblivion.

Although film noir is known for the complexity of its plot structure, contributing to the dreamlike quality of such movies, that very complexity is an obvious target for parody. Minelli employed this technique for his extreme ballet. In the ballet, Astaire's character is the only one who gets to speak, and only in voiceover. He speaks directly to the audience but is never seen doing so; the dancing provides the main narrative thrust with the voiceover to keep the audience from getting too lost in the details of the near-nonsensical plot, ultimately never as important as the pleasures of the dance Astaire and Charisse provide. “Girl Hunt” is aware of itself as a parody and flaunts it (Borde and Chaumeton 109–11); *City of Angels* attempts to hide the fact that it is part of neo noir and the neo Broadway musical.

A common complaint by those people who dislike musicals is that the plots are too simplistic: boy meets girl often seems to be the beginning and the end of the matter. However, there is a reason behind these streamlined musical plots: the songs. Instead of exposition, there is singing, and the singing usually provides something other than plot (Engel 38). Very broadly speaking, in the post-*Oklahoma!* era, songs occur in a musical when the emotion has risen to such a pitch that song becomes the only logical outlet for it. Despair, joy, love, anger, confusion—all of these extremes are explored through song and dance,

not pages of dialogue. With emotion as the focus, plot takes second place; after all, would you rather hear a character sing about his undying love for a woman or sing about a plot point? Certainly a song can advance the plot or provide insight into a character's motivation, but plot advancement is rarely the primary motivation. Indeed, as Scott McMillin has noted, the musical numbers within a show produce a doubling for the characters (54–58). In other words, the effect of a song within a musical on characters is to turn the characters “into new versions of themselves, musical versions [. . .] that play against our normal sense of identity and story” (21). The character becomes “more than” through an entirely different mode of performance, a mode of performance that falls outside of normal, narrative time.

Song and dance transports a text outside of narrative time to “musical time,” where repetition, rather than narrative forward motion, is the main pleasure. The AABA lyric structure of most musical numbers is itself built on repetition, but additionally the internal logic of the songs depend on repeated notes, rhymes, rhythms, and sentiments (McMillin 6–10; 31–37). These various iterations of repetitions stop the narrative flow. Although the musical numbers—in the ideal “integrated musical”—are built to fit within the context of the narrative, and may flow from the actions of the characters, the number itself arrests action in favor of deepening a character who becomes more than just a person who can walk and talk, but also someone who can express the self musically.

The concept of character doubling has an interesting ramification for *City of Angels*. Because the majority of the actors play two different characters, these characters are already effectively doubled. Indeed, part of the fun of the show is working out which “reel world” character created by Stine corresponds to the “real world” people in his life. But when one of these already-doubled characters sings, a quadrupling occurs. The wife in the “real world” is a tramp in the “reel world”; when the tramp sings she cannot help but refer back to that other, “real world” persona. The tramp-who-sings is also the wife-who-sings, even though, within the logic of the show, neither is aware of their double existence. This is not a case of mistaken identity, in which a character deliberately takes on a disguise to evade disaster, fooling everyone on stage but not the all-seeing audience. Instead, within the dual worlds of *City of Angels*, both identities are “real” and subject to the doubling McMillin describes.

This central hallmark of the *Oklahoma!*-style musical, in which music breaks forth when straight dialogue will no longer suffice, presents a problem for *City of Angels*. Noir films are generally plot heavy, and while time may loop back on itself for flashbacks into the past, these movements backward act to propel the story forward. In addition, visual repetitions of a particular object, such as the grandfather clock in Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944), serve the narrative. Clearly, the visual language within these films functions in more complicated ways than as revelation of simple plot information; the clock in *Laura*, for example, hides the murder weapon but it also reveals an obsession with time and death that haunts this post-World War II film. As a live stage production, however, *City of Angels* does not have access to this doubled-visual language. While it tries to meet the genre conventions of both film noir and old-fashioned musical theater, the plot complexities are only ever partially visualized on stage and are never completely filled out textually because musical pauses continually interrupt narrative forward motion.

Indeed, one problem with the score of *City of Angels* is that some of the songs are used simply as background to the action on stage, rather than being integral to it or to the characters. There is, for example, the scene in which two thugs break into Stone's apartment, hoping to persuade the private eye with their fists to lay off his investigation. The scene starts with Stone's radio playing the 1940s-inspired song "You Gotta Look Out for Yourself." The song sounds as if it is filtered through the single speaker of the on-stage radio. Once the thugs enter the picture, they turn up the radio and a light goes up on another area of the stage where a male quartet, in what looks to be a radio studio, sing the song "live" on the radio. The thugs begin to pummel Stone in shadow as the quartet sing in full view. Although the song is clearly a commentary on Stone's inattention to the danger he is in, it is an emotionally empty song that has no real connection to the protagonists. It is a song to be beaten up to; it fills an aural gap and meets one of the genre clichés of the film noir, where physical violence is often linked to the urban sounds of the city and the modern wonder of the radio. Thus, while constructing itself as an integrated musical, *City of Angels* must fall back on "opulent adornment" to satisfy the needs of a different genre.

The connections between jazz music and noir are not well explored. Indeed, only Robert Porfirio, in his 1979 article, "Dark Jazz: Music in

the *Film Noir*,” has directly addressed the issue. Because of the tendency of neo noir to utilize jazz music in its scores to evoke the past—and certainly *City of Angels* fits squarely within this category—there is an assumption that the aural landscape of classic film noir is suffused with jazz sounds. This is not entirely the case. Many noir films used the model of European-influenced music scores typical of many melodramas: full symphonic scoring, lush orchestration, and clearly identifiable melodies (Spicer 46–47). Those films that Porfirio notes as deploying jazz—often ones directed by Robert Siodmak—typically use the music as part of the diagesis rather than as the basis for the score as a whole; that is, the main character enters a nightclub to obtain some crucial information, and the house band is seen and heard in the background playing jazz. This is not to say that jazz does not have a specific function in these films. When jazz is deployed in film noir, it typically signifies discord, danger, or psychological disturbance. Indeed, jazz music is often juxtaposed against western classical sounds to emphasize a shift in mood or to indicate that a character is in imminent danger of losing his or her mind (Porfirio 177–78). In the case of *City of Angels*, then, the near-constant use of jazz not only delimits the timeframe, it also underlines the psychic stress Stine experiences as he attempts to reframe his life through his fiction while under threat from Fidler’s dissatisfied rewriting. But the unquestioned use of jazz as the foundation of the score also highlights the fact that *City of Angels* is indeed neo, and not classic, noir.

The jazzy score and the songs of *City of Angels* serve to suture the two plots together and provide some thematic continuity between them. Overall, the music tends toward swing and a big band jazz sound, more Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman and the Andrew Sisters, than Duke Ellington or Billie Holliday. Trombones and trumpets feature prominently, providing a bright brassy sound, and many of the songs are sung in two or four-part harmony. However, there are two key exceptions to this soundscape. The first involves the villain in the Stone real life story—Buddy Fidler—whose first song is not a jazz-inspired number but is instead a song in fast waltz time that relies on woodwinds and unsyncopated, straight rhythms. The music thus effectively differentiates him from the rest of the characters and indicates to the audience from the start that Fidler is not a man to be trusted. In the private eye, fictional world of Stine, blues and illicit sex are signaled through prominent use of the saxophone—a nonclassical

instrument, often an emblem of jazz and dark nightclubs—when two “good girls gone bad” characters are featured in song.

City of Angels has a surplus of plot, and it takes very precise staging to make it clear to the audience which plot and which characters are currently filling the stage. In the Broadway production, one half of the set—stage left—used careful lighting and black and white costumes to emulate the look of classic film noir. The right half of the stage was in glorious Technicolor, so to speak, with the actors in bright colors—reds, purples, yellows—and bathed in natural light. The visual cues thus helped to maintain order and discipline between the “fictional” world of private detective Stone and the “real” world of author Stine. Ironically, then, *City of Angels* used the technology and stagecraft made possible by, and generally associated with, the British megamusical. *Cats* takes place on a gigantic trash pile and a central character is lifted to heaven via a spaceship;¹⁰ *Phantom of the Opera* features a crashing chandelier. Indeed, many regional theaters had to be “phantomized” in order to accommodate the technological requirements for the touring production (Rosenberg and Harburg 25). And yet because the story and characters seemed more personable and definitely more American than a phantom or poetical cats, *City of Angels* could still conceive of itself as belonging to an older form of musical theater. The primary settings for the use of this complicated dual staging—a private eye’s dingy office, a run-down apartment—also serve to mask the technology involved. Both are perfectly mundane, completely unspectacular.

The visual cues become crucial once the connections between the two plots are revealed: the characters in Stine’s film noir screenplay are stand-ins for the real people in his life. As a result, many of the actors play dual roles. For example, private eye Stone’s past love, nightclub singer-turned prostitute Bobbi Edwards, is author Stine’s vengeful version of his faithful wife Gabby; both are portrayed by the same actress. The dual casting and dense plotting can easily become confusing—which is why the stage and lighting design is crucial to the show—but they do underline the basic, noirish Freudian psychology operating within the musical where Stine’s writerly dreams reveal his inner desires and fears.

There is one crucial exception to the dual casting: different actors play Stone and Stine. This exception allows them to sing the duet “You’re Nothing Without Me” when Stine’s revisions interfere with

Stone's reality. Stone is less than happy with the rewrites and accuses Stine of selling-out his artistic integrity by capitulating to the demands of the Hollywood system. This commentary on artistic integrity, the density of the plot, and the self-aware deployment of film noir visually, textually, and musically all call to mind the sophisticated intellectualism of Sondheim's best work; and yet once again *City of Angels* and its contemporary reviewers worked very hard to erase any debts to the state of musical theater in the 1980s.

This erasure is accomplished in the musical's final number, a reprise of "You're Nothing Without Me." In the final scene, the movie of Stine's bastardized screenplay is in the process of being filmed as Stine looks on helplessly with disgust at what Fidler has wrought. At this moment of despair, Stone reappears to Stine, persuading him to use his typewriter as a powerful agent controlling reality. Stine is finally able to write his own life correctly, stand up to Fidler on the movie set, and disassociate his words from the movie screen. But all is not quite triumphant, something, or someone, is clearly missing. Interrupting his duet with Stone, Stine shouts out, "A Hollywood ending!," types a few words on his typewriter, and his estranged wife Gabby magically appears on the stage to join both men in song (193). This ending, with the entire cast melodically joined together, is pure feel-good, determinedly old-fashioned, fantasy.

The irony of Stone's "A Hollywood ending" is that the ending has very little to do with Hollywood film noir or neo noir and instead has everything to do with the conventions of classical American musical theater. Film noirs are "about" disillusionment and people who drift through their own lives. The relationships between men and women in these films are often pathological and sado-masochistic. Communities fare even worse: they are fragmented, corrupted, or, at the most extreme, nonexistent with everyone living in isolation within the urban jungle. In contrast, classic stage musicals tend to be formed around the idea of community and overcoming difference, with romantic love and the coming together of the boy and the girl functioning as a synecdoche for the larger community (Donovan 480). For example, in *Oklahoma!*, Laurie is a rancher, Curley a cowboy. As they come together romantically, the ranchers and the cowboys also put aside their differences and learn to get along. The finale, with everyone on the stage singing together, drives this fundamental point home. As a musical, therefore, *City of Angels* works within a tradition that is typically quite

conservative and community oriented. This in part helps to explain its happy and conservative ending, with man and wife reunited and the Hollywood filmmaking community tunefully joined together, their squabbles forgotten. Contrast this with film noir.¹¹ How often is the protagonist welcomed and accepted by the community in the final frame?

French scholars Borde and Chaumeton perhaps most famously defined film noir in 1955 as being, “oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel” (2). Later scholars have generally followed this basic description, with Tuska poetically describing film noir as “a mood, a time, a play of shadows and light, and beyond all of these a visual consideration that in its narrative structures embodies a world view” (xvi). This world-view is weary, cynical, and perhaps even nihilistic; corruption exists everywhere. The formal aspects of film noir—disconcerting camera angles, expressive use of chiaroscuro, and realistic urban settings—all contribute to the moral world of these films. As a genre, classic film noir, as opposed to neo noir films such as *The Grifters*, was produced during a twenty-year period from around 1940 through 1960 (Dickos 4–5). Many of these films were based on the hard-boiled crime fiction stories of the Black Mask school of pulp fiction and include the works of Raymond Chandler, Mike Hammer, and James M. Cain; often these authors also wrote the film noir screenplays.

But what is popularly and nostalgically remembered about film noir are the private eyes with trenchcoats, femme fatales who push the envelop of sexuality and violence, highly stylized language, and plots complicated to the point of incomprehensibility. Neo noir films, which had their beginnings in the 1970s, helped fuel this popularized conception of classic film noir. Although neo noir maintains many of the characteristics of classic film noir—particularly its cynical attitude toward humanity—there are some key differences, such as color photography, that mark neo noir as separate. However, the most important of these differences is the reflexive nature of neo noir. Neo noir is hyperaware of its roots, its genre conventions, and the possibility for the parody or redeployment of these conventions. Neo noir explicitly comments on films and filmmaking in ways that classic film noir rarely, if ever, did (Spicer 135–49). *City of Angels*, although a stage musical, deploys film noir in precisely this self-aware, reflexive manner. It is a neo noir musical, and yet it and its audiences insisted that *City of Angels*

was straight film noir, belonging completely to a reconceived, nostalgic notion of a more “innocent” past that the 1940s, through its popular culture, represents. As a musical, *City of Angels* was read as a return to musical theater’s past, before Sondheim and the megamusical. But to succeed as a piece of musical theater, *City of Angels* simultaneously used and erased its usage of modern theatrical developments. It combined its nostalgic longings, implicitly arguing that because musical comedy and film noir flourished at the same time, both are classically American; and thus the two can unproblematically come together to represent a pristine, uncomplicated past.

Since *City of Angels* premiered musicals have become ever more hyperaware. These musicals—a small sample might include *Jelly’s Last Jam* (1992), *Urinetown: The Musical!* (2001), *Avenue Q* (2003), *The Producers* (2001), and *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006)—are much less concerned with hiding their debts to either megamusicals or deconstructed musicals than was *City of Angels*, because in many ways it was this musical which signaled the beginning of the “neo musical.” The descendents of *City of Angels* demonstrate competing desires to either save the musical (*The Drowsy Chaperone*) because it is still a viable art form, or kill it (*Urinetown*) because the form has outlived its cultural relevance. All of these “neo musicals” are therefore not characterized by particular formal elements associated with genre definitions. Instead, these musicals can be defined by the fear of irrelevance and death deeply embedded within their performances, the result of the preeminence of the “musical is dead” discourse. This is perhaps why one of the first of these neo-musicals, *City of Angels*, modeled itself after a film genre obsessed with the past, betrayal, and death.

NOTES

1. There are two indispensable resources for anyone beginning research in musical theater. The first is the various editions of Gerald Bordman’s comprehensive *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*. The second is the *Internet Broadway Database* Web site (<http://www.ibdb.com/>), which encompasses both musicals and straight plays.
2. There are many examples of theater historians who follow the declension or Golden Age theory of musical theater, the following is just a sample.
3. Ethan Mordden puts the nail in the coffin of the American musical at 1979, but he is deeply invested in the idea of decline: “by the end of the 1970s, the Golden Age is finished.” Ethan Mordden, *One More Kiss: The Broadway Musical in the 1970s* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): 1. He continues with this idea in his book *The Happiest Corpse I’ve Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-Five Years of the Broadway Musical*.

4. This familiarity can be achieved in different ways. For example, with *Cats*, the song "Memories" was heard on radios long before anyone ever saw the show. More recent shows like *Spamalot* or *Legally Blond: The Musical* capitalize on their origins as films. For more on how megamusicals market themselves, see Jessica Sternfeld's *The Megamusical*.
5. It cannot be said that the "concept musical" began with Stephen Sondheim. Composer Kurt Weill throughout his career and the "Living Newspapers" from the 1930s favored ideas over narrative. *Cabaret* (1966) is often characterized as a type of concept musical. Finally, it is difficult for a musical to succeed as "pure concept" with absolutely no story whatsoever.
6. Indeed, such is Lloyd Webber's association with the term megamusical that "*Les Misérables* was often mistaken for another of [Webber's] shows." Michael Walsh, *Andrew Lloyd Webber: His Life and Works* 219.
7. Ironically, the lyrics for *Forum* were written by Stephen Sondheim.
8. Zippel later went on to write the lyrics for Lloyd Webber's *The Woman in White* (2004) as well as for the Disney films *Hercules* (1997) and *Mulan* (1998) and "2006 Tony Awards Q&A: David Zippel."
9. Of course, neo noir deconstructs film noir in much the same manner as Sondheim deconstructs the musical.
10. A spaceship cleverly disguised as a discarded tire.
11. Carol Flinn notes that in film noir, the dual features of the female and the musical soundtrack promise the male subject an unattainable utopia. In contrast, as Richard Dyer notes, musicals as a genre work hard to fulfill the promise of utopic longings as represented by woman and music Carol Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 118–32; Richard Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*.

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