

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "IT WAS GOOD ENOUGH FOR GRANDMA,  
BUT IT AIN'T GOOD ENOUGH FOR US!"  
WOMEN AND THE NATION IN  
HAROLD ARLEN AND E.Y. HARBURG'S  
WARTIME MUSICAL *BLOOMER GIRL* (1944)

Sarah Jean England, Master of Arts, 2013

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The Broadway musical *Bloomer Girl* (1944) with score by composer Harold Arlen (1905–1986) and lyricist E.Y. Harburg (1896–1981) was the first book musical to follow in the footsteps of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* The obvious parallels between *Oklahoma!* and *Bloomer Girl* led critics and scholars to compare the musicals at the expense of overlooking the contributions the latter made to the genre. This thesis moves *Bloomer Girl* out from the shadow cast by *Oklahoma!* and situates it within a richer historical context. It begins with a brief history of *Bloomer Girl*. It then focuses specifically on both the dramatic and musical representation of women in the work. Using a comparative methodology, this study examines how the women in *Bloomer Girl* deviate from the model for the Golden Age musical to create a controversial political commentary about the United States in the World War II era.

“IT WAS GOOD ENOUGH FOR GRANDMA, BUT IT AIN’T GOOD ENOUGH FOR  
US!” WOMEN AND THE NATION IN HAROLD ARLEN AND E.Y. HARBURG’S  
*BLOOMER GIRL* (1944)

By

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## **Introduction**

On Thursday October 5, 1944 at the Sam S. Schubert Theater, located at 225 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, women in hoopskirts huddled together backstage in preparation for the first act finale of the newest show to come to Broadway. A trumpet fanfare sounded the final call for places, and, cramped and crowded in their crinoline cages, they toppled over one another, making their way to the wings. Moments later the red-velvet curtain lifted, revealing the sidewalks and storefronts of a wholesome American town. The lights rested on a grand pavilion where townspeople gossiped excitedly about the upcoming fashion show featuring the latest designs from the fictional hoopskirt manufacturer, Horace Applegate. The show commenced amidst chittering and chattering as the women paraded on stage, flaunting their frills and flounces. Each modeled a hoopskirt more enormous than the next, reaching the height of hilarity. Finally there came the announcement for the debut of the “Superhoop of 1861,” worn by none other than Horace Applegate’s daughter, Evalina. The young lady walked center stage, turned to pose for the audience, and dropped her hoopskirt, standing exposed in her bloomers in a profound statement about social equality (see figure 1). The study that follows seeks to examine the meaning of this statement within the context of the wartime 1940s.





Figure 1: Celeste Holm as Evalina Applegate in *Bloomer Girl* at the Schubert Theater in New York, 1944.<sup>1</sup>

The Broadway musical *Bloomer Girl* (1944) with score by composer Harold Arlen (1905–1986) and lyricist E.Y. Harburg (1896–1981) was the first book musical to follow in the footsteps of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s landmark production *Oklahoma!* (1943). Like *Oklahoma!* the show brought together the diverse elements of music, drama, and dance in the service of an integrated whole. When viewed as the successor to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*, *Bloomer Girl* appears to owe a substantial debt to its venerable predecessor. In addition to the integrated format and the Americana-inspired theme, the two shows shared a personnel roster that included stars Celeste Holm and Joan McCracken, choreographer Agnes de Mille, designers Lemuel Ayers and Miles White, and orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett.

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<sup>1</sup> Original photograph printed in “Bloomer Girl,” *Life Magazine* (November 6, 1944), 68.

The obvious parallels between *Oklahoma!* and *Bloomer Girl* led theater critics of the period to compare the musicals at the expense of overlooking the contributions the latter made to the genre; one critic labeled it simply a “musical bargain.”<sup>2</sup> *The New York Post*’s Willela Waldorf famously raged:

The fabulous success of *Oklahoma!* was bound to have its effect on the Broadway musical market. Let’s face it. We are in for several seasons of intensely old-fashioned quaintness, most of it with choreography by Agnes de Mille. *Bloomer Girl*, the first of what will surely be a long series of elaborately cute period pieces, arrived last night.<sup>3</sup>

More vehement still, Burton Rascoe seethed:

If you go there not expecting too much, you will come away satisfied, but if you go there expecting another *Oklahoma!* (as it has been heralded to be) you will come away, I am afraid, feeling that you have been badly misled. *Bloomer Girl* is not even a second *Song of Norway*. It is, on the whole, probably the least entertaining musical in town.<sup>4</sup>

Only Robert Coleman of *The Mirror* recognized the unique qualities of the new musical.

The peripatetic scouts were wrong on one score, though. They said it was another *Oklahoma*. It isn’t. It’s just *Bloomer Girl*. A bright, gay, original, enjoyable, every-minute musical. What they probably meant, anyway, by the ‘Oklahoma’ comparison was: *Bloomer Girl*, like its predecessor, has a viewpoint, spurns musical comedy clichés, is adult.<sup>5</sup>

The relegation of *Bloomer Girl* to the status of an insignificant footnote in the history of the American musical has been a great loss for students and scholars of musical theater. Written during World War II and the two wartime demographic shifts—the move

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Winchell, “Notes Of An Innocent Bystander,” *Morning Journal* (January 16, 1945).

<sup>3</sup> Willela Waldorf, *The New York Post* (October 6, 1944).

<sup>4</sup> Burton Rascoe, “*Bloomer Girl* Won’t Edge Out *Oklahoma!*,” *New York World Telegraph* (October 6, 1944).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Coleman, “Gay *Bloomer Girl* Is A Smash Hit,” *The Mirror* (October 6, 1944).

of southern blacks north and west into the industrial workforce, and the move of women out of the private sphere and into the public—the musical grapples with the issues of race and gender. The representation of gender is particularly interesting as the female characters challenge the accepted character paradigm for the Golden Age musical in a surprisingly critical political commentary about the United States, a political commentary very different from that typically found in musicals of the 1940s.

This thesis moves *Bloomer Girl* out from the shadow cast by *Oklahoma!* and situates it within an historical context saturated with issues of race and gender. Chapter one details the musical's origins and early performance history, including the original Broadway stage production of 1944, its screen adaptation for the Producers' Showcase series in 1956, and its subsequent revivals at Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Connecticut in 1971 and 1981 respectively. Chapter two tells the history of women's fashion in the nineteenth century, as it forms the central focus of the musical. Chapter three includes an analysis of the female character types in the musical, and how they deviate from traditional understandings of femininity as they were depicted on stage in the Golden Age. Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the score functions as an audible metaphor for the breakdown of gender boundaries. Chapter four addresses the political intertext between the musical and the Second World War. By looking at each of these issues, it is possible to understand *Bloomer Girl* as Arlen and Harburg's unique reaction to the dynamic social politics of the mid-1940s. Finally, it is possible to see the revivals of *Bloomer Girl* as a potential model for future research about the shifting semiotic meaning of musicals in American culture.

## Chapter 1: Origins and Performance History

The origin of *Bloomer Girl* can be traced to an unpublished play written by Dan and Lilith James, a young couple active in Hollywood's Communist Party.<sup>1</sup> According to a 1984 article published in the *New York Review of Books*, the idea for *Bloomer Girl* first occurred to Lilith James while she was attending a Communist Party workshop on women's rights. There, inspired by the discovery of an antique costume, she resolved to create a play drawing on "the perversities of Fashion to dramatize the early struggles of the Women's Rights movement."<sup>2</sup> The perversity in question, the hoopskirt, typified many of the innovations in women's fashion realized at the turn of the nineteenth century that enhanced a woman's physical appearance at the expense of her comfort and wellbeing. It symbolized women's subordinate position and its eventual rejection became a rallying cry for the Suffragettes who encouraged members to "wear the pants" as a physical representation of social equality. These pants, named for Amelia "Dolly" Jenks Bloomer (1818–1894), were known fondly as "bloomers" and those who wore them, as "bloomer girls."

In a clever manipulation of history, Lilith James developed the scenario for a new drama based on the fictional niece of Dolly Bloomer and her dual crusade for women's rights and the abolition of slavery during the 1860s. Daniel James, her husband, then joined her in completing an outline or draft of their play, which they brought to E.Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen in whose capable hands it was transformed into a musical

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel James was also known by the pseudonym Danny Santiago. See John Gregory Dunne, "The Secret of Danny Santiago," *The New York Review of Books*, August 16, 1984, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/aug16/the-secret-of-danny-santiago/> (accessed January 13, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

comedy fit for the Broadway stage. Unpacking the identities behind these creative personalities is the necessary first step in situating *Boomer Girl* within a rich social, cultural, and historical context.

The names Harburg and Arlen are scarcely remembered today, even amongst musicologists, though their music—from “It’s Only a Paper Moon” to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”—provided the soundtrack for much of American life during the period known as the Golden Age of Song (ca. 1940–1960). They were part of a generation of Jewish-American songwriters that included such names as Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, George and Ira Gershwin, Dorothy Fields, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Burton Lane, Alan Jay Lerner, Frank Loesser, Frederick Loewe, Harold Rome, and Stephen Sondheim, amongst others. These composers and their unique styles, inspired by the sounds of the synagogue and Yiddish theater, dominated Tin Pan Alley, the geographical epicenter of popular music in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The lives of E.Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen are, in many ways, typical of American songwriters working during the Golden Age. As Jewish-Americans, however, their lives are also uniquely reflective of the immigrant experience. This experience, coming of age in a new world that was not always kind to those perceived as “different,” prepared both Harburg and Arlen to write the politically conscious *Bloomer Girl*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The biographical data presented here is taken primarily from the following sources: Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, with the assistance of Arthur Perlman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993); Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Yip Harburg: Legendary Lyricist and Human Rights Activist* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2012); Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Northeastern University Press, 1996); and Max Wilk, *They’re Playing Our Song: From*

E.Y. (Yip) Harburg (1896–1981) and Harold Arlen (1905–1986)

E.Y. Harburg (Isidore Hochberg), known fondly as “Yip,” was born on April 8, 1896 in New York’s Lower East Side, the tenth and third surviving child of Russian immigrant parents Lewis Hochberg and Mary (née Ricing) Hochberg.<sup>4</sup> In a later interview, Harburg described coming of age during the “new immigration,” the influx of immigrants from southern Europe and Russia that brought many songwriters of his generation to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I think I more or less repeat the history of most people who came to America. My father and mother were Russian refugees. They landed in New York with a lot of other immigrants, and were sort of lost in the vast new society, couldn’t talk the language, and were rather frightened and insecure. When I came along and learned to talk English they were stunned. They never learned for the forty years that they were here. So I became a hero immediately. It made you feel important, and it also made you feel insecure, because these people were so insecure that here they were depending on you to help them out, to help them get along, and they let you know it at a very early age. Not that they meant to. They were very lovable and very sweet and loving, and I got a lot of affection, especially from my father. But he always gave me the feeling that it was I who had to support him. Finally, later on, it was I who had to go out in this new land that was mine and not his.<sup>5</sup>

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*Jerome Kern to Stephen Sondheim—The Stories Behind The Words and Music of Two Generations* (Kingsport, Tennessee: Kingsport Press, 1973). For more about the lives of Harburg and Arlen see their entries in the *ASCAP Biographical Dictionary* and the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, or visit their webpages at the Harburg Foundation, <http://www.yipharburg.com/foundation.html> and The Official Harold Arlen Website, <http://www.haroldarlen.com>.

<sup>4</sup> The name E.Y. (Yip) Harburg has long been a source of confusion for scholars. The nickname Yip stems from *yipsl*, the Yiddish term for squirrel, and referred to Harburg’s flighty nature as a young boy. For more on the evolution of his name see Alonso, *Yip Harburg: Legendary Lyricist and Human Rights Activist*, 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Yip Harburg, quoted in *ibid.*, 4.

Harburg's father was what he referred to as a *Schneider*, someone who is always looking for work but never finds it, and who has a lot of children whom he expects to support him in old age:

As you can see, that left a big mark on me. There was no authority, there was no big father image, really. There was love, but there was no security. So there was a double conflict all the time—having to go out and make a living in society, which I was not equipped to do at the time, being six or seven; and at the same time, not wanting to let them down, and their impression of me.<sup>6</sup>

Harburg worked many jobs growing up, first making women's clothing in a sweatshop, then putting pickles in jars at a small factory, and later selling newspapers and lighting street lamps along the docks of the East River. Despite the harsh realities of his childhood, Harburg found time to enjoy the opportunities life in the city afforded, including the theatrical productions. Harburg recounted how on Saturday afternoons he and his father would sneak into the theater when they were supposed to be attending service at the synagogue.

The house of God never had much appeal for me. Anyhow, I found a substitute—the theater. Poor as we were, on many a Saturday, after services, my father packed me up and told my mother we were going to the *schul* to hear a *magid*. But somehow, instead of getting to the *magid* we always arrived at the theater. Everything in the Yiddish theater set me afire. The funny plays had me guffawing; they were broad and boisterous. And the tragedies were devastating. The Yiddish theater was my first break into the entertainment world, and it was a powerful influence. Jews are born dramatists, and I think born humorists, too. Yiddish has more onomatopoeic, satiric, and metaphoric nuances ready-made for comedy—more than any other language I know of. Jewish humor was the basis for so much great vaudeville, my next passion.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.

Harburg spent countless hours at vaudeville houses watching the great stars of the genre, celebrities like Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Willie Howard, Ed Wynn, and Bert Lahr. He would later collaborate with many of these figures.

As a young boy Harburg pursued his passion for the theater at local settlement houses, which were reform institutions located in the immigrant neighborhoods of large industrial cities. These workers provided public aid and services such as day care nurseries and kindergartens, small playgrounds, English classes, and group activities for those interested in arts and crafts, music, and drama. All of this was done in an effort to help community members break the cycle of poverty.

Harburg was also fortunate to have excellent teachers who nurtured and encouraged what they recognized as his natural aptitude for writing. He spent many cold winter afternoons studying books in the Tompkins Square Library, particularly the writings of O’Henry and W.S. Gilbert, and he went on to attend New York’s prestigious Townsend Harris High School where he worked on the student newspaper alongside classmate and lifelong friend Ira Gershwin. Both later attended the City College of New York where Harburg experimented with light verse. After leaving City College, Harburg did not pursue poetry. As he later explained:

That was work for a dilettante—nobody made a living at that. That’s for fun, that’s a sideline, you don’t earn money that way, I used to think. Money is made by the sweat of your brow. That is the old Puritan ethic that we’re brought up with. You’ve got to do something real nasty, dirty, get calluses—you don’t just sit and write. Because you couldn’t live on \$10 checks for poetry, could you?<sup>8</sup>

Harburg accepted a job offer from a wealthy alumnus to work for Swift and Company in South America, a job that boasted the dual benefits of substantial pay to

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<sup>8</sup> Yip Harburg, quoted in Wilk, *They’re Playing Our Song*, 220.



support his family and the ability to avoid involvement in World War I, a conflict which he likely opposed as a committed social liberal, though he was never outspoken about the subject. After the war ended, Harburg returned to New York, married and had two children. He became co-owner of the Consolidated Electrical Appliance Company, and led what by all accounts seemed an ordinary American life. Then, following the Stock Market Crash of 1929, Harburg's life changed dramatically when his business went under leaving him thousands of dollars in debt. It was at this time that Harburg turned his attention to songwriting: "The capitalists saved me in 1929, just as we were worth, oh, about a quarter of a million dollars. Bang! The whole thing blew up. I was left with a pencil, and finally had to write for a living. What was the Depression for most people was for me as lifesaver!"<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1930s, encouraged by his friend Ira Gershwin, Harburg began writing for multiple Broadway revues and musicals, including the famous *Earl Carrol's Sketchbook*, *Earl Carrol's Vanities*, and *The Garrick Gaities*. In the midst of the Great Depression, he contributed material to J. McEnvoy's *New Americana* (1932), for which he penned the socially significant song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime." The success of this song set Harburg on the path that would lead him directly to Harold Arlen.

The American composer Harold Arlen (Hyman Arluck) was born on February 15, 1905 to the Russian immigrants Samuel and Celia (née Orlin) Arluck. His birth was shrouded in grief as his twin brother passed away the following day, leaving his parents

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 220.

devastated. Seven years later, the Arlucks welcomed their second and last son, Julius. The family resided in a modest duplex in Buffalo, New York.

The head of the family Samuel Arluck was a cantor at the Pine Street Synagogue, and it was here at the age of seven that young Harold began his musical education singing in his father's choir. Recognizing their son's budding musical talents, the Arluck family purchased a piano and enrolled their son in private lessons with the neighborhood music teacher. In an interview with Max Wilk, Harold Arlen reflected on his early musical upbringing: "My father gave me piano lessons so I would be a teacher and not have to work on *shabbas*. Mine was a marvelous family—all kinds of love. But that was the first reason I went to the piano. I found other reasons soon enough, needless to say!"<sup>10</sup> Indeed, like most young piano students, Harold did not like to practice. Though he found the classical pieces that he studied enjoyable, he was much more interested in modern music and so began collecting blues and jazz records. He studied these records carefully, much more carefully than his schoolbooks. At the age of sixteen, despite the protestations of his family he announced that he was dropping out of high school in order to pursue a musical career.

In the early 1920s, Arlen found work as a pianist, alternatively gigging with local bands and playing in movie houses and theaters throughout the city. His experiences eventually led to the formation of his own band, The Snappy Trio. This group quickly expanded, first into a quartet known as the Se-Mor Jazz Band and then into a five-man band called the Southbound Shufflers. Arlen next joined the Yankee Six, a local dance band popular on the collegiate circuit. He went on tour with the band, which had by then

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Arlen, quoted in *ibid.*, 150.

grown to an eleven-member ensemble known as The Buffalodians. The Buffalodians began their tour in Cleveland and then traveled east to Pittsburgh, finally landing in New York City.

In New York, Arlen worked mostly as a pianist and singer in theater pit orchestras and dance bands, yet it was also during this time that he began to compose. “It was a very strange pattern, when I look back,” Arlen later mused, “you have to believe me, I never had *any* notion of being a composer. As a kid, I loved to sing. I wanted to be a singer. Never dreamed of songwriting. I have to be a fatalist and say somebody, something, moved me on the chessboard. I was taken by the neck and put here, and put there, and put there—and then things happened to me. Because listen to how it all worked out for me.”<sup>11</sup>

Harold Arlen was working with the Arnold Johnson Orchestra when the group was hired to appear on Broadway for a six-month run of a revue titled *The Great White Scandals* for which Arlen arranged several tunes. During intermission one night, he sang the reprise for one of the hit songs from the show, “I’m on the Crest of a Wave.” The composer Vincent Youmans, who was in attendance, heard him and hired him to sing in a new musical he was writing, *The Great Day*. Fletcher Henderson, who was doing arrangements for Youman’s show, also asked Arlen to help with the arrangements for the pit orchestra. One day during summer rehearsals, Henderson fell ill and Arlen agreed to play for the performers. During the brief pauses between numbers, he began to toy with a melody from the show. Composer Will Marion Cook heard Harold playing and suggested that he develop the fragment into an original song. Composer Harry Warren also liked the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

idea and introduced Arlen to the lyricist Ted Koehler. Together, the pair wrote the commercial success “Get Happy,” which was later interpolated into Ruth Selwyn’s *9:15 Revue*. Following the success of “Get Happy,” the two men went on to write several memorable songs for a series of revues at Harlem’s Cotton Club, including “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” and “Stormy Weather.”

During his years at the Cotton Club, Arlen was also busy writing for Broadway musicals and revues. In 1932, while working on the score for a revue titled *New Americana* he met the future *Bloomer Girl* librettist, E.Y. (Yip) Harburg. Together the pair wrote “Satan’s Lil’ Lamb,” a song that would prove to be the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration. The following year, their song “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” written in association with Billy Rose, became an instant hit. In 1934 alongside Ira Gershwin, they embarked on their biggest venture yet, a Broadway revue cleverly titled *Life Begins at 8:40*, the average curtain time for a show, after which they left for Hollywood to write for the film industry.

Following this collaboration, the pair left for Hollywood to write for the film industry. There, they signed first to Samuel Goldwyn to write songs for the film *Strike Me Pink* starring Eddie Cantor and Ethel Merman. Once work on *Strike Me Pink* was completed they signed a yearlong contract with Warner Brothers, for whom they wrote three musicals: *Stage Struck*, *The Singing Kid*, and *The Gold Diggers of 1937*, none of which were particularly successful. Around this same time Harburg and Arlen also wrote one of their most memorable songs, “When the World Was Young,” which was later performed by Frank Sinatra on his album *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*.

The pair briefly returned to New York at the end of 1937, where they wrote “Song of the Woodman” for a Broadway revue called the *Show Is On*. They also wrote the score for a new show produced by the Shubert brothers called *Hooray for What*, but they returned to Hollywood soon after to write the score for a film that would prove to be the pinnacle of both their careers. In 1938, Harburg and Arlen were signed by Metro Goldwyn Mayer (M-G-M) to write the score for *The Wizard of Oz*, starring Judy Garland. It was one of the first films to integrate the songs within the plot structure, a credit to Harburg’s artistic vision. The score included such memorable numbers as “Over the Rainbow,” for which Harburg and Arlen won an Academy Award. Harburg and Arlen also collaborated on one final film for M-G-M, the Marx Brothers’ *At the Circus*.

Following their success in Hollywood, Harburg and Arlen parted ways for several years. Harburg continued to write mostly for films while Arlen tried his hand at classical music. In 1940, Arlen collaborated with Ted Koehler on the score for a set of vernacular art songs titled *The American Negro Suite*. He also wrote the *American Minuet*, a patriotic orchestral composition commissioned for Meredith Wilson’s radio program, “Good News Hour.” He then gravitated back towards the film studio. In 1941 Arlen signed a contract with Warner Brothers where he worked with Johnny Mercer on the score for the film, *Hot Nocturne*, for which he composed the hit song “Blues in the Night.” The United States’ entry into World War II the following year had a profound impact on Arlen’s career, and he embarked on a series of service films. In 1942, Arlen and Mercer moved to Paramount pictures where they wrote the score for *Star Spangled Rhythm*, featuring “That Old Black Magic” and “Hit the Road to Dreamland.” The pair then signed with RKO studios in 1943 to write the score for *The Sky’s the Limit*. In 1944

they returned to Paramount for *Here Come the Waves*, featuring the uplifting “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive.” Arlen also rekindled his relationship with Harburg with whom he wrote two socially significant works for the stage and screen. In 1943, Harburg and Arlen contributed songs to the M-G-M all-black film musical *Cabin in the Sky*. The following year, the pair wrote the score for the Broadway show, *Bloomer Girl*.

In the years after *Bloomer Girl*, both Harburg and Arlen remained active. Harburg was placed on the Hollywood blacklist as the Red Scare swept the nation. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) accused him of harboring pro-Soviet sympathies, citing the lyrics for his songs “And Russia is Her Name” and “Happiness is a Thing Called Joe” (a presumed allusion to Joseph Stalin). He was forbidden from working in Hollywood, but he continued to write for Broadway, contributing to such diverse works as *Finian’s Rainbow* (1947), *Falhooley* (1951), *The Happiest Girl in the World* (1961), and *Darling of the Day* (1968).

Unscathed by the politics of the Cold War Era, Arlen wrote primarily for film. His film credits from these years include: *Casbah*, *Blue Heaven*, *Pretty Girl*, *Down Among the Sheltering Palms*, *Mr. Imperium*, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, *A Star is Born*, and *The Country Girl*. Arlen also wrote the score for two Broadway musicals, including: *House of Flowers* (1954), written alongside the noted American author Truman Capote, and *Saratoga* (1958). Harburg and Arlen collaborated on three final projects for stage and screen: the Broadway musical *Jamaica* (1957), the animated-film *Gay Purr-ee* (1962), and Judy Garland’s final film *I Could Go On Singing* (1963). Clearly, neither Harburg nor Arlen ever lost their zeal for writing.

E.Y. Harburg died on March 5, 1981 at the age of 84 in Los Angeles, California when he suffered a massive heart attack while driving en route to a story conference for a new film based on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. He is remembered today not only as a brilliant lyricist, but also as a committed social activist, "the social conscience of Broadway." His remarkable ability to "guild the philosophic pill" with clever witticisms and turns of phrase established him as one of the most unique figures of twentieth-century American musical theater.

Harold Arlen died on April 23, 1986 at the age of 81. Despite his many contributions to the Great American Songbook the name Harold Arlen is rarely uttered today, perhaps the result of the composer's own remarkable humility. As Arlen once said, "Memorable songs? How do you know? A song becomes memorable *despite* its author. Oh sure, you know if what you've written is good, or melodic, or well made, or all three. But nobody can sit down to write a hit. Think about how accidental it all was! I became a songwriter by accident!"<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Harold Arlen's melodies live on in the cultural consciousness of the American people. As Irving Berlin stated in the 1986 ASCAP Tribute to Harold Arlen, "Harold Arlen wasn't as well known as some of us, but he was a better songwriter than most of us, and he will be missed by all of us."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>13</sup> Irving Berlin, quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, xiii.

## Production Timeline

The two principal sources for the production timeline of *Bloomer Girl* are Edward Jablonski's *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, and Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg's *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*. These sources present conflicting timelines, the inconsistencies of which are difficult to resolve due to a lack of primary source materials. In the following section, I will juxtapose the two proposed timelines side-by-side, drawing attention to the strengths and weaknesses of each, in an attempt to provide the most comprehensive history of the musical to date.

By far the most detailed account of *Bloomer Girl*'s production timeline can be found in Edward Jablonski's biography of the composer. Jablonski claims that Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg were busy at work in Hollywood in early 1944 when Arlen's agent, Nat Goldstone, came across the script for a new play by the little-known husband and wife writing team, Dan and Lilith James.<sup>14</sup> After reading the script, Goldstone immediately sensed that it would make a fine subject for a period musical and he brought the script to the composer, who saw it as a natural for the political Harburg. As Harburg later remembered:

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<sup>14</sup> Jablonski contradicts his own timeline for *Bloomer Girl*; he claims that Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg were seriously considering undertaking the project when race riots erupted in Detroit in June 1943. Jablonski also suggests that Arlen had just finished the score for *Here Come the Waves* when he began work on the score for *Bloomer Girl*. This somewhat contradicts his claim that Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer were still hard at work on the score for *Here Come the Waves* in early 1944. It is thus highly possible if not probable that Harold Arlen worked contemporaneously on the scores for *Here Come the Waves* and *Bloomer Girl*. See Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 187; 166–67.



I was working for Metro, he [Harold] was working for Paramount at that time. We were split up. And the James, she was a costume designer and she'd come across a costume, the bloomer, and when she went back into research she found that the bloomer was a creation of a woman named Dolly Bloomer who was [part of the] first women's rights movement; she was powerful and a contemporary of Susan B. Anthony and a group of wonderful people who decided that the way to release women [was through dress reform]. The symbol was the hoop skirt they were wearing and the hoop skirt was an abominable torture chamber, really, for women. Most of them weighed fifty, seventy-five pounds. You know, they had all sorts of whalebone and everything else, and for the sake of Puritanism or whatever style, they were all victims of that thing. And she thought, and very wisely so, she was ahead of Madison Avenue, Dolly Bloomer, in knowing that if she just talked women's rights to women, it'd be in one ear, out the other. But, if she said, "Get rid of those heavy hoopskirts. Wear bloomers like men. Let's get pants. Let's be their equal." That they understood, their symbol, see? And through the bloomer she started the women's rights movement for the vote, for suffrage, for freedom to go to college, for freedom to be professionals and anything they wanted –doctors, lawyers. That was the first movement. And that's all they [Lilith and Daniel James had]. Really that and some outline of a bad story.<sup>15</sup>

According to Jablonski, Arlen recalled that Harburg was initially hesitant and refused for six months to sign on to the project. Apparently, Harburg's objections extended beyond the practical limitations of time to purely aesthetic considerations. In Harburg's opinion, the plot echoed themes all too familiar from Rodgers and Hammerstein's recent hit *Oklahoma!* Paradoxically perhaps, he also felt, as a "costumer," that the play had more potential as a light-hearted operetta than a book musical, a genre in which he was eager to make his mark following Rodgers and Hammerstein's groundbreaking success. Despite Harburg's many objections, Arlen refused to give up on the project. He enlisted the help of Harburg's second wife, Eddie Harburg (the former Mrs. Jay Gorney who married Harburg in 1942), and she began to wear her husband

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<sup>15</sup> Yip Harburg, quoted in Alonso, *Yip Harburg: Legendary Lyricist and Human Rights Activist*, 120.

down with a winning combination of charm and wit. Together, the pair prevailed, and Harburg agreed to do the show.<sup>16</sup>

Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg refute this account in *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*. The authors begin the production timeline for *Bloomer Girl* at least six months earlier than Jablonski, citing correspondence between Harburg and the playwright George Kaufmann dated July 1943:

Harold and I have been intrigued by an idea for a musical which has the scope and quality we talked about in our last correspondence. It has the freshness of *Life with Father* and the brashness of *Of Thee I Sing*. Also, it is away from *Oklahoma!*, which has spurred a new race of men all megalomaniacally bent on duplicating [the] same.<sup>17</sup>

The enthusiastic nature of this correspondence further casts doubt on whether or not Harburg resisted the project at all. Indeed, even if Jablonski's timeline is accepted, and work on the score for *Bloomer Girl* began in early 1944, after which the show entered summer rehearsals, Harburg could not possibly have resisted for six months and also completed work on the show's libretto.

Despite the contradictions between the two sources, it is clear that by early 1944, Harburg and Arlen had begun work on *Bloomer Girl*. As the first order of business, Harburg brought in the screenwriters Sig Herzig (1897–1985) and Fred Saily (1907–1982) to adapt the play for the stage.

I said, 'Look, we'll give you some percentage of this. Let us take the idea and work it up.' And we got Fred Saily, my collaborator, Sig Herzig, myself, we worked up the plot of the thing. They went ahead with the dialogue. Fred Saily [and Sig Herzig] I mean. And I went ahead with the lyrics and music, and Harold...Harold was intrigued with the idea. Harold was never concerned with

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<sup>16</sup> Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 181–183.

<sup>17</sup> Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, 183.

the sociological background of a thing. He kind of left that up to me and he sort of laughed that off. He thought that was an idiosyncrasy of mine, you know. But he was intrigued with the period, with the skirts, with the charm of the music of the time.<sup>18</sup>

Harburg's choice was logical, if not immediately obvious. The Broadway veteran Sig Herzig had begun his career writing the screenplays for several musical revues including *The Vanderbilt Revue* (1930), *Shoot the Works* (1931), *Ballyhoo of 1932*, and *Vickie* (1942). He later gained experience in Hollywood, where he created the plot lines for more than three-dozen silent films in addition to scripts for the sound films *Artists and Models* (1937), *On Your Toes* (1939), *Sunny* (1941), *I Dood It* (1943), *Brewster's Millions* (1945), *London Town* (1946), and *Three on a Spree* (1961). The newcomer Fred Saily had never worked on Broadway, though he later went on to write the script for such notable productions as *Finian's Rainbow* (1947), *Falhooley* (1951), *Jamaica* (1957), and *The Happiest Girl in the World* (1961). At the time of *Bloomer Girl's* production, his experience centered primarily in Hollywood where he had worked alongside Herzig on the screenplays for *I Dood It* (1943) and *Meet the People* (1943). Saily and Harburg were part of the same radical Hollywood circle, which led to a chance encounter at a party where the two discovered they shared similar political views, making them an ideal match for a project like *Bloomer Girl*.<sup>19</sup>

Conflicting accounts surrounding the screenwriters' initial involvement highlight the stormy dynamic that would come to characterize the show's production. According to Edward Jablonski's biography of Arlen: "*Yip agreed to do the show. But as he often did,*

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<sup>18</sup> Alonso, *Yip Harburg: Legendary Lyricist and Human Rights Activist*, 120.

<sup>19</sup> See the entries for Sig Herzig and Fred Saily in the Internet Broadway Database and the Internet Movie Database. See also Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 182.

*he had the final word.* He brought in screenwriters who had written *Meet the People* for him, the veteran Sig Herzig and newcomer Fred Saily. Harburg joined them in converting the James's play into a musical they called *Bloomer Girl*.<sup>20</sup> This account is refuted by Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg in their biography of Yip Harburg, wherein they write: “*By mutual consent, Yip called in Fred Saily and Sig Herzig, the two screenwriters whom he had employed on the MGM film Meet the People, and reshaped with them a story that they then put in book form.*”<sup>21</sup>

### Synopsis

*Bloomer Girl* is set in the Yankee town of Cicero Falls, a fictionalized representation of the real New York town, Seneca Falls, during the spring of 1861, a time when “hoopskirts were wide, minds narrow, and whiskers did prodigiously abound.”<sup>22</sup> The plot concerns Evalina Applegate, the youngest and only unmarried daughter of the successful hoopskirt manufacturer Horace Applegate, and also by an ironic twist of fate, the niece of suffragette Dolly Bloomer, the originator of the competing Bloomer pant. Much to her father's chagrin, Evalina shares her Aunt Dolly's social and political beliefs and becomes a “bloomer girl,” campaigning for women's rights and emancipation. Horace decides that the only cure for Evalina's rebellious nature is marriage to an appropriate suitor. He introduces Evalina to Jeff Lightfoot Calhoun, a young hoopskirt

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<sup>20</sup> Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 182 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, 186 (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> *Bloomer Girl*, undated script (Yip Harburg Collection, New York Public Library), n.p.

salesman in Kentucky, in the hopes of arranging a marriage complete with the added advantage of expanding his business to the south. At first, Evalina is skeptical of Jeff, believing him to have the same outlook as her father, so she decides to test him. She asks him to help hide a trunk containing a runaway slave, whom she is helping escape through the Underground Railroad. He complies. When Jeff later opens the trunk, he is astonished to find his family slave, Pompey. After Pompey justifies his need for freedom, Jeff allows Pompey to escape. Soon, Jeff's brother Hamilton, the real business power in the south, discovers the deception and reproaches Jeff for giving away family property. Conflicted, Jeff orders Pompey arrested, causing a rift with Evalina. Meanwhile, Evalina participates in a fashion show in which the latest designs from Applegate Hoopskirts are put on display for buyers. At the critical moment when she is to reveal the final design, Evalina drops her hoopskirt, defiantly revealing a pair of bloomers, embarrassing Jeff and pushing him yet further away.

In Act II, Aunt Dolly and the bloomer girls parade to announce their upcoming production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. At a breaking point with the political antics of the bloomer girls, Horace has the women arrested. Evalina insists on being jailed with her Aunt Dolly and the bloomer girls. In jail, the women meet Pompey and two other apprehended runaway slaves. Eventually Jeff, won over by the cause of emancipation, buys Pompey's freedom, and the governor, an old flame of Dolly's, pardons the women. The climax of the story is reached when the bloomer girls are allowed to put on a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, starring Pompey in the lead role. Shortly thereafter, Fort Sumter is fired upon, signaling the start of the Civil War. As violent conflict between the north and south looms in the distance, Evalina and Jeff's recently rekindled

romance is called into question. Happily, Kentucky decides to remain in the Union and Evalina and Jeff can look forward to a future together. The Applegate factory, under the direction of President Abraham Lincoln, is turned over to the manufacture of bloomers, which become a key component of the military uniform for the Zouave regiments of the American Civil War.<sup>23</sup> In the final moments, Jeff appears alongside Evalina's brothers-in-law, dressed for a battle in bloomers. As the men leave for the warfront, the women are left to wait on the homefront, a scene depicted by a Civil War ballet. The musical ends happily as (most, but notably not all) the men return victorious from war.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Zouave" refers to the title of the infantry regiments in the French Army who served in the French colonies of northern Africa beginning in 1830. The Zouave military uniform included short, cropped, open-fronted jackets, baggy trouser pants, sashes, and oriental headwear. During the American Civil War, soldiers on both sides of the conflict adopted the name and the dress of the French Zouave regiments. See "Zouaves" in the *New International Encyclopedia* (accessed April 26, 2013). [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_New\\_International\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia/Zouaves](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_New_International_Encyclop%C3%A6dia/Zouaves).

<sup>24</sup> In *Morris v. Wilson*, playwright Ruth Morris alleged that Dan James had poached the scenario for "Evalina" (1943) from her play, "The Lowells Talk Only To God." Morris acknowledged that she had no direct evidence to support her claim, but provided circumstantial evidence based on their mutual involvement with the Erwin Piscator Theater Group in New York City. Morris maintained that in August 1942, after her play "The Lowells" had been rejected for production, she left a copy of the script with an unnamed woman on the Group staff who promised that she would try to have the play produced at Smith College or some other women's college. In December of 1942, the Group produced a play by Dan James. According to Morris, it was common practice for playwrights to hang around studios or theaters while their plays were in rehearsal. She charged that while hanging around the studio Dan James must have picked up a copy of her play "The Lowells." Morris contended that Fred Saily and Yip Harburg then copied her work scene-by-scene, sequence-by-sequence, and line-by-line. The district judge dismissed the case for lack of evidence. See *Morris v. Wilson*, 189 F. Supp. 565 (S.D. NY, 1960), [http://www.leagle.com/xmlResult.aspx?page=1&xmlDoc=1960754189FSupp565\\_1655.xml&docbase=CSLWAR1-1950-1985&SizeDisp=7](http://www.leagle.com/xmlResult.aspx?page=1&xmlDoc=1960754189FSupp565_1655.xml&docbase=CSLWAR1-1950-1985&SizeDisp=7) (accessed January 13, 2013).

The script completed, Harburg and his collaborators presented it to the James, who were disappointed with the working out of their idea. In a 1984 article published in the *New York Review of Books*, Daniel James explained that he and his wife had been hoping their script would be treated as a lighthearted musical comedy that would take a lighthearted and paradoxical look at history, and not a serious drama that would call into question contemporary politics:

It [the play] failed to satisfy our lyricist, E.Y. Harburg, and Harold Arlen, the composer. It also failed to satisfy us. An impasse developed at which point all agreed to call in the team of Sig Herzig and Fred Saidy who were experienced writers in the field of musical comedy. They reworked the material to the satisfaction of everyone but Lilith and myself, who had hoped to invade Gilbert & Sullivan territory, with what we thought was a light-hearted and paradoxical look at history. What I took for a personal artistic failure for which I blamed first of all myself, went on to become a lavish entertainment which played on Broadway for eighteen months and has since often been revived in summer theater. If I was not delighted, audiences certainly were and full credit for this should be given to Sig Herzig and Fred Saidy (now deceased) without whom the production would have never taken place.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the James's disappointment, the project pressed onwards. Once Arlen and Harburg began work on the songs, Nat Goldstone contacted the producer-director John C. Wilson about that critical but unpleasant issue: financing. Wilson traveled to California in mid-April 1944 to meet with Goldstone, who would act as his associate producer, and the rest of the team, including the songwriters. He was pleased with the libretto and partially completed score—by this time, they had written nine complete songs and a draft for a tenth—and he made an agreement with Goldstone to act as the producer and fundraiser for the show.

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel James and Danny Santiago, "Writing 'Bloomer Girl,'" *The New York Review of Books* 31, no.17 (November 8, 1984), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/nov/08/writing-bloomer-girl/?pagination=false> (accessed February 10, 2013).

As the fundraising phase of the production got underway, Harburg and Arlen drove to the Radio Recorder studios on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood to create sales recordings for the show. In the recording session, Arlen sang at the piano, with a little assistance from Harburg, the ten songs they had ready for the show. Interestingly, the recordings were made on glass-based discs, since acetate was no longer available due to the material shortages of the Second World War. Wilson took the five discs back to New York, sparing the songwriters the trouble of backers' auditions, where he had little trouble raising the necessary money, half of which was contributed by Arthur Freed and M-G-M with the contingency that they would own picture rights to the script if the show was a success.<sup>26</sup>

By July 1944, both the book and music of *Bloomer Girl* were completed, and rehearsals were scheduled for the end of the month. As news from the warfront in Europe was promising, the mood of the *Bloomer Girl* cast was cheerful and optimistic. In June, Arlen and Harburg stopped work on the score to listen to radio reports of Eisenhower's

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<sup>26</sup> The M-G-M production of *Bloomer Girl* never came to fruition although concrete plans for a Twentieth-Century Fox production emerged in the mid-1960s. In 1965 Shirley MacLaine was apparently contracted to play the lead role in *Bloomer Girl* when approximately one month before filming commenced, Fox announced that they would be cancelling the production and offered her a part in the Western, *Big Country, Big Man*, as a substitute. The contract for this latter work was similar to that of *Bloomer Girl* but not identical, and MacLaine sued Fox for avoidance of its duty to mitigate damages. The production was cancelled in part because Harburg refused to approve Arthur Laurent's screenplay. Therein, the slave Pompey escapes to the North when the notorious Jesse James robs the train on which he is being transported, and he is set free. See Shirley MacLaine Parker v. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation (3 Cal. 3d 176, 474 P.2d 689, 1970). <http://www.casebriefs.com/blog/law/contracts/contracts-keyed-to-farnsworth/remedies-for-breach/parker-v-twentieth-century-fox-film-corp/>. See also the script for the Twentieth-Century Fox production in the E.Y. Harburg collection at the New York Public Library.



D-Day invasion as Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, initiating the liberation of France and forcing the Nazi's to retreat into Germany. Later in August, the company was cheered by reports that the Allied Forces had landed in Paris. Meanwhile in the Pacific, General MacArthur, with the aid of Admiral Nimitz's naval forces, began driving the Japanese out of New Guinea, and the small islands, Saipan and Titan. A new warfront would soon form however, pitting Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg against one another, and casting a shadow over the production.

### “Stormy Weather”

At the center of the conflict was Agnes de Mille, the choreographer noted for her dream sequence ballet featured in *Oklahoma!* De Mille's vision for *Bloomer Girl* involved a Civil War ballet, which would dramatize the emotions felt by women anxiously waiting at home while their husbands and sons fought for their freedom on the battlefield. She thought that the serious ballet would not only enhance the political message espoused in the musical, but also provide an emotional outlet for the audience.

The score contained one rhapsodic outburst, a colloquial Hymn to Freedom, “The Eagle and Me,” and eight or ten of the loveliest songs I'd ever heard. When Arlen first sang “Eagle” for me, I found I could not speak for some seconds. (It is a remarkable song and he is a movingly fine singer). I quickly agreed to do the show. I thought I saw an opportunity to do a ballet which would embody the almost universal feeling of sacrifice of those at home.<sup>27</sup>

This is not to say that de Mille had no reservations. She wondered whether or not the audience would accept a serious statement about the role of women in wartime. She wondered how they would react to a piece that raised questions about why men were

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<sup>27</sup> Agnes de Mille, quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 188.

willing to go out and fight, and why society was willing to let them. But she felt that it was important to show the true cost of war.

De Mille staged a rough version of the ballet after only five days of work on the choreography; Wilson, Saily, Herzig, Harburg, and Arlen were all present. After the performance, there was a moment of silence. As de Mille later recalled “Harburg found voice first, and stepping over the bodies of three prone, sweating girls, addressed me.” He snapped, “no, no, no. This is all wrong. Where is the wit? Where is the humor?” “Humor?” de Mille snapped back. “In war?” Harburg raged, “Where is the courage? This isn’t the real de Mille. This isn’t what we bought.” Heated, de Mille asked, “How the hell do you know what the real de Mille is? If you wished to buy *Oklahoma!* You’re a little late.”<sup>28</sup> Having very much admired the ballet, Harold Arlen joined in the argument with the hope of affecting a compromise between the unrelenting Harburg and de Mille. He suggested that the ballet could be made less tragic if the dance closed with a celebration of peace and all of the troops returning alive. De Mille begrudgingly agreed, at least for the moment.

In a moment of despair while trying to rework the new choreography with the rehearsal accompanist Trude Rittman, de Mille had a breakdown. The theater historian Edward Jablonski suggests that her breakdown may have resulted from the difficulty of reworking what for her was an intensely personal statement about war (her husband, serviceman Walter Prude, was overseas fighting alongside the Allied forces at the time).<sup>29</sup> During her breakdown, de Mille recalled that she unconsciously reached out for Rittman,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 188–89.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 189.

who thought the beautifully honest gesture could be used in the ballet. The pair resolved to perfect the original version of the choreography, Harburg be damned.

Upon seeing the final version of the ballet some days later, Harburg exploded. “Can’t we get rid of this somber, dreadful ballet?” He appealed to John Wilson, claiming that women would faint, cry, or walk out of the show. Wilson agreed and de Mille was told to revert to the more lighthearted version of the choreography previously approved. In a blatant defiance of authority, however, she publicly rehearsed the approved version while privately rehearsing the illicit one in preparation for the opening night performance. In this she had the support of Harold Arlen, who maintained that the ballet was a triumph.<sup>30</sup>

*Bloomer Girl* was set for a two-week tryout beginning Monday, September 11 at the Forrest Theatre in Philadelphia. After a final dress rehearsal, Wilson approached de Mille and told her that the entire ballet needed to be cut. Both parties felt that the lighthearted version of the choreography was a burden to the show. De Mille suggested that they perform the ballet on opening night and then cut it for subsequent performances. Wilson agreed.

On opening night as the show drew to a close, De Mille premiered her secret version of the Civil War ballet. She later recalled that first performance:

The dancers performed with a tension that tightened the exchange between stage and audience to the point of agony. Their gestures that night were absolute, their faces like lamps, and in the hush when Lidija Franklin faced [James] Mitchell, looked into her returned soldier’s eyes and then covered her own because of what she saw, no one breathed. In the stillness around me several women bowed their heads. I stood at the back holding Trude’s hand. At the end there was no

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

sound, but as Mitchell and Franklin returned for the hallelujah parade [“The Eagle and Me”], there was cheering. As the people filed out past me, one woman, recognizing me, stood for a moment with her eyes covered and then quietly handed me her son’s Navy wings.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, the ballet was an enormous success. Wilson, shocked by the realization that he had been wrong to accept Harburg’s harsh judgment of the ballet turned to her and said, “Darling, it gives me great pleasure to state we were quite, quite wrong.” Somewhat less contrite, Harburg exclaimed, “Goddammit! I’ve begun to like the dreary thing. To think that a lousy little bit of movement can make people weep, and me among them! A lousy little bit of movement.”<sup>32</sup>

In part owing to the attention garnered by de Mille’s choreography, the subsequent New York Premiere was sold out. The production, starring Celeste Holm (Evalina), David Brooks (Jeff Calhoun), Dooley Wilson (Pompey), and Joan McCracken (Daisy) opened at the Shubert Theatre on October 5, 1944.<sup>33</sup> *Bloomer Girl* ran for a wildly successful 654 performances on Broadway and closed on April 27, 1946.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 190–91.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>33</sup> The famed actress Nanette Fabray replaced Celeste Holm in the title role of Evalina Applegate when *Bloomer Girl* moved off Broadway in May 1946. Harold Arlen’s brother, Jerry Arlen also briefly conducted the off Broadway production after returning to the United States following his service in the Second World War. John C. Wilson fired Jerry Arlen after receiving complaints from the cast about problematic cues and erratic tempos. His firing caused a temporary rift in the Arlen family.

<sup>34</sup> The performances of the original New York production have been preserved for posterity on a cast recording. *Selections from the John C. Wilson New Musical, (in association with Nat Goldstone) Bloomer Girl, Featuring Members of the Original New York Production, Music by Harold Arlen, Lyrics by E.Y. Harburg*, Decca Records DA 381, 33 rpm, 1944, reissue produced by Brian Drutman, master disc transfer by Doug Pomeroy and Steven Lasker, CD, 2001. This cast recording features Harold Arlen singing

musical was later adapted for the screen for the Producers Showcase series in 1956.<sup>35</sup> It has also enjoyed several subsequent revivals. The Goodspeed Opera house in East Haddam, Connecticut revived it for two productions in 1971 and 1981 respectively.<sup>36</sup> Most recently, it was revived as part of New York's *City Center Encores* in 2001.

The success of *Bloomer Girl* challenges the views of contemporary critics who disparaged the musical as nothing more than a cheap imitation of *Oklahoma!* More importantly, it shows that *Bloomer Girl's* political commentary was, although radical, extremely relevant to audiences in the wartime 1940s. In the following chapters, I will examine the feminist themes that pervade the musical, and the way in which these themes create a surprisingly critical commentary about the United States during World War II

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on "Man for Sale" and "Sunday in Cicero Falls." Arlen's voice was not featured on the re-released 78 rpm, but has subsequently been restored.

<sup>35</sup> *Bloomer Girl* (New York: Video Artists International, 2012). The abridged version of "Civil War Ballet" featured in the May 28, 1956 Producers Showcase is the best documentary evidence of de Mille's choreography that survives today. The role of Evalina Applegate was played by a young Barbara Cook, who would later originate the role of Marian in Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man* (1957).

<sup>36</sup> Yip Harburg felt that he and Arlen should write a new song for the Goodspeed production of *Bloomer Girl* in 1981 in order to stir up interest in the press. Arlen, however, was not up to the task. Instead, one of Harburg and Arlen's recently refurbished songs, "Promise Me Not to Love Me" was interpolated into the score. This is one of the last songs that Harold Arlen worked on before his death. The lyrics for another *Bloomer Girl* song titled "Hey Little Big Man," can be found in the E.Y. Harburg Collection at the New York Public Library. It is likely that Harburg intended this song for use in Goodspeed production, but there is no evidence that Harold Arlen ever set the lyrics to music, nor is there evidence that the piece was ever performed.

## Chapter 2: The Perversity of Fashion

In *Bloomer Girl*, fashion serves as an outward site for an inward debate about women's rights. The plot of *Bloomer Girl* centers around the nineteenth-century dress reform movement, which aimed to liberate women from the confines of the hoopskirt and replace it with a comfortable pair of bloomer pants. This movement had a direct parallel in the twentieth century, when women donned pants to join men in the workforce during World War II. Both dress reform movements were perceived to be temporary, and were therefore accepted in popular culture as harmless to society. In the musical, Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg took advantage of this dual temporary shift in the attitudes towards women to explore feminist themes at a time well before the heyday of the modern-day women's liberation. Since an understanding of these two fashion reforms is central to an understanding of *Bloomer Girl's* feminist underpinning, it is useful to unpack the history of these changes.

### Victorian Dress Reform

The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century sparked an explosion of knowledge, innovation, and opportunity, which led to a redistribution of wealth, culminating in the rise of an emerging middle class in Europe and the United States. As Katherine Torrens asserts, the lives of the new middle class were characterized by a paradox of freedom and restraint. The freeing shift in economic and social structures that enabled the rise of the middle class was accompanied by a concomitant shift in prevailing attitudes towards traditional gender roles within the family unit. As middle class men

increasingly found employment outside of the home and middle class women tended to their domestic duties, work assumed specific gender identification. A separate-sphere ideology emerged in which the social roles of men and women were relegated to the public and private spheres respectively. The distinction between the public and the private spheres was reinforced by fashions of the age.<sup>1</sup>

Women's fashion reflected constructs of femininity as prescribed by the "Cult of True Womanhood." Barbara Welter defines the four cardinal virtues of true womanhood in this era as submissiveness, piety, domesticity, and purity.<sup>2</sup> The expression of these virtues took several forms throughout the century. In the earliest decades, women's dresses were classically inspired, featuring long flowing skirts structured by a high regency or empire waistline. As the century progressed and consumers' tastes broadened, so did the dresses. Large puffy sleeves and sloped or off-the-shoulder designs created the illusion of a widening neckline. Tight-laced corsets affected an hourglass figure and voluminous skirts supported by layers of petticoats accentuated a narrow waist and full hips. The hoopskirt later replaced the petticoat as the support structure for the skirt.

Also known as cage crinolines or cages, the hoopskirt was an undergarment for women, constructed from concentric circles of whalebone or steel, and suspended by fabric. Its design, intended to support the voluminous skirts favored by women from all levels of society in Europe and the United States, had the paradoxical effect of liberating

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M. Torrens, "All Dressed Up With No Place to Go: Rhetorical Dimensions of the Nineteenth Century Dress Reform Movement," *Women's Studies in Communication* 20 (1997), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966), 152.

women from the weight and bulk of petticoats, while simultaneously confining them to cages. These cages were not merely physical, but psychological as well.

The cumbersome nature of the hoopskirt confined women's activities to the domestic sphere. Comical accounts of women unable to fit through carriages or narrow doorways circulated widely. Indeed, horrific accidents lay in wait for the hoopskirted heroine who dared venture from her home. Their long skirts trailed the ground picking up all sorts of filth and debris, including rusted nails and shards of broken glass. Many stories recount women accidentally straying too near an outdoor fire in their combustible costumes. The latter concern was particularly problematic because the sheer volume of the women's skirts made rescue in any perilous situation difficult. Timely escape from situations like a sinking ship or burning building was nearly impossible. The rigid corset paired with the hoopskirt prevented a woman from bending over at the waist and the sloped-shoulder design prevented her from raising her hands above her head.<sup>3</sup>

The hoopskirt also posed serious health risks to women, which helped to secure their reputation as members of the "weaker sex." Forward-thinking women like Catherine Hastings decried the effects of the hoopskirt in a series of public health lectures on dress reform movement. Here, a brief venture into the anatomy and physiology of the human body is necessary. The hoopskirt exerted pressure on the pelvic and abdominal cavities. The pelvic cavity is the part of the body bounded in the front by the hipbones and in the rear by the spinal column, which contains the reproductive organs, the bladder, the colon, and the rectum. Above the pelvic cavity is located the abdominal cavity. This cavity contains most of the viscera, including the stomach, liver, gallbladder, spleen, pancreas,

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<sup>3</sup> Torrens, 190–93.



small intestine, kidneys, and large intestine. The pelvic and abdominal cavities are connected by a protective membrane called the peritoneum so that whatever affects one bodily cavity will affect the other to some extent. Keeping this anatomical fact in mind, when the weight of clothing is placed predominantly on the hips, substantial pressure is exerted on the abdominal cavity and the viscera. The weight, by necessity, falls upon the lower organs, specifically the bladder and the reproductive apparatus, resulting various women's health issues. Such health issues included the interruption of healthy menstruation and pregnancy, and an increase in bladder and urinary tract infections.

Not only did the hoopskirt itself exert pressure on a woman's frame, but the widened waistline of the hoopskirt effectively demanded its pairing with a tight-laced corset to create the illusion of an hourglass figure. The corset slimed the proportions of the upper body by compressing the chest cavity, the part of the body containing the vital organs and enclosed by the ribs. The ribs are attached in the rear to the spinal column by strong ligaments, and in the front to the breastplate by cartilage, with the exception of the two lowest ribs, which are connected only to the vertebrae, earning them the title of "floating ribs." The cartilaginous attachments allow the cavity to expand and contract during normal respiration. When these attachments become ossified, however, due to reasons including but not limited to illness and advanced age, mobility is severely limited. The corset similarly limited mobility and with devastating effect. Continuous wear led to the disuse and eventual atrophy of the muscles supporting the upper region of the skeletal framework. Moreover, the corset caused the ribcage to warp in such a way that the bones curved downwards and inwards. This in turn either hindered the growth of the internal organs so that they developed smaller in size, or, forced them to crowd

together upon one another. The crowding of the organs resulted in various complications, one of the most serious being the obstruction of pulmonary circulation linked to enlargement of the left ventricle of the heart, as well as congestion of the brain, liver, and kidneys.<sup>4</sup>

By mid-century, frustration with the hoopskirt led several forward-thinking women to rebel against the restrictive costume. The first alternative to the hoopskirt was designed by Elizabeth Smith Miller (1822–1911), the daughter of abolitionist Congressman Gerrit Smith and his wife, Ann Carroll Fitzhugh. Miller later recalled how the need for an alternative to the hoopskirt occurred to her after several hours spent toiling in her garden:

In the spring of 1851, while spending many hours at work in the garden, I became so thoroughly disgusted with the long skirt, that the dissatisfaction—the growth of years—suddenly ripened into the decision that this shackle should no longer be endured. The resolution was at once put into practice. Turkish trousers to the ankle with a skirt reaching some four inches below the knee were substituted for the heavy, untidy and exasperating garment.<sup>5</sup>

Her modest but practical outfit, which combined Turkish pantaloons with a knee-length skirt, drew inspiration from the fashions worn by women at the Oneida Community, a religious group active near her family home in Peterboro, New York. The outfits also bore similarity to those worn by Native-Americans in the Oneida Nation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C. E. Hastings, untitled lecture in *Dress Reform: A Series of Lectures Delivered in Boston, On Dress Reform as it Affects the Health of Women*, edited by A.G. Wilson (Boston: Robert Brothers, 1874), 42–67.

<sup>5</sup> Untitled speech, The Elizabeth Smith Miller Collection at the New York Public Library, Elizabeth Smith Miller Webpage, New York History Net, accessed September 24, 2012, <http://www.nyhistory.com/gerritsmith/esm.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The suffragettes Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Elizabeth Miller's cousin, and Amelia Jenks Bloomer, editor of the women's journal *The Lilly*, were instrumental in popularizing the new outfit, which is today known simply as the bloomer pant. Miller described their roles in the bloomer's early history:

Soon after making this change, I went to Seneca Falls to visit my cousin Mrs. [Elizabeth Cady] Stanton. She had so long deplored with me our common misery in the toils of this crippling fashion, that this means of escape was hailed with joy and she at once joined me in wearing the new costume. Mrs. [Amelia] Bloomer, a friend and neighbor of Mrs. Stanton, then adopted the dress, and as she was editing a paper in which she advocated it [*The Lilly*], the dress was christened with her name.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, dress reform became a rallying cry for early women's rights activists.

Dress reform centered on principle that men *and* women were entitled to equal citizenship as proclaimed by the "Declaration of Sentiments," a speech modeled after the United States' Declaration of Independence, delivered at the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls on July 19, 1848:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled.<sup>8</sup>

Advocates of dress reform believed that in order to achieve equality, women had to get up, and get dressed. In their view, the hoopskirt was a symbol of women's restricted role in society. It reinforced the image of woman as frail and frivolous. These sentiments were echoed in *Bloomer Girl*, when Dolly Bloomer and her bloomer girls paraded through the streets of Cicero Falls, converting women to the cause of dress reform, and carrying signs that provocatively proclaimed "no votes for women, no victuals for men!" and "no vote, no sex!"

A National Dress Reform Association (NDRA) was formed in 1856, and met annually through 1865.<sup>9</sup> The NDRA actively recruited both men and women to support the cause of fairness and functional fashion. Members had to be at least twelve years old, and they were required to sign the organization's constitution. No dues were required so that none might be prevented from joining their ranks, although it is worth mentioning that all of the members were middle to upper class, young, married women who worked

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<sup>8</sup> "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" (speech given at the Woman's Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls, July 19, 1848), The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Papers Project, [www. http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/seneca.html](http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/seneca.html) (accessed 20 February 2013).

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of a cancellation in 1862.

outside the home in either paid or unpaid positions. All were also Caucasian. The experiences of African American women did not lead them to participate in Dress Reform, though women's rights advocates championed African-American issues, most notably abolition.

The leaders of the NDRA called for the rejection of the hoopskirt as a way to affect change on an individual level. Their rallying cry reached far and wide. Although there are no exact records of the number of members in the association, Fischer estimates that between 200 and 400 men and women attended the annual meetings, and that an astounding 800 people attended the last meeting on June 21, 1865.<sup>10</sup> Even larger audiences were reached by *The Sybil*, the official newspaper of the National Dress Reform Association through provocative editorials, articles, and poetry such as the following:

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<sup>10</sup> G. Fischer, "Clothes Make the Woman: The National Dress Reform Association, 1856–1865." (Master's Thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 1987).

Ladies who in hoops are bound,  
And whose dresses sweep the ground,  
Who no health have ever found,  
Turn a line I pray;  
Now's the day and now's the hour,  
Would you crush the Tyrant's power,  
And be free forevermore,  
From chains and slavery?  
Still may those who dare to be  
From all hoops and fetters free,  
Let the tyrant Fashion see  
That they dare her frown.  
Sisters, if you wish to find,  
Health and joy, and peace of mind,  
Bow no more at Fashion's shrine-  
Nature's laws obey.  
By your weak and suffering frames,  
By your children's woes and pains,  
Swear you'll break the tyrant's chains,  
That you will be free.<sup>11</sup>

Despite its importance in American History, the dress reform movement was not long lived, perhaps because it had no clearly expressed endpoint. It never inspired legislative action, and never really affected popular styles. Even Elizabeth Miller, the originator of the bloomer pant, eventually put on the hoopskirt.

The dress looked tolerably well in standing and walking, but in sitting, a more awkward, uncouth effect, could hardly be produced [or] imagined—It was a perpetual violation of my love of the beautiful. So, by degrees, as my aesthetic senses gained the ascendancy, I lost sight of the great advantages of my dress—Its lightness and cleanliness on the streets, its allowing me to carry my babies up and down stairs with perfect ease and safety, and its beautiful harmony with sanitary laws—consequently the skirt was lengthened several inches and the trousers abandoned. As months passed, I proceeded in this retrograde movement, until, after a period of some seven years, I quite “fell from grace” and found myself again in the bonds of the old swaddling clothes—a victim to my love of beauty.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Sybil*, “Parody,” (1857), 136

<sup>12</sup> Untitled speech, Elizabeth Smith Miller Collection, Elizabeth Smith Miller Webpage, New York History Net, accessed September 24, 2012, <http://www.nyhistory.com/gerritsmith/esm.htm>.

According to the historian Kathleen Torrens, the failure of the dress reform movement in general also suggests a failure on the part of the reformers to frame a debate that adequately addressed issues including femininity and aesthetics. As Susan Brownmiller explains, dress reform challenged the idea that appearance was tied to the expression and definition of gender, an idea that was not ready to be challenged in the 1840s.

Every wave of feminism has foundered on the question of dress reform; it is asking too much of women to give up their chief outward expression of the feminine difference, their continuing reassurance to men and to themselves that male is male because a female dresses and looks and acts like another sort of creature.<sup>13</sup>

### **World War II and Dress Reform: Rosie the Riveter**

The fashions of the temporary, and thus safe, nineteenth-century dress reform movement, reappeared nearly a century later as *Bloomer Girl* made its Broadway debut. The economic realities of World War II mandated a dramatic reassessment of women's role in American society. During this time, the United States experienced a labor shortage of young able-bodied men, and the nation turned to women to fill the boom in industrial jobs created by the production of war equipment. While it is important to note that working in the public sphere was not new to women—working class and minority women have worked outside the home since the Industrial Revolution—the World War II era marked the first time that women were hired to fill positions normally occupied by men, positions that were thought to require masculine strength and sensibility,

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Linden Press, 1984), 79.

challenging widely held beliefs about the cultural division of labor by sex. This is not to say that the integration of women into male-dominated positions was easy.

In the early stages, government agencies such as the War Department and the War Manpower Commission (WMC) encouraged employers to hire women, but these agencies did not have the power to enforce economic policy, and were thus unsuccessful. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal granted government limited control over the economy through reforms such as the Social Security Act, which established a system of retirement pensions, unemployment insurance, and welfare benefits for the handicapped and needy, for the most part the private sector governed itself. The government determined that the best course of action was to change public attitudes about women in the workforce through an aggressive media campaign of propaganda.

In 1942, the government established the Office of War Information (OWI). The advertised purpose of the OWI was to disseminate information about the war effort to the American public in an unbiased manner. To emphasize the organization's neutral stance, President Roosevelt appointed Elmer Davis, a respected news reporter who was opposed to government control of the press, as head of the organization. Davis publicly proclaimed: "This is the people's war, and to win it the people should know as much about it as they can. This office will do its best to tell the truth and nothing but the truth."<sup>14</sup> The OWI, however, collaborated with a host of wartime agencies, including the War Advertising Council (WAC), which directly engaged in propaganda.

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<sup>14</sup> Elmer Davis, quoted in Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 30–31.



The War Advertising Council applied persuasive techniques for selling goods and promoting government aims. The WAC famously launched two recruitment campaigns targeted at women. The first campaign, “Women in War,” recruited women for service in the armed forces. The second, “Women in Necessary Services,” recruited women for a variety of menial jobs necessary to support the economy. The WAC asked participating advertisers to devote at least a portion of their ads to the theme of women in the workforce. These advertisements appealed to women’s sense of patriotism by showing direct correlation between efforts on the home front and the war overseas.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most popular propaganda images from the World War II era to address women workers was that of Rosie the Riveter. The best depiction of Rosie the Riveter can be found in the “We Can Do It” poster produced by J. Howard Miller in 1943 for Westinghouse Electric. The poster is based on a black-and-white wire service photograph of a Michigan factory worker named Geraldine Hoff. It features a strong female war worker, clad in a blue jumpsuit and a red-and-white, polka-dotted headband, flexing her muscles (see figure 2). An even stronger depiction of Rosie the Riveter can be seen in Norman Rockwell’s *Saturday Evening Post* cover distributed on Memorial Day, May 29, 1943. Rockwell’s cover features a large woman, dressed in the familiar overalls and a red bandana with the addition of safety goggles, taking her lunch break. Sitting with her legs akimbo in an un-ladylike fashion, she looks into the distance, a rivet gun resting on her lap, and a copy of Hitler’s manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, squashed underneath

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the role of government agencies in media propaganda targeted at women during World War II see *ibid.*, 28–36.

her over-sized penny loafer (see figure 3). These images reflected the changes in women's dress that accompanied women's integration into the workforce.



Figure 2: Rosie the Riveter as depicted by J. Howard Miller in “We Can Do It,” 1943.



Figure 3: Rosie the Riveter as depicted by Norman Rockwell in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 1943.

During the 1940s, pants on women became acceptable as workplace attire. Wartime propaganda portrayed pants as glamorous in order to dispel criticisms that the

new fashions were not feminine. Some even suggested that pants, which emphasized a woman's natural curvature, were patriotic because they inspired male morale on the production line and the sales floor. Featured with increasing prominence in magazines, newspapers, paintings, films, and other forms of popular entertainment, the image of women in pants began to circulate and reach broader audiences.<sup>16</sup>

Marked shifts in the attitudes about women's dress and the definition of femininity were made possible because they were thought to be temporary. While the dress reform movement in the nineteenth-century had begun as a way to liberate women from the oppressive cages of hoopskirts, the dress reform movement of the mid-twentieth century was patriotic and widely assumed to be a fleeting fashion phenomenon. It was a generally accepted fact that once men returned from the war, women would hand over the pants to their husbands, iron their skirts, tie their apron strings, and return to domestic life as usual.

In *Bloomer Girl*, Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg take advantage of the temporary shifts in attitudes towards women and women's dress, both within the time period of the musical's setting and the time period of its performance, to explore feminist themes at a time well before heyday of the modern Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Mirroring the nineteenth and twentieth century changes in women's fashion described above, which moved towards the androgynous, *Bloomer Girl's* dramatic and musical representations of women create a subversive definition of femininity in which gender is not defined by strict parameters.

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<sup>16</sup> Eileen Boris, "Desirable Dress: Rosies, Sky Girls, and the Politics of Appearance," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (Spring 2006), 127.

### Chapter 3: Feminism on the Stage

Feminism—the ideological movement aimed at establishing and defending equal rights for women—is the lifeblood of *Bloomer Girl*. The movement, however, had not taken hold of American society at the time of the musical’s creation. The political, economic, and social policies of the United States in the 1940s continued to reinforce traditional gender roles, even as an increasing number of women took on historically male roles during World War II. *Bloomer Girl* was unusual in portraying women as dynamic characters who challenged narrow social definitions of femininity. It was also unusual in challenging female character types typically found in the musicals of the age.

The 1940s are often considered the beginning of the Golden Age of the American Musical. During this period the theater was ruled by the dynasty of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. They revolutionized the field, establishing a new kind of “integrated musical,” bringing together the elements of music, drama, and dance in the service of a comprehensive whole. While their musicals looked forward aesthetically, they often looked backward socially. Coinciding with national views of gender, their musicals projected a conservative image of women. Since many scholars consider Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals as representative of the Golden Age of Musical Theater, their musicals can serve as the model for the representation of gender in this period. The following analysis establishes Rodgers and Hammerstein as the dominant voice of the Golden Age. It then contrasts the Rodgers and Hammerstein model of female character types with the representation of women in other musicals of the age. Finally, it examines *Bloomer Girl*’s dramatic and musical representations of women and how those representations deviate from the model for the Golden Age American musical.

## The Rodgers and Hammerstein Revolution

In the long history of the Broadway musical, the period between 1943 and 1959 stand out as “The Rodgers and Hammerstein Years.” During this span of sixteen years, the writing team churned out nine musicals, six of which became hits: *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *The Sound of Music*. Their musicals dominated the Broadway stage and influenced future generations of composers, lyricists, and librettists by establishing both “a model and a standard for a new kind of musical play.”<sup>1</sup> None of their musical plays was more influential than *Oklahoma!*, as we have seen in both the creation and reception of *Bloomer Girl*.

The term “musical play” first entered circulation during the late nineteenth century when the impresario George Edwardes employed it to distinguish between the different genres housed at two London Theaters: The Gaiety and Daly’s. The Gaiety Theater presented musical comedies: “shows with mainly farcical plots, comic characters, light singers, dancers, and elegantly dressed chorus girls.”<sup>2</sup> Daly’s Theater, on the other hand, presented musical plays, “shows with more romantic plots, humor more in the province of a comedian and a soubrette, vocalists who could hold their own in concerted finales, and chorus girls who also had to be able to sing well.”<sup>3</sup> As the description of the theaters’ repertoire suggests, in the nineteenth century the musical play denoted a type of

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<sup>1</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Music*, with a foreword by Sheldon Harnick (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 140–41.

<sup>2</sup> This discussion of the term “musical play” and its appropriation by Oscar Hammerstein II is drawn from Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: Norton, 2010), 291–93.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

musical similar to the romantic operetta, one in which music and drama were on equal footing. In the 1920s, the playwright Oscar Hammerstein II (1895–1960) appropriated the term, “musical play.” Initially, Hammerstein used it to describe his operettas *Rose Marie* and *The Desert Song*. By the 1940s, Hammerstein had begun to use the term “musical play” to draw a comparison between the play with music and the play with speech. In doing so, he suggested an aesthetic equivalence between musical and spoken drama, thus elevating the status of musical theater.

In theater culture, drama garnered the exclusive qualifier of “legitimate theater.” Originally, “legitimate theater” simply meant “lawful theater.” It applied to two seventeenth-century London Theaters that had been issued exclusive royal patents for the production of spoken drama. It was likewise used to distinguish between the patented play and the popular reproductions and imitations that interspersed music between the scenes in order to avoid legal repercussions. From this time forward, musical theater acquired the unfortunate and unspoken stigma of illegitimacy.

The meaning of “legitimate theater” evolved over the following three centuries, transforming and morphing into something less precise but equally damning. By the nineteenth century, the phrase applied to works possessing “poetic quality or superior literary worth” in which the “interest of the piece is mental rather than physical.” It was similarly used “by actors of the old school as a defense against the encroachments of farce, musical comedy, and revue.” By the twentieth century, the phrase applied to works “concerned with the New York commercial stage, stage plays, or serious art; classical; semi-classical; other than popular.” Hammerstein sought to challenge the stigma of

illegitimacy by introducing a heightened sense of artistic integrity to the genre of musical theater.

In the early 1940s, Hammerstein formed a new partnership with the composer Richard Rodgers (1902–1979). Their partnership surprised many in the musical theatre circuit. Whereas Hammerstein had spent the previous two decades working primarily in the genre of operetta, Rodgers had spent the same years entrenched in the genre of musical comedy. The two men also had longstanding working relationships with other collaborators: Hammerstein with Vincent Youmans (*Wildflowers*), Rudolf Friml (*Rose-Marie*), Sigmund Romberg (*The Desert Song* and *New Moon*) and Jerome Kern (*Showboat*, *Sweet Adeline*, *Music in the Air*, *Three Sisters*, and *Very Warm for May*); Rodgers with Lorenz Hart. Creatively, Rodgers and Hammerstein were better suited to work alongside their former collaborators than one another. In his years with Hart, Rodgers had grown accustomed to writing the melody first, long the practice in American songwriting. Hammerstein, however, insisted on writing the lyrics for the songs before the music. Nevertheless, the reverse process inspired both to new heights of innovation and imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Rodgers and Hammerstein's first collaboration, *Oklahoma!*, opened on March 31, 1943 at the St. James Theater in New York, directed by the rising talent Rouben Mamoulian and produced under the auspices of the Theater Guild. The prospects for *Oklahoma!* were uncertain at best. Critics alternately regaled and reviled the out-of-town tryouts, which had taken place in New Haven and Boston under the title *Away we Go!* A

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<sup>4</sup> Ethan Morrden, *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press), 71–73.

local reporter for the *New Haven Journal-Courier* was glowing: “[this] lusty, swashbuckling musical play about love and life in the early West” had a “good premiere”; “many of the players are well known and there are many who are not well known who will be soon” and “the joy of the present can be laid aside for three hours while one enjoys the excitement of the past in this lively, sparkling show.” The New York report however, was disparaging. In an infamous telegram sent to the New York newspaper and radioman Walter Winchell, the pronouncement was “No legs, no jokes, no chance.”<sup>5</sup> Audience reactions were similarly lackluster. The choreographer Agnes de Mille recalled the opening night performance in New Haven:

Oh, they were all there. The wrecking crew from New York, that’s the name Ruth Gordon gave them, up to New Haven to see this show. It certainly wasn’t the show you see today, but all the good songs were there. So a lot of them left early, and most of their reactions were, “Well, too bad. This means the end of the Theater Guild. This is their last flop.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the Theater Guild subscription list had dwindled over the past few years after a catastrophic string of flops. The original cast of *Oklahoma!* did not have the star power to drum up the large crowds necessary to fill the house in the downturned market. The cast was made up almost entirely of lesser-known actors. Bambi Linn, an ensemble member, later described the frantic attempts of the production staff to increase attendance for the first performance:

We hear they went out and started bringing people in. They found as many servicemen as they could; they literally went out and dragged them in; they had to do it. You know how big the Saint James is, and if those last few rows were empty downstairs, they couldn’t let it look like that. Not to have a full house on *opening night*? So they papered the house, and in fact I remember somebody said

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>6</sup> Agnes de Mille, quoted in Max Wilk, *Ok! The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 180–81.



to us, “is there anybody you could invite?” I mean, to the *cast*! Of course, I’d already paid for my family’s tickets, and when I heard that I said, “Gee whiz, I could have got them in for free!”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the staff’s efforts were in vain as a surprise spring snowstorm swept the city, sending ticket holders in search of shelter.

The small audience gathered at the St. James Theater quickly realized that they were witnessing something “wonderful.” In the words of Lewis Nichols, reviewer for the *New York Times*:

For years they have been saying the Theater Guild is dead, words that will have to be eaten with breakfast this morning. Forsaking the sometimes somber tenor of her ways, the little lady of Fifty-second Street last evening danced off into new paths and brought to the St. James a truly delightful musical play called *Oklahoma!* Wonderful is the nearest adjective, for this excursion of the Guild combines a fresh and infectious gayety, a charm of manner, beautiful acting, singing and dancing, and a score by Richard Rodgers that doesn’t do any harm, either, since it is one of his best.<sup>8</sup>

The following morning, long lines formed at the box office. *Oklahoma!* ran for an unprecedented five years and 2,248 performances on Broadway, making it the longest running show in history until *My Fair Lady* (1956). The national tour crisscrossed the United States for over a decade, reaching audiences in every state for a combined total of approximately ten million viewers. The show then traveled across the Atlantic. In 1947 it became a fixture at Theatre Royal on Drury Lane in London’s West End, where it ran for 1,548 performances. The musical received foreign productions in South Africa, Australia, and Japan. It was also adapted for the silver screen in 1955, adding an Academy Award for best picture to its impressive list of accolades, which already included a Pulitzer Prize

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<sup>7</sup> Bambi Linn, quoted in *ibid.*, 209–15.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Nichols on *Oklahoma!* in *The New York Times Book of Broadway*, ed. by Ben Brantley, (New York: New York Times, 2001), 110.

in the category of Special Awards and Citations-Letters. Today, *Oklahoma!* remains one of the most celebrated musical works of the twentieth century. It still receives more than six hundred performances per year. The wild success of this mid-western musical raises the question of what exactly sparked the nation's interest and started a revolution.

The plot was fairly simple. Based on Lynn Rigg's 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the book depicted the ordinary lives of settlers in the Oklahoma Territory. Farm girl Laurey Williams and cowhand Curley McClain have fallen in love. But, in a fit of pride, Laurey rejects Curley's invitation to the town social and instead goes with her hired farmhand, Jud Fry. During the social, Jud acts on his sexual attraction for Laurey, and becomes incensed when she rebukes his advance. In an emotionally vulnerable state Laurey declares her true feelings for Curly and three weeks later, the pair marries. Immediately after the wedding ceremony, Curly and Jud get into a fight. In the midst of their brawl, Jud falls on his own knife and dies. The wedding guests hold a makeshift trial for Curly, who is acquitted of murder charges. Happily, Curly and Laurey depart for their honeymoon. This plot is hardly groundbreaking, but the presentation of this plot it was like nothing that had been seen before on Broadway.

Rodgers and Hammerstein combined drama, music, and dance in the service of a comprehensive artistic whole. In doing so, they pioneered the development of the book musical. *Oklahoma's!* new, integrated, format simultaneously pleased and puzzled critics, as Nichols writes: "Possibly in addition to being a musical play, *Oklahoma!* could be called a folk operetta; whatever it is, it is very good."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 111.

The road to revolution in *Oklahoma!* had in fact been paved earlier in the century. The most notable forerunner of the integrated musical was Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern's *Showboat* (1927).<sup>10</sup> If this early forerunner had paved the way, then economic necessity charted the final course to the destination. Theatergoing, which had dwindled during the Great Depression, steadily increased after 1930. As the Depression-era economy revived, more shows lit up Broadway's billboards and marquees, and production seasons began to run longer. The result of this rapid revitalization of the theater was that by the 1940s, the review format of the American musical had become stale. A new kind of musical was needed, one which could withstand longer runs. Thus, the development of the book musical was driven as much by economic necessity as by aesthetic principle. Any consideration of the efforts leading up to *Oklahoma!*, however, should not underestimate the significant role the musical and its creators occupy in the historical narrative.

In addition to pioneering the book musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein were among the first to explore a serious subject within the context of musical theater, where comedy usually reigned supreme. Many of the same critics who admired *Oklahoma!*'s the new format, found fault with the libretto's lack of slapstick and sex appeal, long considered the recipe for success in the business. Hammerstein was adamant, however, that the musical could delve beyond the superficial:

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<sup>10</sup> Other significant forerunners of the integrated musical included *Cabin in the Sky*'s staging of a folk parable in 1940, *Pal Joey*'s raw and honest look at contemporary life in 1941, *Lady in the Dark*'s psychological exploration of character through dream sequences and an experimental musical structure later that same year, and *Porgy and Bess*'s passionate outpouring of song in the 1942 revival. See Ethan Morrden, *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s*, 69–71.

When I was very much younger, I thought that if I ever made all the money I needed out of writing musical comedy, I would then sit back and turn to straight dramatic plays in which I could say whatever I wanted to say and state my reactions to the world I live in. Later on, however, I became convinced that whatever I wanted to say could be said in songs, [and] that I was not confined necessarily [by songs] to trite or light subjects.<sup>11</sup>

Rodgers and Hammerstein were also among the first to exploit musical theater as a vehicle for social criticism. Many of their musicals reflect liberal ideology. Written against the backdrop of devastating global conflict, *Oklahoma!* argues for the United States' intervention in the Second World War. Their later musicals similarly reflect a political stance. For example, *Allegro* (1947) condemns greed and the burgeoning of an increasingly materialistic modern society, *The King and I* (1951) finds fault with western imperialism, and *South Pacific* (1958) offers an in-depth look at the continued existence of racial prejudice around the world.

### **Women in the Musical Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein**

While the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein looked forward aesthetically, they also looked back in one significant aspect: gender roles. As gender is the central theme of *Bloomer Girl*, and since *Oklahoma!* is so widely viewed as the model for the musical, it is worth considering how women were portrayed on the stage during the age of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

In his pioneering article "I Enjoy Being A Girl: Women in the Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein," Richard Goldstein isolates four recurring female character types in

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<sup>11</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, quoted in Stempel, *Showtime*, 292.

the works of this influential pair.<sup>12</sup> These types are based on their function within the plot, the values each exemplifies, and the relative level of success each achieves during the course of the musical. According to Goldstein, the female characters achieve success by learning to conform to a particular set of values.

Goldstein labels the first of the four female character types, “the heroine,” the female half of the central romance, which drives almost all musicals. She is characterized by innocence and idealism, and her primary motivation within the course of the musical’s dramatic action is to achieve the impossible: perfection. This perfection is always in the service of the other half of the romantic pair, as through it, she will become the ideal match for her mate and suitable mother for his future children. Goldstein proposes that in order to find the heroine “one only had to look for the female singer of a waltz, and there she would be.”<sup>13</sup> Her songs are typically moderately fast and sweet. Consider for example, “Out of My dreams” (Laurey in *Oklahoma!*), “A Wonderful Guy” (Nellie in *South Pacific*), “Hello, Young Lovers” (Anna in *The King and I*), “In the Arms of My Love I’m Flying” (*Cinderella*), and “My Favorite Things” (Maria in *The Sound of Music*).

While the heroine operates within a lofty dream world, the same cannot be said for her female counterpart, Goldstein’s “secondary heroine.” The secondary heroine forms half of a subordinate romance within a musical. She has a more realistic view of love than the primary heroine, and she is usually more sexually aggressive. As such, the secondary heroine often supplies much-needed comic relief to the overarching, serious

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<sup>12</sup> Richard M. Goldstein, “‘I Enjoy Being A Girl’: Women in the Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein,” *Popular Music and Society* 13 (1989).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

narrative of the musical. Less frequently, the secondary heroine functions as a tragic character, whose raunchy and rebellious actions lead to her undoing. As Goldstein points out, the secondary heroine can often be spotted by looking for bouncy and humorous numbers. When the secondary heroine is presented as a tragic character, however, her songs can be just as serious, if not more serious than those belonging to the heroine. Consider for example “Younger than Springtime” (Liat in *South Pacific*) or “My Lord and Master,” “We Kissed in a Shadow,” and “I Have Dreamed” (Toptin in *The King and I*).

The third of Goldstein’s female character types is “the advisor,” someone who is typically much older than either the heroine or secondary-heroine. Although she is often unmarried, she serves as a mother figure to the heroine. She is experienced and wise, and supports the principles of “carrying on no matter what happens to you,” “gaining your true love,” “supporting that love without reservation,” and “finding your dream.”<sup>14</sup> The advisor sings slow and serious numbers such as “You’ll Never Walk Alone” (Nettie in *Carousel*), “Bali Hai” (Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*), “and Climb Every Mountain” (Reverend Mother in *The Sound of Music*).

The fourth and final character type is found somewhat less frequently throughout the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein. This “independent woman” acts as a rival to the heroine, and is almost always doomed to fail. Unlike the heroine, the independent woman is not innocent and idealistic; rather, she is mature and usually sexually experienced. This gives her a more cynical worldview, and she thus neither possesses desirable feminine traits, nor is she able to sing. In the rare instance that the independent woman does sing,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

her songs are lively and cynical. Consider for example, “How Can Love Survive” and “No Way To Stop It” (Elsa in *The Sound of Music*) and “Love Look Away” (Helen Chao in *The Flower Drum Song*).

### **The “Civilizing Narrative:” Class and the Classical**

In the closing of his argument, Goldstein summarizes the four female character types by stating, “one usually finds four major female types separated or joined together on the basis of whether or not they are idealistic or realistic, romantic or lustful, dependent or independent.”<sup>15</sup> In doing so, he suggests a hierarchal relationship between them. In her study of women’s voices in the American musical, Julie Noonan suggests that hierarchal organization of female characters in the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein reflects the principles of Classical harmony.<sup>16</sup>

Many scholars have noted the connection between the character hierarchy in the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the aesthetic principles of eighteenth-century Classical music.<sup>17</sup> The ideology of eighteenth-century Enlightenment called into question the superstition, intolerance, and abuse of power so often exercised by the church and state. It sought to replace these institutions with an emancipated common man. This

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Noonan, “The Sound of Musicals’ Women: Tessitura and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical,”(Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas 2006), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Green, “What Gives Musical Theater *Musical* Integrity? An Analysis of the Opening Scene of *South Pacific*,” *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 21 (1996); Noonan, “The Sound of Musicals’ Women: Tessitura and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical.”

ideological shift is reflected in a concomitant aesthetic shift in the music of the era, much of which responded to the populist tastes of the common man. Classical harmony is structured around a central tonic pitch, which establishes the key. In any given key, pitches can be labeled to reflect their relationship to the tonic. In essence then, classical harmony places heightened value on key through pitch hierarchy that emphasizes “polar” (I-V) or “solar” (I-X) relationships to the tonic.<sup>18</sup>

Although classical harmony does not differ greatly from that of the Baroque or Romantic eras, the value it places on establishing and confirming key is unique. As Leonard Ratner writes:

While the vocabulary of classical harmony does not differ essentially from that of baroque or romantic music, a great difference exists in classical harmonic rhetoric—the ways in which the chords and cadences are arranged and the impression of key thus given. No other style in the history of western music places such emphasis upon key or explores with such imagination and verve the ways in which key can be affirmed. The definition of key is a structural event of the first magnitude in classical music, a satisfying and often triumphant reinforcement of periodicity on every level of structure.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have suggested that classical harmony’s obsession with key likely resulted from the development of the well-tempered tuning system in the late seventeenth-century. In the view of theater scholar Julie Noonan, however, “the entire harmonic system is a reflection of hierarchal thinking—or reflective of class distinction.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the notion of class stood at the pinnacle of social consciousness during the Classical era, when the emergence of a nascent middle class threatened to challenge prevailing power structures

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard G. Ratner, *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 48.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Noonan, “The Sound of Musicals’ Women,” 57.



in the West. Noonan thus supposes that the hierarchy of female characters according to class in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical reflects the influence of Classical harmony.

Noonan's argument makes sense when harmony is viewed as the cornerstone of form. In the Classical style, form is also hierarchal. It follows a logical progression from the smallest musical unit to the largest in which the various elements—motive, theme, phrase, period, and section—and their relationships to one another are audible to the listener. Classical form thus exemplifies the aesthetic values of balance, symmetry, and proportion. These values in turn illustrate the new class politics of the Enlightenment, which celebrated “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” for all men in an effort to restore the balance of power to the masses.

Classical form was moreover concerned with the notion of class as it applied specifically to the construction of gender and power. Many Classical pieces begin with a movement that operates according to the principles of sonata form. Sonata form can be understood as either a binary or ternary form, which is comprised of three basic sections: the exposition, the development, and the recapitulation.<sup>21</sup> In the exposition, the two themes that will drive the work are introduced. These themes are termed the primary and secondary themes respectively, though they are often referred to as the “masculine” and “feminine” themes.<sup>22</sup> As Susan McClary explains:

Central to this procedure is a confrontation between two key areas, usually articulated by two distinctly different themes. The first theme establishes the tonic key and sets the affective tone of the movement: it is in essence the protagonist of

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<sup>21</sup> See Ratner's discussion of sonata form as binary and ternary in *Classical Music*, 220–21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

the movement, and it used to be referred to quite commonly (in the days preceding feminist consciousness) as the “masculine” theme. Indeed, its character is usually somewhat aggressive; it is frequently described as having “thrust”; and it is often concerned with closure. Midway through the exposition of the movement, it encounters another theme, the so-called feminine theme, usually a more lyrical tune that presents a new key, incompatible with the first. Given that a tonal, sonata-based movement is concerned with matters of maintaining identity, both thematic and tonal, the second area poses a threat to the opening materials. Yet this antagonism is essential to the furthering of the plot, for within this model of identity construction and preservation, the self cannot truly be a self unless it acts: it must leave the cozy nest of its tonic, risk this confrontation, and finally triumph over its Other. The middle segment of the piece, the development, presents the various thematic materials of the exposition in a whole range of combination and keys. Finally, at the recapitulation, the piece returns to re-establish both the original tonic key and the original theme. The materials of the exposition are now repeated, within this difference: the secondary theme must now conform to the protagonist’s key area. It is absorbed, its threat to the opening key’s identity neutralized.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the principles of Classical form may also be said to have influenced the hierarchy of female characters in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical.

More obvious still, the character hierarchy in these musicals reflects the structured organization of female character types common in eighteenth-century opera. As Susan McClary again explains, the female characters are organized according to their level of success in conforming to the behaviors expected of them by the patriarchy. While there are several examples of strong even wild female characters in operas, the voices of these women are negated once they step out of line as part of a broader “desire-dread-purge mechanism.”<sup>24</sup>

Women are not, of course, entirely absent from traditional music spectacle: women characters may even be highlighted as stars in opera. But opera, like other

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<sup>23</sup> Susan McClary, “Sexual Politics in Classical Music” in *Feminine Endings: Music Gender, and Sexuality*, with a new introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 68–9.

<sup>24</sup> Susan McClary, “Living to Tell: Madonna’s Resurrection of the Fleishy” in *ibid.*, 152.

genres of Western music, is an almost exclusively male domain in that men write both the libretti and music, direct the stage action, and interpret the scores. Thus it is not surprising that operas tend to articulate and reinforce precisely the sexual politics thus described. The proceeding are controlled by a discourse organized in accordance with masculine interests—a discourse that offers up the female as spectacle while guaranteeing that she will not step out of line. Sometimes desire is articulated by the male character, while the passive, domesticated female simply acquiesces. In such instance, the potential violence of male domination is not necessarily in evidence: the piece seems to unfold in accordance with the “natural” (read: patriarchal) sexual hierarchy.<sup>25</sup>

Bearing all of this in mind, Noonan explains, the stock characters found in Goldstein’s model—the heroine, the secondary heroine, the advisor, and the independent woman—might be understood more simply as primary, secondary, and tertiary characters respectively.<sup>26</sup> This terminology acknowledges the role that the characters play within the plot in a manner similar to Goldstein, while also acknowledging the complex relationships of power and class that exist between them, as evidenced by the influence of the Classical style.

The clear terminology that Noonan suggests helps to reveal the character hierarchy and a “civilizing narrative” in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. The civilizing narrative is a plot construction in which the primary woman defines a particular set of social values that the community deems acceptable, a set of values that others have not yet attained, but could if properly educated. It values the white, male-dominated, culture of the United States—Christianity, heteronormativity, and the nuclear family unit—while simultaneously condemning the values of the minority cultures and cultural

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Noonan’s analysis does not account for Goldstein’s fourth female character type, the independent woman.

outsiders. In this way, the civilizing narrative has sometimes been seen a response to the twofold demographic shift of southern blacks north and west into the industrial workforce, and of women out of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere, both of which had a profound effect on society in the 1940s.

Within this narrative, the primary heroine has a civilizing effect on her male counterpart, “converting male energy into social usefulness, making the folk musical into the matriarchal form *par excellence*.”<sup>27</sup> The primary woman may, however, also have a civilizing effect on other characters, drawing outsiders into the community through a process of assimilation. The civilizing narrative thus reflects America’s historical struggle to reconcile the rhetoric of natural equality with the societal demand for ordered hierarchy within both the household and the nation. It demonstrates the widely held American belief that although class lines can be crossed, only individuals who accept and embrace the values of the majority can cross them.<sup>28</sup>

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals thus reflected several widely held beliefs about gender roles in the early part of the twentieth century: the belief that a woman’s proper place was in the home; that a woman’s function in society was to serve as the moral center of the household and community; and that a woman’s role in society was restricted to being a wife and mother.

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<sup>27</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 317. See also Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 126–27.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Elgan Whittaker III, “Subversive Aspects of American Musical Theater”(Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2002), 15–21.

### **The Subversive Sex in *Bloomer Girl* (1944)**

Despite the influence of *Oklahoma!*, Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg's *Bloomer Girl* (1944) does not conform to the accepted gender models of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. Rather, composer and librettist here join forces in a clever subversion of the accepted character paradigms. This subversion is apparent from even the most casual hearing of the score. Its fifteen songs draw upon multiple styles, from classical music to modern jazz, in an "odd fusion of old and new sounds"<sup>29</sup> This fusion makes the subversive, alien nature of the score readily apparent, a fact which caused the leading theater scholar Ethan Mordden to pose the question: "*Bloomer Girl's* score—as a whole it sounds carefully dated, yet other than the inclusion of an unusual number of waltzes, Arlen uses little pastiche...In other words, if Arlen is writing of and for 1944, and within the conventions of musical comedy, why is his sound so...well, alien?"<sup>30</sup>

The answer to Mordden's question is clear. Arlen's score—coupled with Harburg's libretto—functions as an audible metaphor for the breakdown of traditional gender roles. Over the course of the music, the classical style—here characterized by a reserved approach to harmony, diatonic melodies, periodic phrase structure, and clearly articulated rhythms—comes to represent the traditional construction of femininity as

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<sup>29</sup> Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, 191.

<sup>30</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124.

endorsed and encouraged by the community depicted in the musical.<sup>31</sup> The jazz style, on the other hand—characterized by expanded harmony, chromatically inflected melodic lines, and syncopation—comes to represent a subversive construction of femininity central to *Bloomer Girl's* plot.

### **The Classical Style**

Harold Arlen makes use of the classical style in three waltzes dispersed throughout the score: “When the Boys Come Home,” “Sunday in Cicero Falls,” and “The Rakish Young Man with the Whiskers.” The following analysis focuses on “When the Boys Come Home” and “Sunday in Cicero Falls,” which begin the first and second acts respectively. Through his use of the classical style in these ensemble numbers Arlen creates an implicit association between that style and the musical’s fictitious community. Arlen’s message is rendered explicit by Harburg’s lyrics, which seek to define community according to a particular set of social values; social values well accepted, but clearly under threat during both the play’s setting in the 1860s and in the musical’s own 1940s.

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<sup>31</sup> My use of the term “classical style” differs from its application in the writings of Leonard Ratner and Charles Rosen. See Ratner, *Classical Music* and Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*, expanded edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). Although the term may garner some confusion amongst readers more familiar with its application in those writings, my hope is that the term can be understood here as it is used in music marketing today—a broad description of the body of music that contrasts with popular music. To that end, I have chosen the term “classical style” because of the clear way in which it juxtaposes the “jazz style.” The term classical itself also carries an implicit meaning of conservative in today’s society, which I hope will help reinforce the association between the classical style and a conservative construction of femininity in *Bloomer Girl*.

“When the Boys Come Home”

The first act curtain rises on a domestic portrait. The Applegate daughters are anxiously awaiting the return of their traveling salesman husbands. The youngest plays a monotonous finger exercise at the pianoforte while her sisters sew quietly in the background; gradually, the repetitive rhythms of their motions give way to the opening ensemble number.<sup>32</sup> The lyrics of “When the Boys Come Home” present well-accepted nineteenth-century views of gender in which the activities of women who “stitch,” “pray,” “sleep,” “weep,” and “wait” are contrasted with the singular action of men who simply “work.” The private and public spheres are thus created and separated along gender lines. They are also depicted as perfectly natural and given the stamp of authority through archaic language (“twas”) and history:

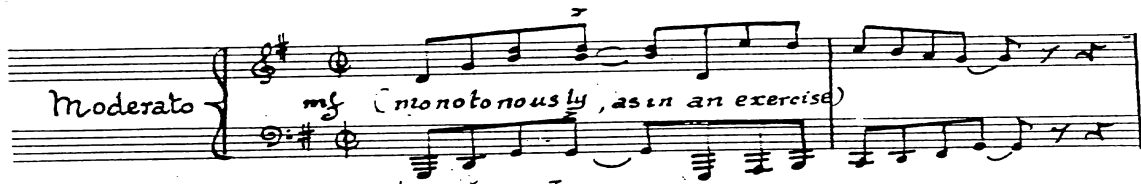
Stitch, stitch, pray and sleep  
Men must work and women must weep  
Twas ever thus since time began  
Woman, oh woman must wait for man  
Stitch, stitch, tie the strings  
This is the sorry state of things  
And only one song keeps hearts abeat  
And only one thought makes waiting sweet  
When the boys come home.

But lyrics are hardly the only thing at work in this number. Just as Rodgers and Hammerstein had sought to integrate lyrics and music, Arlen’s music underscores the

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<sup>32</sup> “When the Boys Come Home” is the title of a song with words by John Hay (1838–1905) and music by Oley Speaks (1874–1948), published by in New York by G. Schirmer in 1915. There is no evidence to suggest that either Harold Arlen or E.Y. Harburg were aware of its existence, but the unintended reference reveals an interesting political undercurrent. John Hay was the private secretary to President Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War. His lyrics for “When the Boys Come Home” depicted American’s weariness as the war dragged on four years. Published during World War I the song also commented directly on the United States’ involvement in the first global conflict. Here, the song takes on further significance as it addresses World War II.

proper social hierarchy of Harburg’s texts. The song follows a modified AABA form including a brief introduction, which develops thematic material from the earlier “Piano Practice.” The left hand accompaniment pattern draws upon the ascending arpeggiated figure from the exercise, while the right hand melody similarly outlines the interval of a fifth in a repetitive motion that depicts the formulaic motions of sewing (see examples 1 and 2).<sup>33</sup>



Example 1: “Piano Practice”



Example 2: “When the Boys Come Home,” introduction

By developing the thematic material from “Piano Practice,” the composer locates the women clearly within the domestic sphere where they engage in the activities of music making and sewing, both markers of feminine accomplishment in nineteenth-century American society.

As the first verse enters, the music outlines the narrow melodic range of a perfect fourth: the women’s voices are here as constrained as their bodies. Meanwhile, the descending melodic arch reflects the women’s subordinate role. This descending line,

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<sup>33</sup> All musical examples drawn from *Bloomer Girl*, piano/vocal score, provided courtesy of the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Connecticut.



which carries extra-musical associations of sadness, also betrays a growing discontentment with the “sorry scheme of things.” Although the piece is not in a minor key as is typical for a lament, the piece is written in a subdued key—D-flat major. By outlining a fourth, an interval traditionally considered unstable, the music also exerts a kind of sadness despite being outside of the traditional framework (see example 3).

Example 3: “When the Boys Come Home,” measures 9-16

The second verse repeats the melodic material one step higher, showing both mounting sexual frustration—the result of the men’s absence—and the women’s own social limitations.

Following a chromatic modulation from the subdued key of D-flat major to the brighter key of D, the orchestra clarifies the waltz rhythm that had only been hinted at by the introduction by now combining melodic accentuation and accompaniment patterns that place an accent on the downbeat of the measure. The change of key and simplification of the metrical pattern underscore a shift in the text, as the women seemingly abandon their serious concerns for more trivial fare. It is here made clear that this community of women can find happiness only when the familiar unit is returned to its natural state:

When the boys come home  
The clouds will trip lightly away, away  
The clouds will trip lightly away  
When the boys come home  
We'll all be as merry as May, as May  
We'll all be as merry as May

There'll be drums and trumpets, tea and crumpets  
Out on the Village Green  
A silver moon for that reunion scene  
Oh what Joy! When the boys come home

When the boys come home  
The glorious sound of the tramping feet  
Will echo down the winding street  
That leads to a lane where lovers meet  
And may it prove so sweet, so sweet  
That they will never more roam  
When the boys come home!

While this text may appear to reinforce normative gender roles, Arlen actually undermines them by hinting at the feminist themes to be explored in the musical. During the nineteenth century no dance was more scandalous than the waltz. In his article “Waltz Me Around Again Willie,” musicologist Steven Baur paints a vivid picture of blasphemy in the ballroom:

The venue is packed. Loud, percussive music fills the room with powerful unrelenting rhythms. Sweating, undulating bodies crowd the dance floor, colliding frequently as young people from varied social backgrounds come together in a dizzying *mélange* of sound and motion. Ecstatic participants revel in the freedom and pleasure of moving together in time. Meanwhile, civic, social, and religious authorities condemn the event and its permissive atmosphere, warning that the current craze endangers the moral and physical well-being of its young victims, causing delinquency, depravity, illness, and—in some cases—instant death.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Steven Baur, “‘Waltz Me Around Again Willie’: Gender, Ideology, and Dance in the Gilded Age,” in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honors of Susan McClary*, edited by Steven Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 47.

Arguably the most scandalous aspect of the waltz was the visual. Unlike earlier dance forms including the cotillions, quadrilles, and other square dances, the waltz featured an intimate coupling of partners. As a report in the *New Englander* raged, “In the former, the sexes meet with perfect propriety; in the latter, they publically embrace. The former are modest—the latter immodest. There can be no doubt that the round dances now in practice are essentially wrong. The waltzes and all that variety are a moral abomination.”<sup>35</sup> It was not only the close proximity between partners that made the waltz scandalous, but the loose morals the unrestrained physical movements of the dance suggested. Any young woman who danced the waltz was in danger of becoming ruined “property,” no longer able to be bartered and traded in a marriage contract.

The waltz thus challenged the emergent separate-sphere ideology of the industrial Revolution (1760–1840), which mandated the separation of labor along gender lines. In order for men to dedicate themselves entirely to the heightened demands of work in the public sphere, women were required to assume a new role in the private sphere, that of housewife. While before this time the division of household labor had been more equitably distributed, after the Industrial Revolution women became responsible for maintaining the home, rearing the children, and keeping their busy husbands content. They were expected to uphold moral standards and serve as role models for both their families and the broader community. Critics blamed the waltz with its chromatic inflections and metric destabilization for undermining women’s sense of moral obligation to both their families and to the broader public.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 49.

### “Sunday in Cicero Falls”

A woman’s obligation to the public stretched beyond the moral to the downright economic. As consumers, women sustained the need for domestic goods, and as producers, they raised future generations. Since the waltz had the power to ruin, it attacked an important pillar of social order. Harold Arlen exploits the destructive force of the waltz in the opening number for Act II of *Bloomer Girl*, “Sunday in Cicero Falls.” In this number, the community praises themselves for their Puritanical values, which Evalina turns upside down, exploiting the hypocrisy of the community’s moral standards.

As the light of Sunday morning casts a warm glow across the sidewalks of Cicero Falls, the local townspeople make their way to church to celebrate the Sabbath. Along the way, they describe the strict moral standards to which they are bound by society. The lyrics make several direct references to fashion—“collars are white,” and “shoes are brushed and shirts are starched”—reinforcing the notion of restrictive clothing as a metaphor for behavioral constraint.

**Women** Sunday in Cicero Falls  
In this lovely merry land  
Main street look like fairyland  
Where the angelus falls  
Shingles are bright  
Collars are white  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Hearts never blunder where  
Girls wear such underwear  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

**Men** Sunday in Cicero Falls  
Shoes are brushed and shirts are starched  
Hearts are pure and throats are parched  
Sabbath has fallen on cobbles and walls,  
Thank merciful heaven  
Just one day in seven is  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

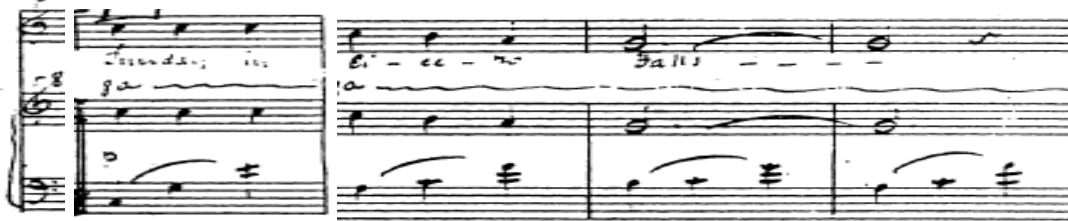
Boys may be quizzical  
But not too physical  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Boys don't spread rumors  
'Bout girls wearing bloomers  
On Sunday in Cicero Falls

Despite their grumblings, the townspeople, including the women, believe that such moral standards are necessary for the creation and preservation of social order. The role of clothing in this process is addressed in the lines “hearts never blunder where girls wear such underwear” and “boys don't spread rumors 'bout girls wearing bloomers.”

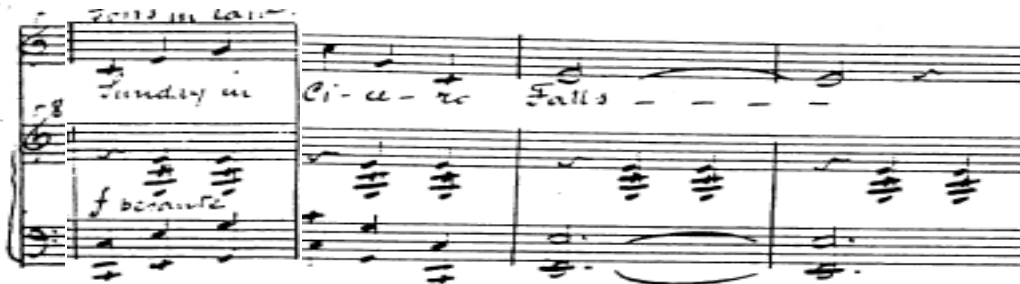
The conservative views of the community are further reflected in the musical structure of the song. “Sunday in Cicero Falls” is written as a waltz in AABA form in C Major. The first A section presents the women's perspective on life in Cicero Falls. It features a descending melodic line that moves in stepwise motion, and outlines a fourth, which again reflects the women's limited social mobility as the melodic line and the

characters to whom it belongs are not free to explore their full range of potential (see example 4).



Example 4: Women's melodic arch, "Sunday in Cicero Falls"

The second A section presents the men's perspective on life in Cicero Falls. There the melodic material outlines a broken chord over a full octave reflecting men's greater social freedom (see example 5).



Example 5: Men's melodic arch, "Sunday in Cicero Falls"

The two lines combine in the final reprise of the A section, where they are bound together by a third line featuring oscillating sixths that sound like the ringing of church bells, in what seems to be a celebration of traditional gender roles and the institution of marriage (see example 6).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Sunday in Cicero Falls". It features four staves. The top staff is for Evalina, with lyrics "Sunday in Cicero Falls". The second staff is for a vocal group, with lyrics "Sun - day". The third staff is for a vocal group, with lyrics "Men, who, at, going, to, Cicero". The bottom staff is for piano accompaniment. The score is in 3/4 time and B major. The lyrics are: "Sunday in Cicero Falls", "Sun - day", "Men, who, at, going, to, Cicero".

Example 6: Gender Counterpoint, "Sunday in Cicero Falls"

Following the conclusion of "Sunday in Cicero Falls," Evalina reprises the number as a solo in the key of B Major, chromatically undercutting the harmonic structure. She indulges in the destructive power of the waltz as she attacks the social pillars of order. She first reaffirms the beliefs of the community and then challenges them, exposing the townspeople as hypocrites through the satirical examples of bartender Murphy and old banker Hodge. These examples make passing reference to a less favorable Suffragette cause, temperance, which is for the most part tactfully avoided in the musical. They contrast the images of alcohol and camphor with the religious nature of the text. Other comical lines contrast sexual images with those of the church. Consider for example the lines "each Puritan buttock is laced to an inch" and "even the rabbits inhibit their habits."

Sunday in Cicero Falls  
With all this underpinnin'  
There who would think of sinnin' there  
When the angelus calls  
Morals are right  
Corsets are tight  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

The sinners join up with a virtuous fringe  
They pass the saloon with that righteous cringe  
And bartender Murphy remarks with a twinge  
"Virtue is its own revinge"  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Old banker Hodge with a nose for investment  
Is making his weekly appeal to the Testament  
He's giving his conscious its weekly repairing  
His morals are getting sabbatical airing  
He's taking his soul out of camphor calls  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

No maiden dare falter  
No widow dare flinch  
Each Puritan buttock is laced to an inch  
The boys may be itchin'  
But no one dost pinch  
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Even the rabbits inhibit their habits  
On Sunday in Cicero Falls.

The threat to social order posed in Evalina's reprise of "Sunday in Cicero Falls" is perceived not only by the audience, but by the fictional community depicted in the musical as well. Following Evalina's exit, the community sings a repetition of the counterpoint featured in the ensemble number as if attempting to reinforce traditional gender roles in which Evalina would not have a public voice. They are unable to silence her, however, as moments later the bloomer girls march through the town square



carrying signs advertising their forthcoming performance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and campaigning for the joint causes of women's rights and abolition. Soon thereafter, the police storm in to arrest Dolly, Evalina, and the bloomer girls on charges of public nuisance and disruption of social order. The destabilizing power of the waltz thus gives way to physical chaos on the stage. While it is impossible to know whether or not Arlen was consciously aware of the nineteenth-century view of the waltz as destabilizing, it is nevertheless clear that it is masterfully exploited in this scene.

### **The Jazz Style**

Thus far the score for *Bloomer Girl* has shown Arlen to be fluent in the classical style, but the composer was equally if not more proficient in the jazz idioms popular in the clubs and ballrooms of the age. This style, typically avoided in the conservative 1940s musical, is proudly showcased in some of the scores most memorable numbers including "Evalina" and "T'Morra'." The nature of the text in these numbers helps to create an association between jazz and a subversive construction of femininity.

#### "Evalina"

The first time Evalina sings in *Bloomer Girl* she sings not as herself, but as the "other." The incident occurs in the first act of the musical when Jeff mistakes Evalina for the Applegate family maid, Daisy. He regales her with "Evalina," an old plantation song.

She takes advantage of wearing the mask of otherness and turns the tables on him, singing his lines in her own voice in a display of female empowerment.<sup>36</sup>

The text of the song features erotic imagery of ripened fruit and youthful longing, suggesting Jeff's sexual intentions.

Evalina, won't ya ever take a shine to that moon?  
Evalina ain't you bothered by the bobolink's tune?  
Tell me, tell me how long  
You're gonna keep delayin' the day  
Don't ya' reckon' it's wrong  
Triflin' with April this way?  
Evalina, won't ya' pay a little mind to me soon?  
Wake up! Wake up!  
The Earth is fair, the fruit is fine  
But what's the use of smellin' watermelon  
Clingin' to another fellow's vine?  
Evalina, won't ya roll off that vine and be mine?

The sexualized nature of the text is reinforced by the musical language, which draws upon the sensual idioms of jazz, including highly-chromatic melodic lines, strategically placed blue notes such as the one that occurs on the word "watermelon," and swing rhythms (see example 7). By restating Jeff's sexual intentions in her own voice, Evalina shows that she is an empowered woman comfortable with expressing her own sexuality.

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<sup>36</sup> According to undated drafts of the script, Harburg intended Daisy to be an African-American woman who had come to the North in search of work after escaping the bonds of slavery via the Underground Railroad. This adds an extra dimension to the "othering" in this scene.

Moderato (With rhythm)

*F* *ve-li-na, won't ya pay a lit-tle mind to me soon?*

*Wake up! wake up! The*

*earth is fair, the fruit is fine. — But what's the use o' smel-lin'*

*wa-ter-mel-on cling-in' to an-oth-er fel-las vine?*

*E - va - li - na won't ya roll off that vine and be*

*Evelina: You forgot the most romantic part...*

*mine?*

Example 7: The jazz style in “Evalina”

Throughout the course of the song, Evalina also shows that she is a world-wise woman who holds no naïve views about romance. She links the themes of love and money, showing her disdain for the institution of marriage in which the union of man and woman is treated as a business contract.

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Evalina</b> | Evalina, won't ya ever take a shine to that moon?<br>Our lives could be a perfect hitch<br>'Cause you're so handsome, I'm so rich<br>Evalina, ain't ya bothered by the bobolink's tune? |
| <b>Jeff</b>    | I'd be content with only you  |
| <b>Evalina</b> | And just a chambermaid or two<br>Tell me, tell me how long<br>You're gonna keep delayin' the day<br>Don't ya reckon its wrong<br>Triffin' with finance this way?                        |

The purpose of “Evalina” within the dramatic action thus seems to be to show Evalina as equal to her male counterpart. She not only physically takes over Jeff’s lines, but when the pair comes together to sing the final words, a comparison of their vocal lines reveals a power struggle, which reaches a climax on the dissonant juxtaposition of the pitches E and D on the word “vine,” which resolves on the word “mine,” notably featuring Jeff’s voice on the upper pitch for it is only in the last moment that he is able to reassert his power (see example 8). The jazz style in “Evalina” thus creates a subversive construction of femininity that contrasts with the traditional femininity associated with the classical style.

Handwritten musical score for "Evalina". The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats. It features two vocal parts, Ev and Jeff, and piano accompaniment. The lyrics for both vocalists are "mine? Roll off that vine and be". The piano part includes dynamic markings like "mf" and "f", and chord symbols such as "Bb7" and "A7". The second system shows a dramatic moment with a double bar line and expressive markings like "L.H." and "C".

Example 8: Power struggle in "Evalina

"T'Morra"

The association between the jazz style and a subversive construct of femininity is further clarified in "T'Morra." Here, Daisy makes a strong argument for the cause of Women's Rights, challenging the audience to "never put off till tomorrow what you can do today."

T'Morra is that better day,  
 With rainbows in the sky  
 That's the picture people like to paint  
 But while I seek that better day  
 The years keep flying by  
 And lots of things that should be happening ain't!  
 Till fin-ally there comes this revelation  
 T'Morra is the curse of civilization

She cleverly links her frustration with the state of women's rights with her own sexual frustrations. She simultaneously questions the virtue of preserving her own virginity and denying herself the carnal pleasures she craves, and the virtue of preserving the status

quo and denying women equal rights. In so doing, she exploits the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the word “utopia.”

T’Morra, t’morra  
Livin’ for t’morra  
Why is t’morra better than today?  
T’Morra, t’morra  
Waitin’ for t’morra  
My aunt became a spinster that way.

T’Morra, t’morra  
It dawns on me with horra  
Loves getting’ far away  
T’Morra, t’morra  
Why can’t a lady borra’  
A little tomorra’ tonight

The present, the present  
The present is so pleasant  
What am I savin’ it for?  
Progressive, progressive, I’d rather be concessive  
My heart is raisin’ a row!  
Utopia, Utopia  
Don’t be a dope ya’ dope ya’  
Get your Utopia now!

The sexual undertone of the lyrics is brought out in the score through rising melodic lines, sensual chromaticism, and swaggering swing rhythms, borrowing from the jazz style (see example 9).

With steady rhythm

REFRAIN

Mos - ra, t' mor - ra  
Mos - ra, t' mor - ra, it

liv - in' for t' mor - ra, Why is t' mor - ra  
dawns on me with har - ra, Love's get - tin' far - a -

bet - ter than e' - day? - mos - ra, t' mor - ra  
Way out o' sight - mos - ra, t' mor - ra Why

look in for t' mor - ra, By just be - come a spint - er that  
can't a la - dy gar - ra, A lit - tle of t' mor - ra to

way, The fu - ture, the fu - ture, It's  
night the pres - ent, the pres - ent, The

al - ways in the fu - ture (5) What's the mat - ter with  
pres - ent is so pleas - ant What am I saw - in' it

cresc. dim.

now? post - pon' in' post - pon - in' A  
far? Pro - gres - sive pro - gres - sive I'd

Example 9: The jazz style in "T'Morra"

As if the sexuality of “T’morra” was not overt enough, Daisy also performs a provocative (but not explicit) strip tease while singing the song, adding a visual component to the expression of her desire (see figure 4).



Figure 4: Joan McCracken performs a provocative strip tease as Daisy in *Bloomer Girl*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Eileen Darby Images Incorporated. <http://www.eileendarby.com/?s=A00347&v=11125d>.



## Musical Anomalies

While careful analysis thus shows that the dichotomy between the classical and jazz styles in the score represents the breakdown of gender boundaries that occurs within the plot of the musical, there is one important song that is an outlier to this analysis: “It was Good Enough for Grandma, But it Ain’t Good Enough for Us.” As the most significant expression of feminism in *Bloomer Girl*, this song demands attention.

As a feminist anthem, “It was Good Enough for Grandma, But it Ain’t Good Enough for Us,” stands apart from the other numbers discussed here. The text decries the historical separation of the public and private spheres along gender lines, which condemned women to a life defined by the four-walls of the home. The lyrics, while witty, convey real anger towards men as the perpetrators of this oppression.

Grandma was a lady  
She sowed and cleaned and cooked  
She scrubbed her pots  
And raised her tots  
The dear old gal was hooked!  
She stitched her little stitches  
Her life was applesauce  
The thing that wore the britches was boss.

When granny was a lassie  
That tyrant known as man  
Thought women’s place  
Was just the space  
Around the frying pan  
He made the world his oyster  
Now it ain’t worth a cuss  
This oyster he can’t foister on us.

Later in the song, the lyrics also serve as a call to action, encouraging women to fight for their rights as equal citizens in the democracy of the United States:

We won the revolution  
In 1776  
Who says its nix  
For us to mix  
Our sex with politics  
We've bigger seas to swim in  
And bigger world's to slice  
Oh sisters, are we women or mice?

At one point, the text suggests that women take control of the political situation by refusing to create future generations of tyrants by not giving birth.

Look twice before you step on  
The fair sex of the earth  
Beware our secret weapon  
We could stop giving birth...  
Take that for what it's worth!

These lyrics may be a veiled reference to birth control, which was a contested topic in both the time of the musical's setting and its production. The first commercially produced condoms and diaphragms were produced in 1838, the controversy of which led to the Comstock Act of 1873 prohibiting the advertisement and distribution of birth control. In an act of social disobedience, Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States in 1916. The next year she was arrested for "maintaining a public nuisance," and she served thirty days in prison. Upon her release she immediately re-opened her clinic, and she continued to be persecuted by the authorities. In 1938, a federal judge lifted the ban on birth control and diaphragms became popular with women of all races and socio-economic backgrounds. Later, in the 1950s, Sanger would begin the research that would ultimately lead to the development of the birth control pill.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "A Brief History of Birth Control," *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book/companion.asp?id=18&compID=53> (accessed April 26, 2013).

The text culminates by insisting that women stop the cycle of oppression, declaring once and for all that what was “good enough for grandma ain’t good enough for us.” The closing lines also re-focus the audience’s attention on fashion as the center of the debate about women’s rights.

It was good enough for grandma  
That good old gal  
With her frills and her feathers and fuss  
It was good enough for grandma  
Good enough for grandma  
But it ain’t good enough for us!

Mimicking the style of a nineteenth-century protest song, in “It was Good Enough for Grandma” Arlen creates music that is accessible enough to be sung by a crowd. The number features a tuneful melody in a low tessitura and a narrow range, which continually reinforces the tonic note. The straightforward nature of the melody helps to facilitate the communal participation integral to the performance of protest music. It likewise makes it possible to perform the number while moving with relative ease, as in a march (see example 10).

Chorus (same tempo)

Good e-nough for grandma that good old gal with her frills and her feathers and fuss - It was good e-nough for grandma good e-nough for grandma But it aint good e-nough for us.

Example 10: Choral ensemble, “It Was Good Enough for Grandma.”

The musical features of “It was Good Enough for Grandma” are unusual for a song performed by the musical’s heroine. The low tessitura in particular demands that the number be performed in the chest voice. This fact is significant because the tessitura of a song often suggest the singer’s level of training and vocal technique, which in turn reveals the class distinction of the singer and the character he or she portrays. Since a trained singing voice was both a marker of class and of feminine accomplishment, the

heroines of the musical stage most often sing in a high vocal range produced by the head voice. Evalina's rejection of this singing style here symbolizes her broader rejection of a traditional understanding of femininity.

In sum, the women in *Bloomer Girl* dramatically and musically defy both traditional understandings of femininity and the narrow limitations of Rodgers and Hammerstein's stock character types. As we will see in the next chapter, the subversive representation of women in *Bloomer Girl* facilitates a political agenda very different from that of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. While most musicals of the age projected a rose-colored image of the United States that justified America's involvement in World War II and increased morale on the homefront, *Bloomer Girl* takes a more critical look at the country. In doing so, *Bloomer Girl* offers a cautionary tale that warns about the domestic perils of discrimination by calling attention to a time period in American history characterized by racism and sexism.

## Chapter 4: Intertextual Politics

When World War II broke out in Europe, the United States was determined to maintain a neutral stance, but the nation found itself gradually drawn towards the conflict. In the beginning, President Franklin Roosevelt recognized that the conflict threatened US security, and looked for ways to support the democratic governments of Europe without directly engaging in war. The necessity of US support became increasingly apparent, however, in June 1940, when the fall of France left Great Britain the only democracy standing between Nazi Germany and America. In March 1941, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act, which “permitted the lending, leasing, selling, or bartering of arms, ammunition of food to any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States.” The navy and air force began to escort British convoys that transported Lend-Lease materials across the Atlantic, protecting them from attacks by German submarines. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill repeatedly urged President Roosevelt to join the war, but the President maintained his stance. Then on December 7, 1941, unprovoked, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States was officially thrust into war.<sup>1</sup>

The United States entrance into the war had a profound impact on nearly all facets of American life. Food, gas, and clothing were rationed. Civilians collected scrap metal to help fill the need for material to build weapons. Women entered the work force, finding employment as electricians, welders, and riveters. Japanese-Americans were stripped of their rights and their property, and sent to live in internment camps. It is

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<sup>1</sup> World War II U.S. Entry and Alliance. <http://www.history.co.uk/explore-history/ww2/us-entry-and-alliance.html>.

hardly surprising, therefore, that the impact of war was also felt in the entertainment industry. People clung to their radios, eager for news about the war raging abroad. Films were commandeered for the spread of propaganda, and musical theater became a vehicle for patriotic fervor. In this section, I will situate *Bloomer Girl* within the historical context of World War II, and show that the subversive construction of femininity in the musical evokes a controversial political message.

### **Theater of Peace**

The American musical—derived from earlier forms of burlesque, minstrelsy, and comic operetta—has long served as a forum for social and political commentary. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such commentary often took the form of satire. In the musical satire, the composer and lyricist present an attack against a contemporary public target either concrete (such as an individual or organization) or abstract (such as an ideology). As a form of humor, satire attempts to render its subject ridiculous through mockery, reveling in distortion, absurdity, and the grotesque. The genre is not interested in the emotions and passions of the individual, but the larger concerns of society, and it is often employed by the powerless against the powerful in an attempt to challenge the status quo. Not surprisingly, given the growing social tensions of the 1930s, the musical satire thrived during the period between the world wars, reaching its peak during the Great Depression with such memorable shows as *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1934), and *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937).

In music, satire draws upon the work of English and French composers, including John Gay, Jacques Offenbach, and of course, W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

Throughout the nineteenth century, musical satires, appealed more than operettas to working class audiences. During World War I, when American audiences shunned operetta along with anything else that smacked of the Teutonic, satirical shows also become popular with the upper class. Satirical musicals thrived in the period between the world wars, reaching their peak during the Great Depression. As a result of the violent realities of World War II, musical satires became far less popular. The humor and fantasy of these musicals seemed somehow wrong in contrast to the reality of destruction. Satirical musicals were thus largely replaced by a new strain of patriotic musical. *Bloomer Girl* occupies the transitional space between the satirical musical and the advent of the patriotic musical.<sup>2</sup>

### **Theater of War: The American Musical in the 1940s**

During World War II, the United States government exploited musical theater as a public space for the performance of propaganda. Many musicals from this era promoted nationalistic mythologies that provided reassuring answers to inward-looking questions of what it meant to be American, and outward-looking queries of what America's rise as a world power meant to the world.<sup>3</sup> Central to the mythologies in these musicals were themes of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny.

The term "exceptionalism" did not enter common parlance until relatively recently, though the concept dates back far in American history. In a database search of

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<sup>2</sup> Alisa, C. Roost, "The Other Musical Theatre: Political Satire in Broadway Musicals: From Strike Up the Band (1927) to Anyone Can Whistle (1964)," (Ph.D. diss. The City University of New York, 2001), 1–13.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 119.



the social sciences, James W. Caesar finds that “exceptionalism” does not appear in any of the literature until the late 1950s with the publication of Max Lerner’s critical study *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today* (1957). There is one notable exception, however. In a thesis proposed by Jay Lovestone, the leader of the American Communist Party in the 1920s, the author maintained that the United States was independent of the Marxist laws of history “thanks to its natural resources, industrial capacity, and absence of rigid class distinctions.” Lovestone drew heavy criticism from Joseph Stalin who demanded that he renounce the “heresy of American exceptionalism.” Thus, the term seems to have originated in etic discourse. Even so, exceptionalism is unquestionably a relatively new addition to the American vernacular.<sup>4</sup>

As a concept, exceptionalism can be traced back to the seventeenth-century Englishman John Winthrop, a passenger travelling to the New World aboard the *Arabella*. Winthrop described the Puritan settlement to be established there as “the city on the hill,” noting that “the eyes of all people are upon us.”<sup>5</sup> His words have echoed through the centuries, and are remembered today for their memorable quotation in President Ronald Reagan’s 1989 farewell address, in which they are embellished as the “shining city upon a hill.”

I’ve spoken of the shining city all my life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls

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<sup>4</sup> James W. Caesar, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” *American Political Thought* (2012), 8.

<sup>5</sup> John Winthrop, quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still.<sup>6</sup>

Another important figure pointed to in the early history of the concept is the nineteenth-century French politician and historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who noted in his scientific study of democracy in the United States: “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.”<sup>7</sup>

American exceptionalism refers to the belief that the United States is fundamentally different from other world nations, but it does not necessarily imply superiority. There are many scholarly theories that seek to explain the exceptional character of the United States.<sup>8</sup> These theories draw upon a set of criteria, which much like the nation itself are simultaneously sacred and secular. The most common theories of exceptionalism fall into two categories, which I will designate “revolutionary” and “frontier.”

In the “revolutionary” theory of exceptionalism, the superiority of the United States is attributed to the Revolutionary War period, and the many ways in which the US expressed its independence from Great Britain, including the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1783). As G. K. Chesterton observes, “America is the only nation in the world founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Reagan, quoted in *ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> “Scholars debate American exceptionalism in new journal” (<http://phys.org/wire-news/96914614/scholars-debate-american-exceptionalism-in-new-journal.html>), accessed April 4, 2013.

dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>9</sup> In the frontier theory of exceptionalism by contrast, the superiority of the United States is attributed to the nation’s plentiful land and abundance of natural resources. These resources are seen as the direct result of the hard work called for by the American work ethic. Social mobility and immigrant assimilation are linked to the acquisition of material wealth, which is in turn linked to the acceptance of American values including that of hard work.

American exceptionalism is closely tied to the concept of Manifest Destiny. The term was first coined by the newspaper editor John O’Sullivan in 1845 to describe the westward expansion that swept the nation in the decades following the War of 1812. This westward expansion was driven in part by economic incentives, but it was also motivated by religious fervor. Historian Frederick Merk defines Manifest Destiny in religious terms as, “A sense of mission to redeem the Old World by example generated by the potentialities of a new earth for building a new heaven.”<sup>10</sup>

The religious view of Manifest Destiny was reflected in the visual artwork of the period. In John Gast’s *American Progress*, arguably the most famous depiction of Manifest Destiny, the figure of Columbia—a common personification of the United States modeled after the muses of Ancient Greece, the goddesses of inspiration for literature, science, and the arts—leads American settlers westward. In her hands she

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<sup>9</sup> G.K. Chesterton as quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset, “American Exceptionalism” A Double Edged Sword,” *The Washington Post* ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/americanexceptionalism.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/americanexceptionalism.htm)), accessed 4/3/2013.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3.

holds a schoolbook and telegraph wire, representing the spread of civilization westward. The various depictions of the settlers illustrate different stages of economic activity and developments in transportation (see figure 5).



Figure 5: “Manifest Destiny” as depicted in John Gast’s *American Progress*, 1872

Although Manifest Destiny is primarily considered a nineteenth-century phenomenon, three of the core principles associated with this concept can still be found in American society today: virtue, mission, and destiny. In the modern sense, Manifest Destiny refers to the belief that Americans are destined to spread democracy across the globe. This belief, which drives American foreign policy in the twenty-first century, originated in the World War II era when the United States Government intervened in global conflict to stop the spread of communism and fascism, which it perceived as a direct threat to the nation.

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<sup>11</sup> John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. Chromolithograph published by George A. Crofutt. Copyright Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

During the World War II era, themes of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny began to appear in American popular culture with increasing prominence. As Raymond Knapp explains, the themes of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny in musicals from this era are most often presented through a comparison of European and American models of nationalism.<sup>12</sup> This comparison is based on contemporary American perspectives; it is heavily biased against European nationalism, perhaps intentionally so. Thus, any discussion of the comparison affected in these musicals must be approached with this in mind.

In the European model of nationalism, developed during the nineteenth century, nation building was accomplished through the unification of an autonomous people with their rightful land. This approach to the formation of a nation sought to answer questions of belonging, and in so doing both enfranchise and disenfranchise particular groups. European nationalism drew upon both myth and history, using the past to justify one group's claim to a land and its economic benefits over that of another. It sometimes drew upon the rhetoric of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection employing a kind of racism backed by an unrelated body of scientific research.

European nationalism was problematic for Americans who recognized themselves as having European roots and who thus were living in a country to which they did not belong, since their ancestral land and their past were located across the Atlantic Ocean. This fed an American sense of cultural inferiority. Americans thus developed a new nationalism, which celebrated the politics of inclusion. This new inclusive nationalism

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<sup>12</sup> The following discussion of European and American nationalism as portrayed in musical theater of the World War II era is drawn from Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, 119–122.

resolved Americans sense of displacement because in the United States the notion of belonging is not based on shared history or land ownership (in the United States individuals, not groups, hold rights, including property rights). This idea is based on an ideological commitment to the democratic principles of “liberty, justice, and equality for all” (the word “all” in this case ignoring the historical discrimination against minorities and women). Regardless of race, religion, or creed, anyone can make the choice to commit to these principles. Thus people who had lost their place in Europe could find it in America and things that did not work in Europe could be made to work in America. American mythology valued the “melting pot” as opposed to the “pure strain” of European nationalism.

American mythologies did borrow some tropes from European models. Both value simple goodness, for example, which is most often found in the rural countryside and not the modern urban center. A clear depiction of the similarities and differences between European and American nationalism can be seen in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*

### **Politics on the Western Frontier: *Oklahoma!***

On the surface, *Oklahoma!* appears to be a simple love story, but there is a strong political subtext. According to theater scholars Bruce Kirle and Andrea Most, *Oklahoma!* supported our involvement in the war effort by offering a comparison of European and American values and showing the superiority of the latter.<sup>13</sup> The musical

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<sup>13</sup> This discussion of politics in *Oklahoma!* is drawn from Bruce Kirle, “Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in American Consciousness,” *Theater Journal* 55, no (Spring, 2003) 251–74 and Andrea Most “We

directly addresses the interventionist/isolationist debate that preceded American involvement in World War II, providing a solution through the politics of assimilation. Before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, America was divided between interventionists, who wanted to join the Allied forces and fight fascism, which they perceived as a threat to American democracy and human rights, and isolationists, who believed that America should not interfere in European affairs. Although Roosevelt's administration was officially neutral, New Deal liberals were linked with interventionists whereas conservatives were linked with the isolationists

In *Oklahoma!* the fragmentation of American society between the isolationists and interventionists is represented by the conflict between the farmhand Jud, who embodies isolationist attitudes, and the cowboy Curly, who embodies interventionist attitudes. The character of Jud is concerned with fulfilling his own needs at the expense of those of the community. He is a sexualized bully, a threat to decency, and thus linked to the fascists in Europe who posed a threat to civilized order. In the course of the musical, Curly is forced to murder Jud in self-defense when, unprovoked, Jud initiates a fight, a metaphor for the German aggressors. The necessity of Curly's actions represents the interventionists' belief in the necessity that Americans must be willing to fight to defend themselves and their countrymen in World War II, despite the opposition posed by their more civilized nature.

As part of the interventionist/isolationist debate, *Oklahoma!* also addresses the rampant anti-Semitism that characterized the 1940s, much of which centered on the "Hollywood question." Isolationists often accused the media and entertainment industry,

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Know We Belong to the Land': The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*," *PMLA* 113, no.1 (Winter, 1998) 78–89.

which was perceived as predominantly Jewish, of trying to coerce the United States into joining the war effort because of self-interested motivation. In *Oklahoma!* Rodgers and Hammerstein fashion a mythologized American Utopia in which middle-class values could potentially be inclusive of ethnic outsiders, like Jews, through the character of Ali Hakim.

A Persian, Ali Hakim represents the ethno-racial other. His profession as a peddler positions him as a Jew. His Jewishness is attested to by his Semitic speech inflection, love of haggling, and humorous tendency to wallow in self-pity. As a character, Ali Hakim represents the clown. By turning the Jew into a comedic character Hammerstein undercuts American anti-Semitic rhetoric during World War II. He negates the notion of the Jew as a danger to American society. The play ends with Hakim's resentful acceptance of marriage to Ado Annie, a metaphor for assimilation into American society. Jews strove to associate themselves with the founding myths of America in order to illustrate that America was *already* Jewish.

In the musical Ali Hakim argues for the acceptance of Jews into the fabric of American society by contrasting Jews and African Americans, and showing the latter as the greater threat. Hakim, like Jewish Americans during World War II, acts as a mediator between Jud (the outsider) and Curly (the insider). Jud metaphorically represents the racialized Other who cannot be whitened (such as African and Native Americans). The emphasis that Jewish writers often placed on ethnic inclusiveness did not stop them from perpetuating racial stereotypes about blacks. Jews (and many other immigrant groups in the early twentieth century) found that a powerful strategy for becoming fully American was to adopt the prejudices of whites towards blacks as their own. Jews in show business



used blackface as a way of aligning themselves with the dominant white culture. Unlike the African American, the stereotyped Jewish character channels his perceived savagery within the socially acceptable. As deranged and driven by sexual desire Jud is portrayed not only as the African American outsider, but also the Native American outsider, as suggested by the musical's setting in the setting in Indian Territory and his lyrical characterization with dim-witted, short ungrammatical phrases, and preoccupation with sex.

The fragmentation of community in *Oklahoma!* is hypothetically resolved when the territory of Oklahoma becomes a state. It is likewise represented by the two marriages that occur in the musical's finale: Curly to Laurie, and Ali-Hakim to Ado Annie. The unity of two individuals as one through marriage illustrates the process of assimilation, a core value of American nationalism. The celebration of marriage when considered in a political reading of the musical can be viewed as a celebration of American—rather than European—nationalism.

### **Politics on the Eastern Shore: *Bloomer Girl!***

As the successor to Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* many scholars have analyzed the political commentary in *Bloomer Girl* under the misguided assumption that the two must express similar views. As Ethan Mordden writes, "Most of all it [*Bloomer Girl*] owed to Rodgers and Hammerstein a new way of conceiving of musicals that was very relevant to the wartime 1940s. The art of *Bloomer Girl*—how it looked, moved, sang—was very strongly derived from *Oklahoma!*"<sup>14</sup> While it is true that in *Bloomer Girl*

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<sup>14</sup> Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'*, 98.

Harburg and Arlen draw upon the example of Rodgers and Hammerstein to exploit the musical as a public forum for addressing the social tensions surrounding World War II, the way in which they address the war is markedly different from the Rodgers and Hammerstein model. Interestingly, the difference between the political messages achieved in the two musicals centers around their portrayal of women.

In his widely accepted analysis of the musical, Mordden argues that *Bloomer Girl*, with its clear focus on the issue of women's rights, justified America's involvement in the war effort by establishing Americans as the good guy:

Good guys have a sense of humor, dance well, try not to be racist, and sing Irving Berlin songs. Alternatively, good guys ride horses, try to get along with their neighbors, and sing Rodgers and Hammerstein. But they don't jail or sue the bad guy: they kill him. You have to or he'll keep coming at you. So, in many different ways, the wartime musical took a look at why we *were* the good guys. According to Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg's *Bloomer Girl* it was because of feminism.<sup>15</sup>

By exploring the nineteenth-century plight of women in the United States in the context of the contemporary plight of minorities in Europe, Arlen and Harburg trumpet the belief that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," a clear expression of support for the nation's involvement in the war effort overseas. As Harburg himself once explained, *Bloomer Girl* is about the "indivisibility of human freedom."<sup>16</sup> Arlen and Harburg are careful however to show that they do not take the call to war lightly.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,97.

<sup>16</sup> Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, 187.

## The Civil War Ballet

The score for *Bloomer Girl* features a Civil War ballet, choreographed by Agnes de Mille. The ballet begins starkly, with no music save for the beating bass drum, which summons the men to war. The women bid farewell to their husbands and sons as strains of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” quietly fill the air. Following the men’s exit, the women are left to await their return in a clear parallel of *Bloomer Girl’s* opening scene, in which the Applegate daughters await the arrival of their travelling salesman husbands.

As the ballet continues, the women depict both the inward fears they face, and the outward calm expected of them, while they eagerly anticipate news from the warfront. The choreography shows the women pacing and alternately dissolving into tears, as they continue to partake in social rituals like dancing, cooking, and cleaning. Meanwhile the orchestra plays “It Was Good Enough for Grandma.”

Suddenly, the church bells ring, announcing the end of the war. The orchestra plays strains from “When the Boys Come Home” as the women are reunited with their loved ones. All except for one poor widow that is, who dramatically races through the crowd in search of her husband, never to find him. The ballet ends as life in Cicero Falls returns to normal, while the widow, dressed in black, stands center stage with her hands outstretched in a passionate outpouring of grief, unable to go on.

As the Civil War ballet shows, *Bloomer Girl* is not a purely nationalistic musical; it also draws upon earlier elements of satire, taking a critical view of American society. This view is supported by Alisa C. Roost, who, in her dissertation on political satire, explains that in *Bloomer Girl*, “the political comments are made primarily through

sentimental appeals, with some incidental satire.”<sup>17</sup> The influence of satire in *Bloomer Girl* is further apparent when one undertakes a serious consideration of the musical’s setting.

*Bloomer Girl* setting in the months before the Civil War depicts the United States in the unflattering light, not as a unified nation that stands for democracy, but rather of a nation divided over the issue of controlling humanity. Whereas *Oklahoma!* contrasts American and European values, *Bloomer Girl* juxtaposes American values against themselves. This raises interesting questions about the true role of feminism as the central focus of the plot in *Bloomer Girl*.

While the issues of women’s rights, and to a lesser degree, emancipation, are explored in the musical, neither minority group achieves the full victory of equal rights within the time frame of the dramatic action. Because Arlen and Harburg present the female characters as strong, independent, and willful women with whom the audience becomes entranced—not as shallow “namby-pambies” (a word favored by the silver-tongued Yip Harburg) who fit nicely into the confines of a well-defined stock-character type—this fact is foreground in any careful reading of the musical.

Through their portrayal of women in *Bloomer Girl*, Arlen and Harburg encourage Americans to look at the domestic threats to freedom, most notably: racism and sexism. Indeed, although they do not engage in direct comparison, they seem to suggest that the atrocities in Europe could easily have occurred in the United States. Harburg and Arlen show that we as a nation should not become complacent with the status quo, because complacency is a breeding ground for sexism and other such intolerance.

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<sup>17</sup> Alisa, C. Roost, “The Other Musical Theatre: Political Satire in Broadway Musicals,” 287.

In an interview about *Bloomer Girl* Harburg explained: “we were trying to deal with the inherent fear of change—to show whenever a new idea or a new change in society arises, there’ll always be a majority that will fight you, that will call you a dirty radical or a red.”<sup>18</sup> When interpreted in the context of *Bloomer Girl*’s final scene, where the United States government takes control of Horace Applegate’s hoopskirt factory and converts it to the manufacture of bloomer for the war effort, Harburg’s statement seems to express support President Roosevelt’s New Deal, legislation which enfranchised many minorities, including poor women and African Americans, to the chagrin of many conservatives. Thus, the musical attacked opposition to diversity in the 1940s.

Harburg also left behind this word of encouragement for those who will continue to fight for the rainbow of diversity in a speech appropriately titled “I Got a Song,” named after a song taken from *Bloomer Girl*’s first act.

Ever since the famous contract between God and Noah, which was confirmed and blessed by the sign of the rainbow, man has been pursuing that arc in living color, hoping to make it his own; and our own minstrels have aided and abetted in that survey with song and slogan.

Neither I, nor any of my generation, did latch on to the rainbow- so we can’t hand it down to you. But we can give you the songs that kept us hanging in- and by hanging on to our laughter; affection and a certain grace. After all, songs have always been the world’s anodyne against tyranny and terror. Rarely ever can you throw the fellow who can rise and shout—I got a song.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist*, 187.

<sup>19</sup> “I Got a Song” (Speech), E.Y. Harburg Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

## Conclusions

Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg's 1944 musical *Bloomer Girl* has often been relegated to the margins of theater history, a mere footnote in the narrative of the successful musicals produced during the Rodgers and Hammerstein era. As this thesis has shown however, *Bloomer Girl* occupies a unique place in the development of the American musical. Standing at a crossroads between the musical revue and the book musical, and between satire and patriotism, *Bloomer Girl* is a transitional musical.

As a transitional musical, *Bloomer Girl's* success lies in the ability of its creators to explore feminism through the lens of the safe and the temporary. In *Bloomer Girl*, the composer and lyricist explore a nineteenth-century dress reform movement, which re-emerged during the wartime 1940s, and which was accepted in both periods because it was viewed as a temporary change. Arlen and Harburg take advantage of this temporary shift in the attitudes towards women and women's dress to explore feminist themes well before the heyday of the modern Women's Liberation Movement. In doing so they engage in a surprisingly critical political commentary about the United States. In the future, it would be interesting to re-examine this musical within the historical context of its later interpretations, including those at the Goodspeed Opera House in the 1970s and 1980s during the Second Wave of Feminism, and *Center City Encores* post- 9/11 America.

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