

## **‘What about love?’: claiming and re-claiming LGBTQ+ spaces in 21st century musical theatre**

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‘Broadway: Not Just For Gays Anymore’, the opening number to the 65th Tony Awards in 2011 at the Beacon Theatre, presents an affectionate parody of the long-established trope that musical theatre is a homosexual art form. David Javerbaum and Adam Schlesinger’s musical number used cast members from Tony-nominated musicals to ostensibly bolster the heterosexual credentials of the musical, whilst the music resembled ‘The Company Way’ from *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* (1961) and the vintage choreography paid homage to Busby Berkeley with its use of box steps, kick lines and canon. The ambiguity of these heterosexual / homosexual overtones was embodied in Neil Patrick Harris, a gay actor then best known to the general public for his role as womanising Barney Stinson in *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014). The performance simultaneously proclaimed inclusivity for a heterosexual (male) audience whilst continuing to display the level of ‘camp’ traditionally associated with musical theatre.

The success of the number relies on the myth about musical theatre and homosexuality continuing to have currency for both the TV audience and, as Grace Barnes’s notes, as an ‘in-joke’ for theatre professionals sat in the auditorium (2015, p.109). The stereotype clearly reaches further into popular culture than this, as exemplified in a 2003 episode of *The Simpsons* where Grady, a gay character, tells Homer that ‘almost anyone who’s ever written, starred in, or even *seen* a play is gay’ (Kirkland, 2003). As David Halperin writes, ‘a stereotype doesn’t have to be generally valid in order to contain some truth’ (2012, p.91), and there is evidence in the work of D. A. Miller (1998) and John Clum (1999) that gay men in the 1950s and 1960s had a special relationship with musicals. Yet even the fact that musical theatre has changed

since the high camp of Golden Age shows such as *Funny Girl* (1963) and *Mame* (1966) has done little to dispel the narrative of homosexuality that surrounds the genre.

The early 21st century has seen an increase in explicit representations of queer characters in musical theatre. Until recently, the majority of queer characters portrayed in musicals were gay men who largely adhere to three narrative tropes that might be labelled as the 'drag queen', the 'drama queen' and the 'dancing queen'. Clum's suggestion that 'Broadway's version of a gay musical is always problematic, foregrounding a comforting, stereotypical version of gayness for the bus-and-tunnel crowd' (1999, p.10) resonates with the use of these tropes, which often minimise the 'queerness' of the characters involved.

### **The Drag Queen**

Musical theatre has a long history of characters in drag, although such characters were largely used for comic value until the 1970s. Since then, drag has often been used as a mask for queer characters. In the case of characters such as the Emcee in *Cabaret* (1966) and Frank-n-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), it serves to maximise their sexual ambiguity by allowing the maximum possible gender combinations in sexual partnerships. Contrastingly, Albin's female persona of Zaza in *La Cage Aux Folles* allows him to access aspects of his personality that his own persona does not achieve. John Clum notes that Albin's use of drag allows the audience to identify Albin and Georges as 'a classic butch-femme couple' and criticises the 'conservative' values of the musical, noting that the love duet 'Song on the Sand' could be applicable to any middle-aged couple regardless of gender (1999, p.14). Nevertheless, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (2005) explores the differences between the gender and sexual identities of the three drag queens effectively, in particular through its treatment of Bernadette as a transgender character, although musicals such as *Closer to Heaven* (2001) and *The Producers* (2001) do not always differentiate clearly between the original character and their

drag persona, resulting in an uncomfortable conflation between drag and homosexuality that is not altogether absent from characters such as Michael in *Billy Elliot* (2005).

### **The Drama Queen**

In 2013, James Rawson noted in his film blog for *The Guardian* that 56.5% of Academic-Award nominated portrayals of gay, bisexual and transsexual characters died by the end of their respective films compared to 16.5% of heterosexual characters. In fact, Rawson notes that only four of the 23 gay, bisexual and transsexual characters get a happy ending across his 19-year survey (Rawson, 2013). The tendency to kill off or otherwise punish gay characters is also prominent in musical theatre history, resulting in a ‘drama queen’ trope that results in many gay protagonists failing to find a happy ending.

One of the earliest examples of the ‘drama queen’ trope comes in *A Chorus Line*, where Paul, a Puerto Rican ex-drag queen, falls and injures himself during a tap sequence. This ensures that Paul does not make the final selection of eight dancers for the chorus line (and neither does Greg, the other openly queer character) and thus frustrates Paul’s possible happy ending in a violent manner. Paul’s life story was apparently based on Nicholas Dante, one of the book writers (Viagas et al, 2006, pp.101-102), and it is possible that there is a sense of cathartic relief in this depiction. Indeed, given the backdrop of the AIDS crisis and the subsequent backlash against queer sexualities, it is unsurprising that many queer characters of the 1980s and 1990s met an untimely end in musical theatre. The depiction of Marvin’s partner Whizzer’s death in *Falsettoland* (1990) was written in the midst of the crisis and its immediate aftermath, and songs such as ‘Something Bad is Happening’ and ‘Unlikely Lovers’ are given an added poignancy as both the queer characters and the writer come to terms with this threat to their identity. ‘Unlikely Lovers’ is particularly unusual in that it is a quartet written for two same-sex couples – the couple sing a bickering love duet as Marvin refuses to leave Whizzer’s side, before they are joined by Cordelia and Charlotte (‘the lesbians from next door’) in a rich

harmonic reprise of the chorus complete with trumpet descant. The recurring phrase ‘let’s be scared together’ (Finn and Lapine, 1985, p.140 and p.142) anchors the number in the specific moment of the AIDS crisis whilst also touching the universal and timeless emotion of the fear of grief.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, the ‘drama queen’ trope often focuses on the twin pressures of individual self-loathing against gay hedonism. Jason in *Bare* overdoses on drugs after splitting with his boyfriend Peter, and Mile End Lee in *Closer To Heaven* suffers a similar fate. The majority of ‘drama queen’ characters are written by gay and bisexual writers and the impulse to tell some of the difficult and tragic stories of queer life post-Stonewall is understandable, particularly given the emotional potential of musical theatre as a genre. Nevertheless, the focus on writing tragedy contributes to a wider tendency to deny positive outcomes for gay characters across a variety of narrative forms.

### **The Dancing Queen**

The return of the musical comedy at the beginning of the 21st century saw the satirical tone of shows such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons* and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* transferred to musical theatre. Whilst the parodies are largely affectionate - *Spamalot’s* Sir Lancelot remarks on getting married to Prince Herbert, ‘just think, Herbert, in a thousand years this will still be controversial’ (Idle and Du Prez, 2005) - the numbers tend to re-emphasise the stereotype of the ‘dancing queen’, a threefold conflation between camp, homosexuality and musical theatre without promoting any alternative representations of queer characters. *Avenue Q* (2003) is an exception to the above rule in that it allows the character of Rod a believable journey despite the fact that he begins as a stereotypical closeted Republican. Rod has to come to terms with the fact that he is in love with his housemate Nicky, who does not feel the same way as him. In fact, Kate Monster’s realisation that ‘if someone doesn’t love you back / it isn’t such a crime’ (Marx, Lopez and Whitty, 2010, p.93) could equally apply to Rod, and this parallel is

explored further through Rod and Kate's duet 'Fantasies Come True'. Whilst *Avenue Q* does contain a satirical number in 'If You Were Gay', it is led by Rod's heterosexual housemate Nicky and seeks to develop their relationship rather than satirising homosexuality per se - possibly because of the involvement of Jeff Marx and Jeff Whitty, who both identify as queer. *Avenue Q* succeeds in creating themes that are universal and applying them to straight and queer characters alike - this is apparent in 'The Internet is For Porn', where all the male characters are treated in the same way through the universal theme of masturbation.

The idea of universal themes leads towards the thorny topic of assimilation, and the question of whether rejecting the concept of the 'gay musical' dilutes the representation of queer identity. In fact, the opposite is true - by exploring the fundamental differences between queer and straight experiences, musicals can produce a wider range of queer characters that carry an authenticity that is often missing from characters that follow established tropes. David Halperin's suggestion that 'making the Broadway musical more explicitly gay-themed [...] does not succeed in making the musical itself more satisfactory as a vehicle of gay desire' (2012, p. 106) seems to underestimate the political power of LGBT representation on stage, particularly in terms of encouraging younger LGBT audiences to connect with the form. It is possible that, through denying the importance of LGBT characters in the musical, Clum and Halperin are unwittingly buying into the heterosexist standpoint of critics such as Mark Steyn, who in a chapter entitled 'The Fags' questions 'if the entire genre has a gay sensibility, who needs a show specifically addressing the subject?' (1998, p. 201)

### **'Not Just For Gays Anymore?' - musical theatre as a 'safe' queer space**

Steyn's argument can be seen as the culmination of the age-old trope of musical theatre as a safe 'queer space'. Scholars point to the contribution of gay writers such as Novello, Coward, Hart, Kander, Ebb, Loewe and Sondheim. They cite the proliferation of gay men in the audience and onstage, and they note the affection that gay men show diva performers such

as Judy Garland or Bernadette Peters (see Clum, 1999, pp.133-196). Yet these observations mask the fact that the ‘queer space’ has rarely extended explicitly into the fictional worlds on stage. The importance of ‘queering’ and ‘divadom’ in the history of LGBT identities should not be underestimated, but, fifty years after the legalisation of homosexuality in the United Kingdom, it is apposite to ask whether the supposed ‘queerness’ of the musical theatre genre has been utilised as an excuse to maintain an impoverished queer heritage within a genre that is uniquely positioned to externalise the idiosyncrasies of what it means to be queer. In particular, the focus on the relationship between musical theatre and homosexual men has obscured the lack of representation of lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters in musicals until recently.

### **Contemporary Queer Spaces**

During the past few years on Broadway and in the West End have seen LGBT writers begin to explore ‘queer spaces’ of their own. Since 2014, Broadway has seen revivals of *The Color Purple* (2015, via the 2013 Menier Chocolate Factory in London) and *Falsettos* (2016) alongside new musicals such as *Fun Home* (2013), *If/Then* (2013) and *Come From Away* (2015). Alongside *The Color Purple*, London has seen its first productions of *Yank!* (2017 via the Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester), *Soho Cinders* (2012), *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie* (2017) and *Fun Home* (2018). The range of LGBT characters represented in these productions demonstrates the importance of the lived experience of LGBT people both in source material and as bookwriters, lyricists and composers. This chapter analyses four musicals that foreground LGBT writers — *The Color Purple*, *Yank!*, *Fun Home* and *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie* — to understand how exploring ‘queer spaces’ in history and in the present can contribute to LGBT representation in musical theatre.

### **‘I’m beautiful... and I’m here’ — *The Color Purple* as a womanist utopia**

In her 1983 prose collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker proposes the term 'womanist' as 'a black feminist or feminist of color' and 'a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually' (1983, p. xi). In *The Color Purple* (1982), Celie is a black, lesbian woman who is abused by her stepfather and her husband, but who finds her identity through her relationship with various women within her community. Walker's focus on Celie is thus an act of resistance against the compulsory white heterosexuality that polices the American novel (Bealer, 2009: 38) as well as an exploration of the 'womanist' principles explored in her later collection. E. Patrick Johnson's development of 'quare studies' as derived from the 'African American vernacular for queer [that]... always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*' (2001: 2) is based on Walker's etymology, and both 'quare' and 'womanist' principles are integral to an understanding of *The Color Purple* as a Broadway musical. Yet the musical is rarely read intersectionally by musical theatre scholars – and thus both 'womanist' and 'quare' readings are often lost.

*The Color Purple* (2005) challenges the white, heterosexist and patriarchal privileges enjoyed by mainstream musical theatre writing through its depiction of Celie and Shug as black, female and queer characters written by a writing team with combined lived experience across all these identities. Johnson notes that 'most often, white theorists fail to acknowledge and address racial privilege' (2001: 5), and since this chapter is written from a white, gay male perspective, it is important to interrogate the intersectional qualities of Celie and Shug's relationship. In particular, there is a different emphasis in the way that Alice Walker explores the social disadvantages of Celie's position as a black woman in society but allows Celie and Shug to operate outside of traditional social attitudes towards same-sex relationships within black communities. Barbara Smith argues that black heterosexual women tend to marginalise black lesbian women as 'heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women

have... maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort' (1982, p. 171); neither Squeak, Nettie nor Sofia react in this manner towards Celie and Shug's relationship. Yet Alice Walker's explicit descriptions of Shug and Celie's sexual relationship in the novel also defies Evelyn M. Hammonds' description of a 'politics of silence' surrounding black women and their sexuality (1983: p. 94) as Celie and Shug embody 'womanist' and 'quare' principles in their narrative.

Celie's attraction to Shug is first introduced in the sixth chapter of *The Color Purple* when Celie is given a picture of Shug Avery by her stepmother (who does not appear in the musical). Celie instantly recognises Shug as 'the most beautiful woman I have ever seen': 'I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery.' (Walker, 1982, p. 13) In the musical, Celie is aware of Shug — 'She Mister ol' girlfriend' (Funderburg, 2006, p. 139) — but she does not establish an attraction to her until Shug's first appearance on stage. Before her meeting with Shug, Celie performs a number of short solos about different women (Nettie at the beginning of 'I Will Say My Prayer' and in 'Lily of the Field', and Sofia in 'Dear God, Sofia'). In the 2014 revival, these passages are accompanied by marimba, piano and woodwind, with an occasional use of muted trumpet. Contrastingly in 'Dear God, Shug', there is a prominent off-beat click that represents Celie's excitement, and the paired clarinets are supported by the marimba before the jazz saxophone and trumpet enter the orchestration. As Celie sings 'Not like Nettie, not like Sofia, not like no-one else...' (Funderburg, 2006, p. 138), her solo is accompanied by electric guitar, bass and drum kit for the first time as her sexuality is awakened by Shug.

Shug's own attraction to Celie is made explicit in 'Too Beautiful For Words' as she encourages Celie to look in the mirror to discover her beauty. Shug's conclusion that 'the grace you bring into this world's too beautiful for words' is quite different to the parallel scene in Walker's original novel, where Shug uses the mirror to teach Celie how to masturbate: 'I look



at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash. Maybe.’ (Walker, 1982, p. 49).

In the musical, ‘Push Da Button’ is transformed from an intimate scene between Shug and Celie into a jukejoint number in which Shug addresses all of the black men and women present. Patricia Hill Collins suggests the intersection between black and lesbian identities often reinforce the white stereotype of black female sexuality as ‘deviant’ through ‘the co-joining of Black heterosexual women’s sexual deviancy as lying in their excess sexual appetite with the perceived deviancy of Black lesbians as lying in their rejection of what makes women feminine, namely, heterosexual contact with men’ (2002, p. 146), and there is a sense in which Shug’s highly sexualised public performance acts to obscure her private same-sex relationship with Celie. Indeed, Shug’s bisexuality is seldom mentioned during critical analysis, and there is the danger that the musical is unwittingly engaging in Hammonds’ ‘politics of silence’ through altering the context of ‘Push Da Button’.

Nevertheless, the convention of the love duet in ‘What About Love?’ clearly establishes a queer relationship between Shug and Celie. Allee Willis, one of the songwriters, has offered the duet as evidence that the musical does not water down the relationship — ‘I hope anybody who sees it understands it’s real love’ (Stockwell, 2005). The number combines a coming-out moment for both Celie and Shug with a more conventional pop music duet, thus both resisting and repurposing the heterosexual mode of the love duet. Celie begins by confessing that she is ‘lifted up to the clouds by a kiss / never felt nothing like this’, reaffirming that the representation of her romantic relationship with Shug in the kiss that precedes the duet has established her lesbian identity. Shug, too, confirms that her feelings for Celie have taken her by surprise — ‘Love’s the one thing I know all about / I had it all figured out’ (Funderburg, 2006, p. 149), suggesting that Celie is the first to awaken Shug’s bisexuality.

Musically, the duet is in the vein of 1980s soul duets such as ‘Endless Love’ in its homogenous thirds in the verses and choruses and vocal counterpoint in the bridge sections. Similarly, the use of piano and strings places the number as a conventional love duet — but with two female voices rather than the more traditional male/female arrangement. The evocation of the love duet through the use of musical genre makes it difficult to read the number as anything other than a lesbian duet, particularly considering the simplicity and directness of the lyrics — ‘I want you to be a story for me / that I can believe in forever’ (Funderburg, 2006, p. 149). Thus while many of the explicit scenes from the novel are erased in the musical adaptation of *The Color Purple*, the writers adapt existing conventions in order to support the original queer narrative.

Celie’s identity as a lesbian woman is as central to her character as her position as an oppressed black woman within her society, and the categorisation of *The Color Purple* as a ‘black musical’, a ‘feminist musical’ or even a ‘lesbian musical’ fails to understand the importance of all of these intersections as part of Walker’s ‘womanist’ narrative. Apryl Denny offers the persuasive observation that *The Color Purple* ‘offers not a depiction of how the world is but of how it might be if society were to repudiate hierarchy and embrace Womanism’ (2009, p. 284). Celie’s rejection of Shug’s promiscuity in ‘I’m Here’ does not nullify her lesbian identity, but it does release Celie from the patriarchal society of compulsory heterosexuality in which she was contained in the first act of the musical — ‘but most of all I’m thankful for loving who I really am’ (Funderburg, 2006, p. 173).

### **‘It isn’t right or wrong, just something true’ — *Yank!* as a reclamation of LGBT spaces in Golden Age musical theatre**

While *The Color Purple* creates a queer space through a utopian vision of the historical period in which it is set, David and Joseph Zellnik’s *Yank!* aims to ‘stitch queer stories back

into the larger narrative of the “Greatest Generation” (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017), through a re-imagining of the Golden Age musical. *Yank!* is inspired by the oral histories in Allan Bérubé’s *Coming Out Under Fire* (1990):

During the 1930s and 1940s, young men and women who grew up feeling homosexual desires had little help coming out. They were likely to lead isolated lives, not knowing anyone else like themselves, with no one to talk to about their feelings and often unsure what they were. (Bérubé, 1990, p. 6)

Bérubé suggests that the mobilization for the Second World War allowed young men and women to mix with different groups of people and to recognise others that felt the same as them, both in military camps and at gay bars and nightclubs that began to flourish around the cities in which the military was stationed. These new ‘queer spaces’ are fully explored by the gay and lesbian characters in *Yank!*, allowing a very different perspective on the period inhabited by the so-called Golden Age musicals.

The Zellnik brothers cite Oscar Hammerstein II as a major influence on the show, and theatre critic Dominic Maxwell describes *Yank!* as ‘the kind of show Rodgers and Hammerstein might have written if they had chosen as their hero a gay 18-year-old in combat and in love’ (Maxwell, 2017). Nevertheless, there is some truth in John Clum’s depiction of Hammerstein as ‘the musical’s bard of heterosexual normality’ (1999, p. 92), and it is possible that focusing on Hammerstein’s legacy of the integrated book musical obscures part of the queer history that *Yank!* utilises in reclaiming a LGBT space in traditional musical theatre. The show itself begins in 1943 and the musical language seems as akin to Rodgers and Hart than Rodgers and Hammerstein, broadening the musical pastiche to incorporate the queer sensibilities in Hart’s lyrics.

*Yank!* is bookended by the song ‘Rememb’ring You’, which is the inscription in the fictional journal of Private ‘Stu’ Stewart that frames the narrative. The number is performed by Mitch Adams, Stu’s sweetheart in the musical, and is tinged with regret at a lovers’ parting: ‘No matter what I do | I keep rememb’ring you’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 4). The staging of

‘Rememb’ring You’ encourages the audience to read the song as ‘queer’ as Mitch is singing directly to the modern-day young man that has discovered Stu’s diary (the same actor that plays Stu in the rest of the show), and this aligns the number with the lyrics of Hart, Cole Porter, Ivor Novello and Noël Coward. In particular, the sentiments reflect the unrequited love of Hart’s ‘It Never Entered My Mind’ (‘Once I laughed when I heard you say / that I’d be playing solitaire’), and in ‘I’m Talkin’ To My Pal’, which was cut from the 1942 production of *Pal Joey* (‘I can’t be sure of girls / I’m not at home with men / I’m ending up with me again’). This link is even more explicit in the shower scene in the title number of *Yank!*, where Stu discusses how hates being around men — ‘maybe that means I’m even more normal than them, and not how I sometimes feel: like a fella somehow born in the wrong kind of body’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 11).

The musical language of ‘Rememb’ring You’ acts as a portal into a queer heritage inhabited by the great queer lyricists of the 1930s and 1940s, and it is possible to read *Yank!* as a continuation of the Rodgers and Hart sensibility within the framework of Hammerstein’s book musicals. In particular, the handling of Stu’s acceptance of his homosexuality breaks with the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition as Stu is not given his own musical number until midway through the second act. In Act 1, Stu is often given the final verse in ensemble numbers as he comes to terms with his feelings for Mitch as ‘the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen’ in ‘Polishing Shoes’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 19) and the fact that he does not feel ‘all the good and normal things that other fellas do’ in ‘Betty’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 33). Ultimately it is up to Artie, a homosexual photographer for *Yank* magazine, to take Stu under his wing through teaching him about the ‘queer spaces’ available to conscripted GIs. Artie’s character is immediately defined in his cheeky verse to ‘Click’: ‘How do you find your match? How do you pick? | Follow your heart and follow your - ’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 42).

The number subverts the typical MGM film tap numbers of the early 1940s through using tap to symbolise the methods of attracting male attention in gay bars. The audience never

sees Stu and Artie in these locations outside of the ‘Click’ dream sequence, but their promiscuity becomes a bone of contention when Stu returns to the squad after a period as a Yank reporter. Artie’s second number, ‘Light On Your Feet’, utilises a similar dance idiom to teach Stu and Mitch how to avoid indictment. Artie’s carefree attitude contrasts with Louise, the lesbian officer, who advises Stu and Artie that they need to ‘always strive to be a credit’ in order to involve detection.

During the unfolding of Stu’s journey, the public ‘queer spaces’ conjured by Artie in his ‘dream sequences’ are contrasted with the private ‘queer spaces’ within the confines of Stu’s conscription. Stu and Mitch’s relationship thrives in the private spaces of showers, bunk beds and (literally) closets — the only available closed spaces within their homosocial environment. Their sexual relationship is contrasted with the intimate relationships of their fellow squad members, who have their own ‘buddies’ that they protect and occasionally share a dance with. Eventually Mitch proposes a utopian vision for ‘A Couple of Regular Guys’ after the war has ended: living in the house the he has already ‘put a payment down’ on, ‘the perfect size | For a couple of regular guys’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 67).

This number is more in the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition of ‘dream songs’ — there are clear similarities with ‘If I Loved You’ from *Carousel*, ‘I Have Dreamed’ from *The King and I* and ‘16 going on 17’ from *The Sound of Music*. It is unsurprising that Stu’s reprise of the song at the end of the musical is interrupted by Mitch puncturing the homonormative vision that he has set up. Yet Stu has already expressed his acceptance of his sexuality in ‘Just True’: he explains that ‘what we have is special / what we are is not’ explaining they are two of hundreds of thousands (Zellnik, 2017, p. 85-86). Ultimately Mitch marries his childhood sweetheart Becky, but Stu has completed his journey of coming out: ‘You already found me, Mitch. And Artie found me. And I found me’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 104).

Despite the bookending of the musical with the modern-day young man listening to ‘Rememb’ring You’, many critics chose to focus on the heterosexual elements of the story. Alfred Hickling in *The Guardian* remarked that ‘the chief honours go to the lone female, Sarah-Louise Young, who portrays every mom, sweetheart and radio idol that helped to get these brave, frightened men through the war’ (Hickling, 2017), whilst Alun Hood compared the ‘depiction of men under unimaginable pressure finding solace in unattainable and impossibly glamorous women’ with *Kiss of The Spiderwoman* (Hood, 2017). These critical responses might be compared to the two renditions of ‘Rememb’ring You’ in *Yank!*. The ‘original’ version is heard in the middle of Act I, performed by Dinah for the forces on the radio. Dinah is described in the script as ‘a girl-next-door type with a kittenish sound’ (Zellnik, 2017, p. 52), and the swung rhythm locates the song as part of the repertoire designed to keep up the morale of the troops. However, the audience has already heard Mitch singing the song directly to the young man, and thus Dinah’s version feels insincere and inauthentic against the queer specificity of the opening number. Yet it is possible that this reading in itself comes from the recognition of a queer space that is inaccessible to some critics of the musical.

### **‘Ring of keys’ — the unfinished work of coming out in *Fun Home***

Although *Fun Home* is not the first Broadway musical with a lesbian protagonist, it is currently the only Broadway musical that features a lesbian character where the original source material, the book and the lyrics are all written by lesbian women. The musical is based on Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical graphic novel of the same, and is adapted by bookwriter and lyricist Lisa Kron. Furthermore, the musical is unique in that it portrays a gay male character (Alison’s father Bruce) from a lesbian perspective — both in the writing of the show and from the perspective of the fictional Alison in the show. Alison’s verbal ‘caption’ at the end of ‘Welcome To Our House on Maple Avenue’ neatly summarises the theme at the heart of the

musical: ‘Caption: My dad and I both grew up in the same small Pennsylvania town, and he was gay, and I was gay. And he killed himself, and I became a lesbian cartoonist.’ (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 17) At its heart, *Fun Home* explores the relationship between a daughter and her father, as Rebecca Applin Warner’s chapter in this volume addresses. As Applin Warner notes, Alison’s central question is ‘am I just like you?’ (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 11) and this question is explored through both the text and the music within the musical.

*Fun Home* follows the thematic structure of the graphic novel, focusing on three key periods in Alison and Bruce’s relationship — Alison’s childhood, Alison coming out while at college, and Alison reaching the same age as Bruce was when he committed suicide. Each period involves Alison and Bruce negotiating their respective ‘coming out’ in different ways, highlighting that the process is continuous rather than a singular occurrence and reminding the audience that the characters are still negotiating the heterosexual matrix despite the inherent ‘queer space’ of their relationship.

By the time that Older Alison has explicitly ‘outed’ herself and her father to the audience, we have already experienced Bruce’s alienation from his family in ‘Welcome To Our House On Maple Avenue’. As the family tidy up the house for Bruce’s visitor from the local historical society, Bruce is upstairs putting the finishing touches to his make-up. Bruce utilises one of the key lyrical motifs of the musical — ‘not so bad if I say so myself’ — as he admires himself in the mirror, but when he joins the family his music is in a one-bar canon with the rest of the family, showing Bruce to be out of step with the familial group. In the original graphic novel, Bechdel suggests that Bruce ‘used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things to be what they were’ (2007, p. 16). This can be seen in Bruce’s first ‘coming-out’ scene, where he seduces his ex-student Roy. Bruce repeats the ‘not so bad, if I say so myself’ motif and repurposes the ‘he wants’ motif from ‘Maple Avenue’ into his ‘I want’ motif. Alison comments that Bruce’s relationship with Roy is like a ‘1950s lesbian pulp novel’ in its ‘tawdry

love' (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 30), and Bruce's use of alcohol in the seduction points towards a darker side of his 'coming out' being for an exclusive audience of young male ex-students.

Contrastingly, Medium Alison's self-loathing is largely contained in a short scene outside the Gay Union at college, where she asks God not to make her a 'lesbian' or a 'homosexual'. Indeed, by her next scene, Alison has come out both to herself and to her friend Joan and is preparing to come out to her parents. At this stage, Alison has yet to sing anything other than the 'not so bad if I say so myself' motif, which she uses to describe her drawing process. A short scene between Alison as a child and her father indicates that Bruce is at least partially responsible for this reticence — Alison is refusing to wear a dress to a party (preferring 'a boy shirt and pants'), but Bruce manipulates her into conforming by suggesting that 'people will talk about you behind your back' (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 37). This scene leads back to Medium Alison coming out to her parents by letter, again repurposing one of Bruce's motifs: 'I want, I want, I am... a lesbian'. Nevertheless, Alison is still worried about fitting in with the 'real lesbians', stating that she is 'asexual' until Joan's kiss convinces her that she is attracted to women.

'Changing My Major To Joan' is the first solo in the musical as Medium Alison comes to terms with her first sexual experience. The number combines Lisa Kron's stream-of-consciousness lyrics with Jeanine Tesori's tonally and metrically shifting accompaniment to portray the unfamiliar giddiness that Alison is experiencing. Tesori avoids the tonic of A  $\flat$  throughout the opening section as Kron's lyrics cycle between the phrases 'last night', 'Joan' and 'Oh my god'. As Alison begins to pour out the details of her first passionate encounter where she was 'too enthusiastic', the music still avoids a clear statement of the tonic chord, which is only heard in its first inversion. At the end of the section, Tesori suggests that she is working towards a II-V-I perfect cadence, but unexpectedly arrives on an implied E7 chord as the dominant of A major, literally 'changing' the 'major'. The first clear statement of a tonic



chord in root position comes on the phrase ‘sex with Joan’, and the first perfect cadence comes on ‘kissing Joan’, suggesting that Alison is beginning to formulate her identity more securely. Alison’s lyrics begin to unfold through repetition as her confidence increases in this section:

I’m changing my major to Joan  
I’m changing my major to sex with Joan  
I’m changing my major to sex with Joan with a minor in kissing Joan (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 40)

This technique of extending lyrically and musically continues in Alison’s second verse, which lasts for 16 bars rather than the original 14 bar section as Alison corrects herself — ‘I’ll have found some dignity / but who needs dignity?’ The bridge section returns to the more tentative mood of the opening section — the music gradually becomes more tonally ambiguous as Alison wonders ‘am I falling into nothingness or flying into something so sublime?’, before returning to a clear perfect cadence into the new key of B ♭ major for the final chorus. The coda section recalls the phrasing of the introduction, but this time Alison clearly knows where she is heading musically and lyrically — back to Joan and a final cadence in B ♭ major.

The placement of ‘Changing My Major’ as Alison’s first solo song is important since it emphasises the chronology of Alison’s thought process. Older Alison chooses to remember her ‘coming out’ at college as a three-stage process, where she comes out to herself (and subsequently Joan), and then comes out to her parents by letter, and finally ‘consummates’ the process through her encounter with Joan. Yet Alison’s memories of coming out are interrupted by childhood memories of her father — ‘Changing My Major’ is followed by a sequence in which Bruce criticises Alison for her ‘half-baked’ attempt at drawing a map. In ‘Maps’, Older Alison discovers that she can draw a circle around the key events of Bruce’s life, but the audience is increasingly aware that Alison herself is still trapped within that circle. While Medium Alison is still unaware of her father’s sexuality, Older Alison remembers a number of occasions during her childhood in which Bruce covered for his own indiscretions with young men. This triggers an earlier ‘coming out’ memory, when Small Alison first recognises

something of her identity in an ‘old-school butch’ delivery woman (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 56).

‘Ring of Keys’ is musically much simpler than ‘Changing My Major To Joan’ — it is in a lilting 6/8 and remains in the key of E major throughout. Yet the number contains a similar tension between the tentative verses and the confident choruses, this time through Kron’s use of ellipses in her verse lyrics to show Small Alison reaching for a truth that she cannot yet articulate. ‘Ring of Keys’ also utilises an unfolding list in the chorus to show how the delivery woman’s ‘butch’ appearance makes an impression on Alison through her ‘lace-up boots’ and her ‘ring of keys’ — a rebuttal to her father’s insistence on the feminine dress code of party dresses and hair barrettes. The song culminates in Small Alison’s recognition that ‘I know you’, which she restates three times. It is clear that Small Alison has undergone a ‘coming out’ process of her own — not necessarily recognising her sexual orientation, but understanding that she does not conform to the gender identities offered by her family.

The final section of *Fun Home* contrasts Alison’s coming out with Bruce’s inability to come to terms with his own sexuality. It is Helen that tells Alison about Bruce’s infidelity with young men, and it is clear that Helen is struggling to accept Alison’s sexuality as she refers to Joan as Alison’s ‘friend’. Contrastingly, Bruce seems to utilise Alison’s revelation to become more open with his daughter, but it is clear that he is unable to see outside his own ‘circle’ in order to connect with Alison. ‘Telephone Wire’ is a representation of Alison and Bruce’s last car journey where the two characters are in completely tonal and rhythmic areas. Bruce consistently pulls Alison’s urgent 4/4 A major into a nostalgic 3/4 G major as he remembers his own formative experiences, whilst Alison tries to ‘say something / talk to him’. Alison modulates into Bb major but is unable to persuade her father to ‘see’ her before the car journey ends.

‘Telephone Wire’ moves straight into ‘Edges of the World’, where Older Alison imagines her father’s suicide through Bruce’s performance. ‘Edges of the World’ acts as Bruce’s counterpart to ‘Changing My Major To Joan’ as Bruce recognises his own identity. Bruce’s narcissistic personality means that this recognition is projected inward instead of outward, and whereas Alison’s identity is realised in Joan, Bruce sees himself in the broken-down house that he is restoring. Bruce’s ‘I could still break a heart or two’ motif is restated at the climax of the song, and the emotional truth of Bruce’s self-obsession is ever-present in the chorus as he asks, ‘why am I standing here?’ (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 72) Older Alison is finally able to make peace with her memories of Bruce through recognising the importance of the opening frame of the musical, where Bruce is playing ‘airplane’ with Small Alison. Alison states that ‘every so often there was a rare moment of perfect balance when I soared above him’ (Kron and Tesori, 2015, p. 77), and thus establishes an answer of some kind to the original question: ‘Am I just like you?’

### **‘Out of the darkness, into the spotlight’ — LGBT characters and inclusivity in *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie***

The representation of contemporary LGBT identities is a major challenge for musical theatre writers. Often contemporary musicals are based on much older source material that does not present LGBT characters in an inclusive manner, if indeed they are presented at all. Thus the 2015 musical adaptation of *Bend It Like Beckham* incorporates homophobic jokes about ‘lesbian footballers’ from its 2002 source material, and this cannot be rectified by its recasting of Jasminder’s friend Tony as a gay man. Similarly, the 2016 adaptation of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day* maintains the casual misogyny and homophobia that characterises the original source material despite the addition of a minor gay character. As with *Yank!* and *Fun Home*, the most successful LGBT characters in recent musical theatre have come from real life —

such as Kevin Tuerff and Kevin Jung in *Come From Away* (2017), a musical based on the day that 38 planes were forced to land in Newfoundland during the September 11 attacks in 2001.

Dan Gillespie Sells and Tom Macrae's *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (2017) is inspired by the 2011 BBC3 documentary *Jamie: Drag Queen at 16*. Jamie New is a 16 year-old boy that plans to attend his high school prom in a dress, and eventually aspires to perform as a drag queen for his career. Jamie is supported by his mum and her best friend Ray, but is frequently thwarted by the heteronormativity of his environment. Gillespie Sells and Macrae relocate the story from Durham to Sheffield, setting the story against a multicultural backdrop in a traditionally working-class city. Jamie's story thus takes place within an environment that is simultaneously inclusive and hostile a city that has accepted multiculturalism but still conforms to traditional values of gender roles.

*Everybody's Talking About Jamie* offers a twist on the traditional coming-out story. Jamie is already open about his homosexuality with his family and classmates, but he has not yet revealed his desire to be a drag queen to anyone other than his mother and Ray. Jamie's clarity about his drag identity is in marked contrast to other 'drag queen' characters in musical theatre — as he tells Pritti, 'I want to be a boy. Who sometimes wants to be a girl' (Macrae and Gillespie Sells, 2017: 30). For Jamie, drag is 'fun' rather than 'sexual', but the musical's narrative demonstrates how Jamie's drag identity allows him space to fully accept his own identity.

Tom Macrae's book presents a nuanced overview of the homophobic conditions faced by many LGBT teenagers during growing up. Jamie's dad refers to his son's drag performances as 'disgusting', and it transpires that he used this word when he first discovered Jamie dressing up in his mum's clothes. The ramifications of this phrase are explored in Jamie's song 'The Wall In My Head', where Jamie describes how his dad's words keep 'building' inside him. The word 'disgusting' is also used by Dean's dad when he complains about Jamie's plan to attend

his school prom in a dress. Dean represents an openly antagonistic presence at school, referring to Jamie as a ‘queer’ in front of the rest of the class. Dean’s homophobia is implicitly reinforced by Miss Hedge, Jamie’s teacher, who pretends not to hear Dean’s use of pejorative language and sees Jamie’s nonconformity as a way of him making himself the ‘centre of attention’. Miss Hedge is explicitly connected to Dean in ‘Work of Art’, where they taunt Jamie as he walks through the school with his misapplied make-up, and later takes Dean’s side in forbidding Jamie to go to the school prom in a dress. Miss Hedge is representative of the heteronormative culture in many schools — her motto to ‘keep it real’ is well-meaning but her failure to recognise the multiplicities of identity in her class is symptomatic of the problematic school experiences that many LGBT people face in the UK.

It is Jamie’s use of drag that allows him to access a number of ‘queer spaces’ in order to navigate the heteronormative structures surrounding him. Jamie receives a pair of Jimmy Choo shoes from his mother for his birthday, and these allow him to embody his own ‘queerness’ — after trying them on in front of Pritti, Jamie finds that he is able to respond to Dean’s bullying for the first time:

Yeah Dean, I’m gay. I *am* gay — so if *I* call me gay then being called gay in’t an insult. Cos I am bent, and I am queer, and I am a faggot batty bum boy. (Macrae and Gillespie Sells, 2017: 32)

Jamie’s decision to find a dress for his prom leads him to meet Hugo and his drag alter-ego Loco Chanelle, along with her drag entourage, who persuade Jamie to go ‘Over The Top’ by performing in drag at the local Working Men’s club in front of his excited schoolmates. ‘Over The Top’ can be seen as the antidote to ‘The Wall In My Head’ as Jamie invents the drag persona Mimi Mee as an embodiment of his new identity, allowing him to temporarily combat the prejudices of Dean and Miss Hedge. However, Jamie is shattered by his dad’s rejection, especially since Margaret has covered for her ex-husband through buying birthday cards and presents on his behalf. Yet this allows Macrae to take the traditional drag narrative one step further as Jamie re-embraces his own identity in preference to Mimi Mee:

You said to keep it real Miss, and I have. Prom — it's a fairytale. But this — me like this — is real. (Macrae and Gillespie Sells, 2017: 127)

*Everybody's Talking About Jamie* is able to negotiate 21st century drag identities through drawing on the real-life experiences of Jamie Campbell. Grace Barnes suggests that 'from whatever angle you look at it, male-to-female drag is ridiculing women' (Barnes, 2015: 116), but there is a clear differentiation between Jamie's gender exploration in his prom outfit and the antics of Loco Chanelle and the other drag queens at the Working Men's Club. The musical also touches on nonconformist parenting, with Margaret's best friend Ray acting as an unofficial father figure to Jamie in the absence of his dad. Finally, the insistence of Jamie's schoolmates that he is allowed into the Prom suggests a shift in values within the younger generation — this moment is based on the real-life events of *Jamie: Drag Queen at 16* and draws attention to the changing generational attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

### **'Who's got extra love?' — further explorations of the queer space in musical theatre**

The four musicals analysed above are a representative sample of musicals with LGBT characters written by LGBT writers that have been produced since 2014. It is notable that two of these musicals deal specifically with gender ambiguity (*Fun Home* and *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*) and that *The Color Purple* includes a bisexual female character originally written by a bisexual woman. These new identities require musical theatre scholarship to move away from the binary of discussing 'sexuality — both hetero- and homo-' (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 169) and to begin to consider bisexual, asexual, transgender and genderfluid identities.

It is unfortunate that this chapter does not include any examples of transgender characters written by transgender writers, largely because musical theatre is yet to fully embrace transgender characters (although the recent film version of *The Rocky Horror Show* starring Laverne Cox brings up some interesting issues). Nevertheless, there are a number of other musicals that might benefit from further study in their use of queer spaces — the fantasy

homonormative world of *Zanna Don't*, the use of alternate realities in representing the bisexual character of Lucas in *If/Then* and the exploration of online spaces in *Soho Cinders*. The recent revivals of *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Falsettos* suggest that there may be other musicals with LGBT characters to be recovered and reframed in future productions. There are many queer spaces still to be explored - and LGBT musical theatre writers and scholars should be at the forefront of this exploration.

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