See It to Be It: Identifying Women as Major Players in American Commercial Musical Theatre

In 1981, a 19-year-old Jeanine Tesori attended a production of *Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music* and absorbed the work of conductor/music director Linda Twine. In 2015, as she held her Tony award that recognized her work as composer of the musical *Fun Home* and stood next to her beaming collaborator, book writer Lisa Kron (also holding a Tony), Tesori delivered her acceptance speech. On seeing Twine in action, Tesori claimed, “that was my ‘Ring of Keys’ moment, which is by the way is not a song of love it’s a song of identification. Because for girls, you have to see it to be it” (“Acceptance”). On a warm Sunday evening in June 2015, thousands of diehard musical theatre fans across the country glued themselves their television screens in anticipation for the holiest night of the year. Many of these were teenage girls. And yet Tesori and Kron’s accomplishments went largely unrecognized outside of the professional theatre community when their acceptance speeches were not broadcasted.

Musical theatre often serves as a formative experience for many young girls. Whether in a family that regularly attends the theatre in New York or one that flies across the country on vacation to see one Broadway show, it is a hallmark experience for young children, especially young girls, to see a musical. We can utilize Tesori’s “Ring of Keys” example that she describes in her own life and apply it on a wider scale to see how all young people, specifically girls, absorb the world, art, and information that surrounds them. As mentioned above, Tesori claims that “Ring of Keys” from her musical *Fun Home* is, “not a song of love it’s a song of identification” (“Acceptance”). In “Ring of Keys”, Young Allison reacts to a delivery women entering the luncheonette where she is eating with her father. She sees cropped hair, masculine
clothing, and a definitive swagger. She was, “an old school butch,” as Allison recalls, before Young Allison sings “Someone just came in the door / Like no one I ever saw before” (“Ring of Keys”). This is a new experience as well as a moment of liberation. Young Allison can identify a piece of herself in this stranger, specifically a part of her character that has been restricted and hidden away for all of her life. She sings, “I thought it was s’possed to be wrong / But you seem okay with being strong” and then goes on to claim that, “It’s probably conceited to say / But I think we’re alike in a certain way” (“Ring of Keys”). It is not the attraction but the identification that excites and energies Young Allison. This song allows us to understand how a Young Allison recognizes herself in someone else, and thereby recognizes all the possibilities that her life could have. These are the moments that young girls should have the opportunity to have when the find themselves in a theater. In the words of Tesori, they need to see it to be it.

If young women need to “see it” to find success in the field of musical theatre composition and creation, then the theatre community is not securing a future for female composers, book writers, lyricists, and directors. Creative teams that dominate the commercial theatre industry on Broadway, arguably the most visible on a national scale, are made up almost exclusively of men. Exclusively or majority female creative teams such as the one that created Fun Home are few and far between. Indeed, even Hamilton, a musical that has risen to the top of popular culture and is continually praised for its progressive themes was created by an exclusively male creative team. Hamilton was conceptualized by male composer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda, dramatized and honed by director Thomas Kail, orchestrated by Alex Lacamoire, bolstered, backed, and nurtured by the Public Theatre’s Oskar Eustis, choreographed by Andy Blankenbuehler, and visualized by an all-male design team. Hamilton, as progressive as it may seem, only found manipulation and development by male hands. Its commercial success,
therefore, can be likened to eras where women had next to no creative power in shaping musicals, such as Golden-era Gershwin and Cole Porter, mid-century Rodgers and Hammerstein, and even as recent as Sondheim. When we look through history, it’s not difficult to see the reason why these young girls do not find themselves in creative positions on shows today. There is simply not a strong historical precedent of women on creative teams.

Musical theatre is a genre that is traditionally associated with male creativity in collaboration with other men. Rarely do female names come to mind. What is the effect of these all-male creative teams? Oftentimes we see musicals that are developed that contain female characters with little-to-know agency. A lack of female creatives in the writing room can often lead to a lack of gender equity onstage. When the commercial theatre industry devalues the work of female creatives and subsequently bolsters musicals which devalue active women characters, the potential for young girls who wish to one day participate in the industry is severely limited.

We must ask ourselves this: where are the women in the history of musical theatre? One issue with such a question is that women, although present in the shaping of the modern musical, go largely unrecognized in the telling of the American musical’s history. When we as the theatre community are asked to identify major names in musical theatre, we immediately name Rodgers and Hammerstein, perhaps followed by Gershwin, Porter, and Hart, perhaps followed by Kander and Ebb, and then we must of course mention Steven Sondheim. Names like Tesori, Kron, Ahrens, Norman, Hudes, and Benjamin go largely unrecognized. This is, of course, because these are 21st century names. Once we go back to the beginnings of the genre, we see that musical theatre relies on a historical premise of male-dominated work.

There are not too many “Ring of Keys” moments for girls to see in most 20th century musicals due to the genre’s reliance on stock. Gender equality between characters is a problem
that is rooted in musical theatre tradition, a genre where it is commonplace to fit people, both men and women, into boxes. The groundwork of musical theatre lies within Vaudeville, Burlesque, and minstrel, three types of musicals that rely heavily on gender and racial stereotypes to produce emotionally charged, often melodramatic pieces of theatre. A foundation of restrictive roles combined with male-centered creativity has produced an entire century of a formulaic musical structure.

After these blatantly stock-driven types of musicals was the emergence the Golden-Age. This era relied on a jukebox formula. Composers such as Gershwin and Porter would use musicals to showcase their work with very little emphasis put on story or plot. Rodgers and Hammerstein changed the game with Oklahoma! which intertwined plot and music. Characters would break into songs that would not stop the show, but instead push the story forward. Oklahoma! marked the birth of the book. Also created so was new musical theatre stock characters, such as Laurie as the spunky but love-torn female ingénue, Curly as the morally strong male protagonist, Aunt Eller as the older female moral compass, Ado Annie as the ditzy female best friend, Will as the dim-witted male best friend, and Jud Fry as the morally questionable male antagonist. These roles that were originally drawn and formulated by men continue today as the most common set up of stock characters in many musicals. Instead of seeing the vast range of possibilities for a future in the theatre or any career, young girls have seen themselves onstage to be boxed into restrictive roles. Not too many “Ring of Keys” moments can be found in this formula.

Are women accountable for any of this early development in the genre? A largely male-written history of the American musical conceals this, but of course they are. In her article “‘Ah, Sweet Mystery’: Rediscovering Three Female Lyricists of the Early Twentieth-Century
American Musical Theater”, Ellen Marie Peck investigates historical erasure of women in the field. One of the more fascinating pieces of anecdotal evidence offered by Peck regards the development of acclaimed musical theatre song “Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life”. Peck asserts that, “music history books will claim that Victor Herbert wrote ‘Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life’, […] [It] is occasionally heard today, perhaps most notably in Mel Brooks’s satirical film Young Frankenstein [sic] and the recent Broadway hit Thoroughly Modern Millie [sic]. But […] a woman named Rida Johnson Young wrote the lyrics” (48–49). This erasure of prolific female theatre artists is commonplace. Peck goes on to claim that:

[Young], Dorothy Donnelly, and Anne Caldwell wrote the lyrics and libretti for many of the most successful American operettas. They also all wrote individual songs to be interpolated into musical comedies, revues, and vaudeville acts, making them three of the most prolific songwriters of their time. Peck 49

Though prolific, these names are very unfamiliar to us today. The theatre industry suffers a profound negative impact from such historical erasure. Pieces of popular culture and musical theatre iconography are built on pillars of masculine artistry that are sometimes inaccurate and ultimately degrading to women. It is worth questioning the cause of male domination in the areas of composition and book-writing in the musical theatre field.

Peck examines the fact that theatre in general was a frowned upon profession for women at the turn of the 20th century. She claims that, “It had long been under attack by religious zealots who preached its immorality, and more than one parent worried about a daughter being molested by ‘stage door Johnnies’ (men who waited outside the stage door to woo exiting chorus girls)” (51). Armed with this kind of background knowledge, it is not difficult to recognize that misogyny would permeate more deeply into male-identified roles such as “composer” or “playwright” compared to “chorus girl” or even “leading lady”, roles that are traditionally
associated to have little to no influence or agency. Peck goes on to claim that the content of many early-to-mid-twentieth century musicals highlighted this opinion. She points out that, “Kern and Hammerstein’s Show Boat cautioned that ‘Life upon the wicked stage ain’t nothin’ for a girl’” (51). For over a century, women in the industry have been either appropriated to “feminine” spaces within the business or banished altogether. This idea of immorality formed the basis for a male-dominated field. Moral ambiguity is a defining element of all art. Removing women from artistic spaces through a fictional narrative of “protecting the innocence” of young women is a dangerous practice. It further exacerbates their exclusion and discrimination in history.

We cannot ignore female contributions to the genre as the history books so easily do. However, when we try and locate inspiring female musical theatre creatives, there is not a lot to work with. We see a trend of the devaluation of women on creative teams extending far beyond the era that falls under Peck’s examination. Once we move past the largely forgotten, turn-of-the-century work by Young, Donnelly, and Caldwell, we see more prominent female artists emerge. Early names of note include Liza Lehman, Nora Bayes, and widely accomplished composer in the theatre Kay Swift. Beyond this, daughter of Richard Rodgers, Mary Rodgers, arguably became the first female composer of prominence with the premiere of Once Upon a Mattress in 1959, a musical that presents strong female characters and makes hefty political comments on class and race. An even bigger milestone was marked with the rise Micki Grant, who wrote music for six musicals in the seventies alone and is distinguished for being the first African American woman to compose Broadway-premiered show. In their article about women composers in the American musical canon, Linda J. Snyder and Sarah Mantel comment about the content of Grant’s musical revue Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope, which, “had an all black cast
that included the composer. It was an insightful treatment of ghetto problems, with Grant’s positive focus on African American achievement and the need for peace” (528). Indeed, a trend for female composers of musicals is certainly activism and intersectionality. Both Rodgers and Grant contributed to the 1978 musical revue *Working*, which depicts the struggles of ordinary working people spanning race, class, and gender. Carol Hall’s *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1978) continues to function as a biting political and socio-economic satire. Elizabeth Swados’ *Runaways*, a 1978 “concept” musical, addresses the issue of child homelessness.

Where these names rank highly in quality they certainly lack in quantity. Mantel and Snyder optimistically mention that, “Since the turn of the twentieth century nearly 200 American women have composed works for the stage” (527). Considering the report was written in 2013, this means that an average of 1.77 female composers had works professionally staged per year over the span of 113 years. In addition, this does not consider the contextual issue where women often did not compose entire shows before mid-century. They would often only contribute one or two songs to musical revues. Looking even more short term, a recent analysis of the 2012-2013 Broadway season revealed unfortunate statistics for female creatives in commercial theatre. TheWrap reported that, “of the productions that opened on Broadway during the 2012-2013 season, only 14 percent were directed by women” (Kenneally) Additionally, this season only yielded one female composer: Cyndi Lauper of *Kinky Boots*, which was one of 12 new musicals that opened. This also extends beyond musical theatre. Also stated is that, “Of the 28 plays that opened on Broadway in the 2012-2013 season, just three were written by women” (Kenneally). Not only is Jeanine Tesori’s story a rare occurrence of female inspiration, such an event is still rare today considering such abysmal statistics. When young girls come to visit New York City,
they are seeing male-driven stories created by male composers and writers. This is a problem that simply must be remedied.

There are, of course, musicals that are written by men that have female-driven content. With music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and a book by Winnie Holtzmann, *Wicked* has proved itself to be a social phenomenon. It has garnered popularity and commercial success across the world while also featuring strong female presences onstage. The musical has achieved so much success that its impact is not only on people in the audience, but also people who engage in online social communities. Feminist and queer writer Stacy Wolf claims that theatre extends far beyond physical space. In her essay “*Wicked* Divas, Musical Theater, and Internet Girl Fans”, Wolf explores the recent surge in internet fandoms and how they change theatrical spectatorship. She focuses specifically on the accessibility that young girls have to musical theatre. *Wicked* targets young girls as a fan base and utilizes their ability to form a community around their shared love for the material. Wolf claims that:

*Wicked’s* girl fans legitimate homosocial attachments, create community, and validate each other’s expressions of vulnerability. Girls’ active fandom and their insightful use of musical theater should urge us to take their tastes seriously and to value that space of girl bonding as a queer social practice, not merely as a stage to be got-through and that only exists to lead up to heteronormative adulthood. Girls’ writings on the Web adhere culturally; the Web becomes a public/private place for their thoughts and feelings, interpretations and affiliations, expectations and desires, experiences and fantasies.

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It is important to recognize the widespread availability of this material. Young girls no longer must wait to see a production of their favorite musical until their family take them on an expensive trip to New York. They can now open their computers and not only view the material, but also connect and form gendered communities around their mutual fascination and adoration of the divas that grace the Broadway stage as the beloved Elphaba and Glinda. What’s important,
however, is that both Elphaba and Glinda engage in intellectually driven journeys, explore their femininity and sexuality, and find independence through mutual empowerment. The two protagonists have active roles within the world of the story. As Wolf claims, it’s the type of musical that young girls should be absorbing. They are active, which therefore inspires girls that they can be active as well. Websites like Tumblr, Facebook, and Youtube allow for greater visibility and communication about Broadway musicals. When young girls see empowering material readily available to them on their computers or phones, then it is a cause for celebration.

This concept is often negated, however, when young girls are only exposed to musicals written by exclusively by men that contain only male-driven content. Why are we unable to allow women to showcase their work on the Broadway stage more frequently? Maybe we can owe it to the long history of a male-dominated industry. Perhaps it is habit. Perhaps it is a commercial concern. Producers might be cautious, questioning if female-written musicals can make as much money as their traditional counterparts. Regardless of the reason, we see two problems emerge: A lack of female creatives, and a lack of strong female characters. Female creatives inevitably lead to works that promote activism and gender equality. As we can tell from the 2013-2014 Broadway season study, these musicals are rarely produced. What are young fans to do when they only have a couple options when it comes to obsessing over musicals that have strong female leads? Which leads to the inevitable second question: What is the type of musical that we truly value today?

This brings us back to Hamilton. Diversity is celebrated, difference is accepted, history is rewritten, and frank conversations about immigration, race, and class can happen. As inspiring and provocative as this musical is, it is not including gender in the conversation. Where it is admirable and inspiring to see empowered characters like Elphaba and Glinda celebrated both in
context and performance so fiercely online, it is unsettling to see characters like Eliza and Angelica Schuyler celebrated equally so. Beyond commenting on the performances of Philippa Soo and Tony winner Renée Elise Goldsberry, it is difficult to discuss these characters without talking about their relationship with Alexander Hamilton, the show’s protagonist.

Angelica is initially depicted to be searching for inspiration and knowledge on the streets of New York City with her two sisters. The three Schuyler sisters sing about how wonderful their lives are in a seemingly platonic situation. A Destiny’s Child inspired scene and song tricks us into thinking that this is about empowerment, when they are just on a search to find men. Even though Angelica is briefly shown and assumed to be intelligent, that characteristic is quickly swept under the table. The song “The Schuyler Sisters” claims that inspiration does not come from within, but rather from male figures who are assumed to be more educated and intelligent. This launches the story of Angelica, who tragically fails to snag the man who would fulfill her wishes and instead marries for wealth. Eliza is Angelica’s foil. Quieter and more reserved, she gets her wish and gets to marry Alexander. The sisters’ relationships with Alexander are shown to be at odds. In “Helpless”, Eliza falls under Alexander’s spell. She becomes empowered, but only through her connection to a male figure. She is stricken by Alexander’s look when they first meet, singing, “The you look back at me and suddenly I’m helpless” (“Helpless”). Later in the song, Eliza sings, “Now my life gets better every letter that you write me” and “Look into your eyes and the sky’s the limit” (“Helpless”). Here is a severe departure from a song like “Defying Gravity”, “Ring of Keys”, or “I’m Here” from The Color Purple. Eliza’s agency and ability to do whatever she wants in life is dependent upon her attachment to Alexander. Only when she looks into his eyes and sees his smile does she feel open, happy, and inspired to accomplish bigger things in her life. It is not the vision of a potential future that liberates Eliza, but a man’s loving
stare. Meanwhile, Angelica completely loses any hope of happiness when she loses the man with which she feels a strong connection. In her song “Satisfied”, she sings, “But when I fantasize at night it’s Alexander’s eyes” before concluding the song with the closing lyric: “He will never be satisfied / I will never be satisfied” (“Satisfied”). The few women which exist in the world of Hamilton are completely dependent on men for their happiness. The two most visible female characters have plotlines that are solely dependent on their feelings for Alexander Hamilton, the male, morally ambiguous protagonist.

Let’s look at this musical by the numbers for a second. Hamilton’s cast album has been lauded as visionary. It achieved the highest cast album sales and chart placement since 1963. After the Tony’s, the album found its way to number three on the Billboard 200 chart, one of the only musical cast recordings to do so. This is simply the most visible, most prominent, most mainstream, and most commercially successful piece of theatre in recent history. It is coveted by musical theatre nerds, rap artists, and music industry magnates alike.

Such visibility is great for the theatre industry, but perhaps not the best in terms of gender equity onstage. The album itself has 46 tracks. How many of those tracks prominently showcase women? Six. Let’s look at those six tracks. The first is “The Schuyler Sisters”, which depicts three young girls on the hunt for intellectual men to flirt with. The second and third are “Helpless” and “Satisfied”, two songs featuring love-struck women professing their issues in regards to their love for Alexander. That’s it for act one. The next female-driven song occurs about halfway through act two. “Say No To This” introduces us to Maria Reynolds, depicted here as a seductress in red who brings Hamilton into her bed. This is the only place that Maria appears in the entire musical. She functions only as a plot point to introduce Hamilton’s sex scandal into the story. And then we make it to “Burn”, which depicts Eliza burning the love
letters that she wrote to Hamilton at the beginning of their romance. She wants to erase herself from history in an effort to hide from the shame she feels after having their lives torn apart by scandal and having her heart broken through betrayal. These are perfectly legitimate feelings, but yet again we see a character who only has a voice when she professes to stake her happiness on Hamilton. We see a solo from Eliza again in the finale (“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”) once Alexander has died, where she is depicted as the keeper of his history. She sings about how she lived another fifty years and completed various service projects. She interviews soldiers, makes a collection of letters, raises funds for the Washington Monument, speaks out against slavery (claiming Hamilton could have done so much more), and most importantly, establishes the first private orphanage in New York City. She makes it very clear that all this time and effort was dedicated to preserving Hamilton’s legacy. Again, her happiness is rooted in her relationship to Hamilton. It’s problematic to say the least. But lest we forget, this is the biggest hit that Broadway has seen in at least a decade. People cite it as a beacon of hope for creating diverse theatrical spaces. Hamilton, while progressive, cannot be excluded from a feminist critique. It is not perfect, and we should not kid ourselves otherwise.

It all comes back to the same issue: a lack of female creatives behind the scenes inevitably leads to a lack of gender equity onstage. When it is only men who, as the Hamilton’s finale states “tell the story”, women become severely left out of the conversation. Their stories are invalidated and pushed to secondary roles. Would Hamilton deal with gender issues so poorly if it had even ONE female creative on its team? Perhaps one designer? Or the choreographer? Anything? We need female voices present to advocate against stories that push away the possibility for active female characters. How can we fix it? The problem is that the lack of women on creative teams perpetuates a vicious, inter-generational cycle. Although we cannot
say unequivocally that women don’t carry their own biases, it is undeniable that male-centered creative teams are more likely to produce male-centered content, which in turn is seen by the next generation of potential female writers, composers, directors, etc. These girls not only see a misguided representation of themselves onstage, but they are also see that this was created by mostly men. Opportunities and possibilities are diminished and young girls are less likely to have that “Ring of Keys” moment. In short, we are missing out on future book writers, lyricists, and composers.

What can be done? It must start with content. Girls that are sitting in Broadway theaters should not be forced to identify solely with female characters that are driven exclusively by their attachments to men. This is a strong topic amongst online theatre communities. Olivia Rubino-Finn of NewMusicalTheatre claims that, “We can’t simply be content with hearing about the actions, passions, interests, and beliefs of women—we have to experience them for ourselves, just as we’re shown the full lives of male characters manifest onstage time and time again” (“Who Lives”). Rubino-Finn advocates for giving women onstage a voice. This can propel the message forward that young girls have just as much a right to an opinion as men. Rubino-Finn goes on to state that, “Failing to give female characters in musical theatre the space to propel their own stories simply doesn’t cut it anymore” (“Who Lives”). It is important to give agency to these characters as well. Not only do they say what they feel, but they also make an active effort to change their circumstance for the better. On Wicked, Wolf says that following: “the musical values unique, singular femininity, honors female friendships, and represents women as socially significant. […] What Salman Rushdie observes [about] The Wizard of Oz […] is true here too: ‘The power of men ... is illusory; the power of women is real’” (42). Like Wicked, let’s at least pay attention to diversity of gender. Let’s try and increase our quota of female voices on
creatives teams. It worked for Wicked to produce solid gender equality onstage, it can certainly work again in the future. We shouldn’t preclude men from the conversation, but we most certainly must pay as much attention to not precluding women as well.

Many of the myths of women in the theatre have been debunked. The theatre is not a dangerous place where women are likely to fall prey to lechery. Female-driven work is most certainly commercially viable. We can look at Wicked and Fun Home as prime examples. Female-driven work can also be very popular. Let us stop erasing women from our musical theatre history books. Let us drop the devaluation of women on creative teams. Let us promote content that comments on gender, promotes female agency, and showcases a feminist lens. And finally, let us make it a priority for young girls to not only see Jeanine Tesori on television on Tony night, but also for them to see women succeeding in their fields and achieving their goals and aspirations. There is immense power in the ideology that seeing is believing. Let’s try to make more “Ring of Keys” moments happen.
Works Cited


