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Contradiction in the Tragic Musical

Chelsea McCracken

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Introduction

Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge (2001), with its dazzling visuals and rapid editing, entranced me from the first time I experienced it, and each time I re-watch it I notice more details in its subtle brilliance. One striking feature of this film is the death of the central love interest, the beautiful Satine, played by Nicole Kidman in an Oscar nominated performance. What remains more fascinating than her death is the amount of foreshadowing and darkness that permeates a movie that on the surface seems full of life and flashy exuberance. I find myself wondering how so lively a musical can combine elements of the tragic in such an effective way. Moulin Rouge is not the first film to blend the seemingly conflicting forms and elements of the musical and tragedy. Looking back through the history of the movie musical, particularly during the era of the studio system, it might appear that the idea of a true tragic musical is a contradiction in terms. In the early sound era, only one film was released that perhaps fits these qualifications, Rouben Mamoulian's Applause (1929). After this anomalous example, it is not until the decline of the studio system, which was marked by an increase in genre bending, that tragic musicals really emerged. An early example of the changes taking place in the musical is West Side Story (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise 1961).

An incredibly popular film, it won ten Academy Awards including Best Picture, and is the first widely released American tragic musical.¹

I am using the term “tragic musical” rather than “musical tragedy” because the films I will discuss are identified first as part of the musical genre, even though they contain strong elements of the tragic. The complexity of this definition became evident in the 1970s when the musical genre began to fracture and many musical films that were released pushed the bounds of genre convention so far that they no longer met the requirements of the musical. Since a tragic musical must first be a musical, I do not feel that their inclusion would be profitable for the purposes of this work. One such example is Tommy (Ken Russell 1975). While the violent ending of this film could be considered tragic, the film lacks a focused plot and strays too far into abstraction. One film released pre-Moulin Rouge but post-genre fracturing (exactly twenty years after West Side Story and twenty years before Moulin Rouge) that offers another look at tragedy in the musical is Pennies from Heaven (Herbert Ross 1981).² Pennies from Heaven follows an everyman tragic hero, Arthur, as his world crumbles around him and he finds solace in love/lust and music. While each of these three films, West Side Story,

¹ The focus of this paper is on musical films, and not musical stage productions, although West Side Story is based on a very successful, groundbreaking Broadway musical. Therefore, I will not be looking into stage musicals or operas, although I recognize the impact of opera, and its extensive use of tragedy, on tragic musical films.

² All That Jazz (Bob Fosse 1979) was released around the same time as Pennies From Heaven and is another example of a tragic musical. However, its form, use of modernist self-reflexivity, and flawed tragic figure so closely resembles Pennies From Heaven that its inclusion in this work would be superfluous.

Pennies from Heaven, and Moulin Rouge, brings together different views and aspects of tragedy into the movie musical, they all share elements that link them and combine to create a model of the tragic musical.

Before analyzing these films, I will define the terms I have used and will continue to use: the musical and tragedy. Film scholars have devoted many pages to describing the conventions of the movie musical, with the two most prominent sources being Rick Altman and Jane Feuer. In his 1989 book The American Film Musical, Altman offers a precise and now largely accepted definition of the syntax of Hollywood musicals. At the very least, a musical must be a feature-length narrative film. Altman adds that the narrative must focus on the creation of a romantic couple; he writes, “no couple, no musical” (Altman 103). Along with this focus on romantic pairing, Altman emphasizes the dual-narrative, or dual focus, structure of the musical, which builds the film “around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values” (Altman 19)³. The dual-narrative structure drives the story by using character development and the establishment of the couple, and “requires the viewer to be sensitive not so much to chronology and progression—for the outcome of the male/female match is entirely conventional and thus quite predictable—but to simultaneity and comparison”

³ The couple is defined by heterosexual norms as being a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. Since the musical is structured around binaries, the adherence to a strict construction of male and female is central to the musical. While there are potential queer readings of these films, for example the homosocial realm of the gangs in West Side Story, the dominant discourse of the musical is one of heterosexual norms.

(Altman 19). The success and joining of the couple is linked with the success of other aspects of the film. For example, in a film following the backstage musical format, the union of the couple corresponds to the success of the show they are creating. What further separates the musical from other films that focus on romantic couples is the use of song and dance.

In musicals, the couple comes together through song and dance and joins, if not in actual marriage, then in a symbolic one. Altman specifically discusses the combination of “rhythmic movement with a certain sense of realism... the world of the film musical begins where reality and the fantasy, rhythmic world of the show merge” (Altman 106). For the soundtrack, Altman specifies that the musical must combine musical elements with realistic ones. In a traditional non-musical film, the image is the dominant element and it drives the soundtrack. A character’s dialogue and sound effects only occur on the soundtrack because they are generated by the image. For example, if someone in the scene knocks over a drinking glass, the audience usually hears a shattering sound. Actions on the screen have dictated what the audience hears. Even off-screen sounds are presumably created by the diegetic world and could be seen in the images. Hearing sirens although there is no visible police car, the audience still assumes that there is a police car off screen creating the sound. Non-diegetic music, music that comes from a source outside the world of the film, also serves the image in non-musical films. The emotion of the scene tends to inspire the music, and

therefore the image still controls the soundtrack. One key element of the musical is the occasional reversal of this image/sound hierarchy, which takes place before the start of most production numbers. Sound that occurs diegetically in the film (sound that is created by the images on the screen) is gradually replaced with music. The music causes the characters to move in response to it and now the sound drives the image instead of the other way around. These moments of music and dancing are used as an “expression of personal and communal joy, as signifiers of romantic triumph over all limitations” (Altman 110). In this way, the musical numbers become an integral part of the form of the musical.

In The American Film Musical, Altman specifies three sub-genres of the musical: fairytale, show, and folk. All three tragic musicals that I will be analyzing are folk musicals (although they have elements of other sub-genres). Folk musicals offer escape for the audience by projecting them into a “mythicized version of the cultural past” (Altman 272). Since they deal with an historical reality, folk musicals have a greater level of textual complexity. They must balance between the complete fantasy of idealized memory and an excess of realism that might push the film out of the realm of the musical. The central element of the folk musical is its focus on the family and community (Altman 273). The community provides a base of support for the central characters by sharing the trials and joys that the characters experience during the film. Part of the importance of the community is to provide a

connection with the land and a specific location. Often the female character represents this connection, and through the course of the film she tames the wandering male figure and connects him to the land as well (Altman 307). The successful union of the couple reinforces the bonds of the community (Altman 309). The look of folk musicals is unique, often drawing from American artworks, especially paintings, drawings, photography, and regional art. The goal is to create sets that “never aspire to the status of reality, but rather to that of remembered reality” (Altman 277). Musical numbers are not justified in the narrative as pieces of performance or as art, but rather as expressions of emotion coming naturally out of life and everyday situations. Perhaps the most pertinent aspect of the folk musical, when looking at it in relation to the tragic musical, is the presence of a dark character(s) or force that interrupts the communal joy. Often this character is constructed as evil, as exemplified by Jud Fry in Fred Zinnemann’s Oklahoma (1955). Other times this dark influence is reflected in a more general way, as in the Halloween scene from Meet Me in St. Louis (Vincente Minnelli 1944). This darkness represents the possibility for memory to be unpleasant as well as utopian (Altman 314), and is extremely important when analyzing the role of tragedy in a musical.

In response to Altman’s very thorough definition of the musical, Jane Feuer wrote an essay titled “The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment.” She contributes a theory of “myths,” which help pull the

audience into self-reflexive musicals. Self-reflexive musicals are those that include internal performances that draw attention to the manufacturing of the musical itself, for example films that have plays, movies, or other performances within them. Feuer looks at the myth of entertainment, which the musical constantly plays with, as a continual shift between “demystification and remythicization” (Feuer 162). Feuer breaks the myth of entertainment, as relating to the musical, into three parts, the first of which is the myth of spontaneity. The myth of spontaneity refers to an attribute of musical presentation that makes it appear as though it is a “spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude toward life” (Feuer 162). The effortlessness and ease with which performers move into musical numbers create the illusion of spontaneity and musical numbers as natural occurrences. In fact, “Musical entertainment claims for its own all natural and joyous performances in art and life. The myth of spontaneity operates...to make musical performance, which is actually part of culture, appear to be part of nature” (Feuer 165-166). The myth of integration refers to someone becoming part of or integrating with a group of people within the film (Feuer 166). It reflects the merging of different viewpoints and ideas, and is closely linked with the success of the romantic couple and any other endeavors in the film (such as the show in the backstage musical, or the strength of the community in the folk musical). While studios produced musicals for a mass

public, the myth of integration seeks to mask this situation. By creating a world where a group of people can work together and create entertainment:

It offers a vision of musical performance originating in the folk, generating love and a cooperative spirit which includes everyone in its grasp and which can conquer all obstacles. By promoting audience identification with the collectively produced shows, the myth of integration seeks to give the audience a sense of participation in the creation of the film itself. (Feuer 168)

In a way, this gives the audience the illusion that the films are created and viewed by a single, collective entity of which they are a part.

The final myth is the myth of the audience. Self-reflexive musicals make use of the audience in several ways. Firstly, “the use of theatrical audiences *in* the films provides a point of identification for audiences *of* the film” (Feuer 170). This includes people watching plays and films within the musical, as well as audiences in the world of the film who seem to spontaneously gather around as characters move into impromptu song and dance routines. This myth also includes an external audience’s recognition of actors and/or songs. If viewers have seen the lead actor in previous roles, or heard the music from the film in other situations, then they bring with them preconceived notions and expectations. In the film world, the most successful performances are those that connect to the audiences and appear to be genuine and non-manipulative. Showing this relationship within the film creates the feeling of trust and interaction with the film viewers, who cannot have the same level of connection and immediacy that an audience of a live show has with the event. By using an audience in the film world, musicals can include

shots of the internal audience's reactions and their interactions with the actors. Overall, "self-reflexive musicals mediate a contradiction between live performance in the theater and the frozen form of cinema by implying that [the self-reflexive musical]...is theater, possesses the same immediate and active relationship to its audience" (Feuer 171). By drawing attention to the presence of an audience, these musicals actually re-mystify the role of the audience.

In Feuer's argument, these aspects of self-reflexive musicals apply particularly to the MGM show musicals, which revolved around show business and performances in the film world. The show, or backstage, musical follows characters who, as the name implies, put on a show. Examples of this type include Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films such as Follow the Fleet (Mark Sandrich 1936) and Shall We Dance (Mark Sandrich 1937). Usually show musicals contain theatrical performances within the film, but the definition can stretch to include filmmaking or other performances within the movie. One of the central aspects of this division of the musical is the backstage area as a crossing between the "real" world of the film and the performance within the film, which gives the viewer a privileged look into the supposed mode of production. These films also connect the union of the couple with the success of the production (Altman 205-212).

I have gone through Feuer's argument of the myths in these films because after the collapse of the studio system, self-reflexivity became much

more common as directors sought to take a more critical look at genre films. Instead of reserving the title of “self-reflexive” for films that dealt specifically with characters putting on plays or making movies of their own, films began to capture this self-reflexivity in broader ways. The three films that I am looking at in this analysis, for instance, have elements of self-reflexivity, although only one of them, Moulin Rouge, has a distinct “backstage” plot. Pennies from Heaven deals with a sheet music salesman, which brings in an element of show business. The film is filled with musical numbers resembling those in show musicals, only lacking an interior audience. The use of pre-existing songs and the mimicry of classic musical dance numbers give Pennies from Heaven a self-reflexive tone. West Side Story likewise contains elements of self-reflexivity, particularly through the constant choreographed motion of the characters. Their fluid movements provide a continual suggestion to the audience that the film is a sort of ballet and not intended to imitate the real world.

With this explanation of the musical in mind, I will move into a definition of tragedy that supports this particular project. In Oscar Mandel’s book A Definition of Tragedy,⁴ he defines tragedy as a work in which:

A protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject

⁴ While many authors examine historical definitions of tragedy and include their own additions to it, Mandel’s 1961 work offers a broad definition that serves my purposes in this study.

to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering. (Mandel 20)

While people tend to use the term “tragedy” loosely to describe unhappy events or deaths, this definition brings up some of the complexities that must be taken into account before calling a work of art “tragic.” Mandel’s broad definition allows us to apply it to a wide range of mediums, from poetry to the more pertinent example for this argument, the cinema. Mandel builds on numerous previous definitions of the tragic, including those of Aristotle and S. H. Butcher. Several pieces of this definition deserve careful exploration. First, as mentioned above, tragedy means more than people dying or being unhappy. Their suffering must be a result of their well-intended actions; it happens “not as a mere outcome of their own efforts, but *necessarily* as a condition contained in the effort.... [*Inevitability*] impresses us as the kernel of the definition. No work can be tragic without it” (Mandel 24). Throughout the years, this “inevitability” has been referred to by many titles, including fate, destiny, and fortune. Mandel feels that using inevitability removes spiritual connotations from the word and makes it accessible for every example.

Mandel discusses the subject of tragedies and the form of the tragic hero. A tragic hero must possess, “a purpose—a drive or an ideal which insists on being gratified” (Mandel 103). As Henry Myers, another scholar who writes about tragedy, adds: the tragic hero “has enough in common with other men to make his fate significant to them, and at the same time is unusual

enough to excite and hold their interest” (Myers 135). The element that separates this figure from others is the intensity with which he or she approaches his or her actions. The most important factor for a figure to be considered tragic is the action that he or she undertakes in the course of the plot. As such, a victim—someone to whom bad things have happened—cannot be the center of a tragedy. If misfortune occurs “out of the blue,” then it is no longer inevitably caused by the character’s actions and ceases to fulfill the necessities of a tragic plot: “Tragedy deals with an *action* harmful or fatal in its nature” (Mandel 103). The inevitable consequence of the dedication and deliberate, focused actions of a tragic hero “is that the hero lives intensely, but not long,” (Myers 136) like a flame that burns brightly, only to consume itself.

The actions of the tragic figure and the line of the definition requiring that they be “impelled... by a purpose” leads into the question of free will and the source of this purpose (Mandel 117). There are several ways to respond to the issue of free will, ranging from humans having full control over their destiny (or, to use a less spiritual phrase, the inevitable result of their actions) to a completely fatalistic view, in which each step of a person’s choices have been mapped out and are predestined by a controlling force. Mandel’s definition is relaxed enough to account for the broad spectrum of possibilities; as he states, “all forms of necessity, including fatalism, are compatible with tragedy” (Mandel 121). Tragedy is therefore not dependent on the source of

the tragic figure's purpose, only that the figure acts upon it in a way that results in his or her downfall.

In addition to the tragic hero, Mandel looks into tragic guilt and the ways in which people who commit sinful actions can become tragic figures. Going back to his base definition, Mandel reasserts that the tragic character must "command our earnest good will." So while they may perpetrate sinful acts, the characters can be tragic only if the audience recognizes their inward worth and goodness. This recognition creates sympathy for the character, sometimes where the creator did not intend it. If the audience is willing to forgive a character condemned by both the world in which he or she is contained and the story author/creator's world, then the figure may become tragic. The character's actions must, like those in other tragedies, "bring about inevitably... some great pain for the actor" (Mandel 139). The tragic figure still suffers as a result of his or her actions, although there is not a specific requirement that he or she repents these actions, only that they face the consequences of them.

The emotional impact of tragedy is extremely important to take into consideration when examining tragedy in film. Mandel does not include Aristotle's emphasis on the creation of "pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of these emotions" (Mandel 21) in his definition. In her book Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion, Elizabeth Belfiore goes into great detail concerning Aristotle's use of catharsis (also spelled

katharsis). Catharsis refers to the idea of purging, of separating and therefore removing, certain emotions (Belfiore 293). Plato defined catharsis as “a separation of the worse from the better” (Belfiore 295). The idea behind this is that through exposure to tragic plots, good and bad can be distinguished and bad elements are purged. The impact of this catharsis is particularly important when discussing tragic film. Film is a photographic medium and since the images are more realistically depicted, audiences tend to respond to films as vivid mirrors of real life. Catharsis as a result of film allows viewers to purge their emotions, making them feel better without really changing anything in their lives. They can recognize the separation of good and bad and release the idea of the bad through the physical reaction of crying or feeling pain for the tragic figure. The pain, since it is not directed at the viewer, can offer relief. As the movie ends and the lights come up, people feel assured that they have distance from the tragic and comfort themselves that their lives are not that bad.

The musical has a similar emotional effect on viewers, although it takes a very different route in achieving it. The musical, a highly effective mode of entertainment, offers viewers the feeling of utopia. As Richard Dyer discusses in his influential article “Entertainment and Utopia,” “entertainment does not...present models of utopian worlds... Rather, the utopianism is contained in the feeling it embodies. It presents...what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized” (Dyer 177). Dyer specifies five areas

in which entertainment provides that which society fails to provide: energy (displays of activity and vigor), abundance (profuse quantity of material items), intensity (emotional experience without buffers), transparency (a link between the characters and the audience), and community (belonging, being part of a group) (Dyer 180). The musical tends to respond to each of these categories, particularly during the musical numbers. As the romantic couple comes together and moves in harmony, the audience is filled with a sense of kinesthetic energy and lightness. By viewing the happy endings in a musical, the romantic triumph over all limitations, the audience feels what utopia would feel like, even if no real world solutions are offered. Tragic catharsis, as mentioned, also gives the audience a sense of release and contentment. In the case of tragedy, however, this feeling comes from experiencing the fall and suffering of the tragic figure, not through the creation of utopian feelings.

When looking at tragedy in the musical, one has to wonder how these fit together. How can a film both offer its audience the feeling of utopia and purge unpleasant emotions through the depiction of tragic, inevitably suffering figures? The definitions of the musical and tragedy seem to conflict and act in contradictory ways. However, there are several films that join them together in a highly effective way. To analyze how these films work, it is interesting to look at the original film that combined elements of tragedy in a musical form and set a precedent for the tragic musicals that followed it. Applause tells the story of the decline and eventual suicide of a burlesque dancer, and her

daughter's potential seduction into the world of burlesque. Mamoulian described his intentions with Applause as follows:

I was fascinated by New York, and I wanted to show it in all its beauty and ugliness. I wanted to show the burlesque in all its tawdriness and vulgarity. At the same time I wanted to show that even in a garbage dump a beautiful flower can grow... I wanted two young, innocent people who should be poisoned by it but yet they are not. They win in the end. (Mamoulian 169)

Mamoulian was interest in juxtaposing contradictory images and themes.

This experimentation, particularly with seemingly opposite elements, reflects the use of tragedy in a musical format. Applause shares elements with musicals of the early sound period while exploring tragic plot lines.

Applause was released in 1929 at the beginning of the sound film era.

While some genres, including the western, were possible in the silent era, musicals rely on sound. The musical genre was only possible after the invention of synchronous sound, and therefore Applause was released as conventions of the musical were being formed. Early musicals borrowed much from traditions of vaudeville and often revolved around the show world. The correlation between vaudeville and cinema goes back well before this period, however, as short films were often shown as bits of spectacle in vaudeville programs. Early sound films were often musicals since having large choruses singing made it unnecessary to synch sound and image exactly. The very first talking film was a musical based on the world of show business. The Jazz Singer (Jack Jarmuth 1927) took the film world by storm when it successfully synced audio and visual material. It also made use of stage acts,

such as minstrel shows and lounge singing, within the world of the film. Unlike the polished, classical Hollywood musicals, The Jazz Singer and other early sound musicals were rough and awkward. Most only had synch sound over part of the film, the dialogue was frequently simple and inept, and conventions of over-the-top silent film acting conflicted with the ability to use words to explain plot points. By adding synch sound, however, The Jazz Singer pushed production studios forward, and soon silent films were a thing of the past, except in avant-garde works.

The same year that Applause appeared, several other films used the stage and vaudeville acts to justify musical numbers. These included The Broadway Melody (Harry Beaumont 1929), On With the Show (Alan Crosland 1929), and Gold Diggers of Broadway (Roy Del Ruth 1929). Applause's use of the burlesque, instead of vaudeville, immediately gives it a darker, more exploitative feeling. Mamoulian explored the combination of the show business world with family melodrama, and mixed together what I would describe as a somewhat tragic musical. While similar to later tragic musicals, Mamoulian's decision to have the young couple escape from the burlesque world keeps the film from becoming truly tragic. Applause follows the story of Kitty, who is a famous burlesque dancer. Kitty moves through several men in the course of the movie but is determined to keep her daughter out of show business. Her devotion to her daughter earns the audience's good will, even though she has many vices, such as a tendency to drink and

associate with seedy men. Kitty's daughter, April, is raised in a convent until a manipulative man convinces Kitty to bring her back to New York. As Kitty begins to drink herself to death and lose her career because of her age, her suitor tries to pull April into the dark world of burlesque. She is only saved, and the audience assumes this is a saving action, by agreeing to marry a Navy man and move to a farm in the Midwest.

Kitty and April's future unhappiness is foreshadowed in the shots surrounding April's birth. Just after the film begins, Kitty leaves the stage after her act, faints, and immediately gives birth. April comes as a surprise when she is literally born into the seedy burlesque world. When the rest of the cast filters back to see the new baby, the camera moves to the ceiling to frame a shot that looks directly down on the mother and baby lying on the couch and the others walking around them. While the characters see this display as a happy moment, it is eerily reminiscent of a funeral wake. Kitty lies, almost lifeless, with her arms spread to the side, in much the same way as she does in the end after killing herself. This image gives the narrative a circular trajectory, where the beginning foreshadows Kitty's decline and death. In this way, Kitty's story is very much tragic. In the end, April's future husband offers a way to save Kitty but it is too late. She tries her best to look after her daughter, but it is this desire that leads her to kill herself and therefore become a tragic figure.

While the production numbers of musicals are supposed to bring the characters together through harmonic and rhythmic song and dance, the musical numbers in Applause constantly refuse this connection. The burlesque dancers are all shapes, heights, and ages, and can never seem to move in unison. Close-up shots cut the body into pieces but unlike Busby Berkeley's musicals, which create intricate, beautiful patterns from legs, arms, and faces, these dancers are too scattered. The close-ups focus on faces, both of the dancers' and, interestingly, the members' of the audience. Far from the pristine Berkeley girl's faces, however, Mamoulian fills the screen with leering men who are missing teeth and dancers with grotesque features and make-up. These details, interspersed in a musical number, leave the audience with an uneasy feeling at the contradiction, and offer further evidence for this film to be viewed as a dystopic, or perhaps tragic, musical.

Applause resists becoming a truly tragic musical. While Kitty's story follows a tragic arc, April manages to escape from a similar fate. Her birth in the backstage area and dance lessons at a young age seem to set April up to follow after her mother into the sleazy burlesque world, where she might have had the same misfortunes. Towards the end of the film, April does give in and agree to stay in the city to look after her mother, and even dances her mother's part in the show. If the film ended with April, near tears and about to faint, dancing on stage in front of a jeering, grotesque male crowd, then I would call Applause a tragic musical. However, right before the film ends, April's fiancé

returns to rescue her from this fate. Although Kitty dies, April will apparently escape and live a happy life as her mother wished.

Applause provided a starting point and a precedent for the tragic musicals that followed. Yet not until 1961 was a mainstream, American tragic musical released. After the decline of the studio system, films began to bend and comment on genre conventions, which reflected, as John Cawelti wrote in his influential essay “Chinatown and Generic Transformation,” people’s feelings that genre traditions, and the culture they appear to represent, are no longer appropriate for the current needs and expectations of society (Cawelti 260). When looking at tragic musicals, several questions come to the foreground, which I will address in the following chapters. Genre movies by definition are predictable; they offer a formulaic plot that the audience enjoys because it already knows what is going to happen. If this is the case, how does the tragic musical fit into the concept of the musical genre? Looking again at Cawelti’s descriptions of genre bending, tragic musicals seem to fit his definition of demythologization, which refers to a film that “deliberately invokes the basic characteristics of a traditional genre in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth” (Cawelti 254). Taking this interpretation into account, should musicals that end in tragic ways still be considered musicals? If so, how do we view the production numbers? Do they convey a sense of joy and triumph, even in a world where the union of the couple is denied in the end? What does the

death of one of the romantic leads do to the formation of the couple, on which the traditional musical is based? Do these films actually offer a new view, or is it simply the same story dressed with “realistic” disappointments and grittier imagery? In the end, how do these two seemingly opposite concepts, tragedy and the musical, join together in an effective way? Can the viewer feel what utopia would be like, even if it does not last? With these questions in mind, I start my close readings of the films mentioned above, beginning with West Side Story.

West Side Story:

The Origins of a Tragic Musical

West Side Story began as a collaboration in the mid 1950s between Leonard Bernstein, who wrote the music, Jerome Robbins, the choreographer and original director, and Arthur Laurents, who wrote the source book and then the stage play. Later Stephen Sondheim, in one of his first Broadway shows, joined this talented group. The starting idea was to create a musical based on William Shakespeare's tragic play, Romeo and Juliet, but set in a contemporaneous New York City. After working through several possible options, they decided on the story of two warring gangs in New York's Upper West Side. The star-crossed lovers, Tony and Maria (taking the parts of Romeo and Juliet), come from different backgrounds. Tony is Polish-American and a former leader of one gang, the Jets. The Jets, although they are children of immigrants, violently despise the recently immigrated Puerto Ricans, represented by the Puerto Rican gang, the Sharks. The leader of the Sharks is Maria's brother Bernardo, and therefore Tony and Maria's love is forbidden. Many of the side characters are also retained, for example, Mercutio (in the form of Jets leader Riff), the nurse (Maria's friend Anita), Tybalt (Sharks leader Bernardo), Paris (Maria's Puerto Rican suitor, Chino), and Prince Escalus (Lieutenant Schrank and Officer Krumpke). West Side Story contains several key allusions to the Shakespeare play, including a reworked balcony scene, which now takes place on a cramped fire escape.

The ending shares Shakespeare's tragic feel, but takes away the double suicide and allows Maria to live. The end also lacks the conclusive dialogue between Romeo and Juliet's parents, confirming the end of the feud. In a more tragic twist, Tony's death, while it contains a small symbol of unity as members from both gangs carry away Tony's dead body, seems to create more hatred and disunity in the neighborhood; the rest of the gang disperses in all directions, instead of as a group.

Laurents' book West Side Story became the basis for a very successful stage musical, which first opened on Broadway in 1957 and has undergone numerous revivals through the years. A review in the *New York Times* of the original Broadway performance called West Side Story "a profoundly moving show that is as ugly as the city jungles and also pathetic, tender, and forgiving...an incandescent piece of work that finds odd bits of beauty amid the rubbish of the streets" (Atkinson). The show was a success, loved by critics and audiences despite, or perhaps because of, its dark, timely subject matter. One critic warns not to "look for the familiar solaces of the musical stage," (Atkinson) meaning do not expect light-hearted tunes, extravagant costumes and set pieces, and comedy bits. The humorous moments in the stage and screen versions have a sarcastic, biting undertone of social commentary. One such moment is the song "Gee Officer Krumpke," which some people at that time felt took too lighthearted a position on what was a serious, scary problem (Atkinson). The stylized ballet fighting in West Side

Story loses some of its initial shock value, however, since modern audiences are accustomed to seeing incredible, graphic violence on television, in movies, and on the news.

West Side Story was not the first musical theater piece to incorporate elements of tragedy. In fact, one 1957 *New York Times* article by George Kaufman looked at it as a continuation of what he saw as a distressing trend of darker musicals edging out lighter fare.⁵ West Side Story, however, uses tragedy more directly than other shows of the time, which would perhaps have a character die, only to return as a ghostly presence for the rest of the show. Kaufman goes on to say that he recognizes the time for the old-fashioned musical comedy has ended, that the simple plot and tunes would get “hooted off the stage these days” (Kaufman). He calls for a new designation of the musical to prepare viewers for the show they are going to see, so instead of referring to everything as a musical or a musical comedy, advertisers should use the phrase musical drama, or perhaps musical tragedy, to inform viewers. This is the earliest reference to a term joining tragedy and the musical that I have found, and it helps to mark West Side Story as the first of the tragic musicals. West Side Story was such a success on the stage that the creators decided to move it into the more freeing form of film. Its success opened the doors for more tragic musicals on the stage, as well as in film.

⁵ He mentions Bitter Sweet (opened in 1929), Carousel (opened in 1945), and Allegro (opened in 1947) as examples of stage musicals that make use of darker subject matter and death.

The best-known version of West Side Story is the 1961 film version, directed by Robbins along with Robert Wise, who also produced. Reviewers of the time applauded it as “nothing short of a cinema masterpiece” (Crowther). The film follows the stage version very closely and at times, the film sets itself up as a stage on which the young performers dance and sing. The rooftop, for example, looks more like a dance stage than an actual rooftop in a slum, which would be covered in garbage and much dirtier. The overall aesthetic of the mise-en-scene is highly stylized, using color in especially meaningful ways. This compliments the spontaneous use of dance throughout the film, and the highly choreographed fight/dance sequences.

Setting Up the Tragic Circumstances

While similarities to the restricted arena of the stage are apparent, Robbins and Wise make good use of the freedom cinema offers. The opening sequence, for example, starts with an abstract pattern that shifts colors as the overture plays. As the music finishes, the pattern sharpens and the audience realizes it is the well-known New York City skyline. A series of aerial shots of the city follow, moving over major landmarks and highways as eerie whistling sounds are heard in the background, later accompanied by a sporadic drumbeat and snapping fingers. The final aerial shot shows a small group of high school boys clustered together on a set of bleachers in a fenced playground area. The shot tightens on the young men until suddenly cutting

to a close-up of Riff, the gang's leader, snapping his fingers. This sequence sets up the location of the story since, after entering the West Side neighborhood, the camera never leaves it. These shots do more than just establish location, however. Along with the rest of the opening sequence, through the first skirmish between the Jets and the Sharks, it sets up the tone for the entire film. Audiences are used to seeing images of New York in musicals, and this sort of montage opening might, in a more traditional musical, represent places characters will go or at least set up New York as an idealized place, such as the New York in On The Town (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly 1949) (Dunne 103). The fact that in West Side Story these images are accompanied by the solitary whistled tune, which we later find out is a secret call that the Jets use, and a light, uneven beat, gives the images an ironic twist. The grand orchestral overture fades out, leaving the audience in an uncomfortable silence that forces them to look at the images more closely. The disconnect between sound and image starts the film with the feeling of unease, which is only heightened in the rest of the opening.

The first fifteen minutes of the film are without dialogue. After cutting to Riff snapping his fingers, the film develops the two gangs and their conflict using movement and rhythm instead of words. The camera pans to show the other Jets joining Riff in snapping their fingers, and in this way they are united by a beat, a sort of musical pulse, from the very beginning. The orchestra returns with a simple jazzy beat to accompany the snapping fingers.

Later, this bit of music is repeated and since it is associated with the gang's unifying rhythm, it becomes a theme for the Jets. In general, the Jets are associated with jazz music and rhythm, while the Sharks are represented with Latin music. The Jets clearly have authority in the playground setting. When a boy of about the same age accidentally throws his baseball towards them, he has to wait for them to return it on their terms. As the Jets all stand up and begin to move away, however, the camera moves outside of the fenced playground. The gang is visually trapped by the chain link, symbolizing their confinement to their neighborhood and situation in life and hinting at their inability to escape from it. This shot foreshadows the story's unhappy conclusion.

As they move out of the playground and onto the street, the Jets break into spontaneous, ballet-like dance steps. First one or two on their own, then the whole gang in unison join together in proud, energetic dance steps, mainly involving jumping and reaching out with extended arms. So far the dancing seems to fit with that of a traditional musical, as their movements convey a collective joy and togetherness. The representation of the Jets as a community links them to the conventions of the folk musical. This dance halts suddenly when the Jets turn and find Bernardo on the sidewalk. The music stops briefly as they stare at each other and when the tune returns, it is played with a deeper horn to show tension between the characters.

With the arrival of the Sharks, the joyful dancing of the Jets takes on a different tone and style. The Jets clearly ruled what was going on in the playground, but with a benevolent hand, not seriously disrupting the other boys and even detouring their path to avoid stepping on a little girl's chalk drawing. After Bernardo enters, the audience sees a different side of the Jets. Two Jets follow Bernardo as he tries to leave, making catcalls to torment him. Bernardo walks away in disgust and angrily pounds a wall before he begins to snap his fingers, calling members of the Sharks to join him. By snapping his fingers he links his group with the Jets in the mind of the audience. His snapping is more rushed, however, conveying a desperate energy and increasing the tension of the scene. He and two other Sharks dance down the street, but their dance has more forward, rather than upward, movement. They also add more aggressive spinning and punching moves. All of these movements build energy and suggest the potential for violent conflict. In the minor skirmishes that follow, where the group with fewer people yields to the more populated one, the Jets continue to dance with an upward, lighter energy. They are confident of their position in the neighborhood and when together, they are unconcerned by the Sharks.

The violent conflict begins when one of the Jets, Action, picks a fight with a Puerto Rican. The dispute between these two quickly boils over to involve both gangs in their entirety, since each is unwilling to let the other one have the last punch or kick. Starting the conflict with just two people shows

how combustible the situation is and suggests the difficulty in ending it. Several 1950s films deal with the issues of teen violence and postwar juvenile delinquency,⁶ which seems to inevitably end in tragedy. The escalation of conflict mirrors the Cold War political tensions of the 1950s; the deadly conflicts between gangs and spread of street violence microcosmically reflect actions on a national level (Salisbury 192). This escalation is formally demonstrated as the editing begins to quicken and the dancing turns into running with bits of stylized fighting added. For example, leapfrogging over someone's back becomes symbolic for fighting with him. The few bits of dance are much more aggressive and purposeful, particularly the section in which three Jets stride down an alley, bent over, snapping rapidly with both hands. This often repeated iconic bit clearly shows the shift in the Jets attitude. No longer as confident and nonchalant, they are closer to the ground and the snapping quickens the rhythm of the scene. The camera spins at times, reflecting the turmoil for the Jets as the Sharks encroach on their territory, and again foreshadowing the mayhem that will follow in the film.

This opening scene brings in elements of the musical; the opening overhead shots, for example, are reminiscent of Busby Berkeley's elaborately staged dance patterns. The opening also contains a foreboding undertone that suggests the tragic conclusion, even before any of the characters are named or the lovers are seen. The juvenile delinquents (JDs, as they call themselves)

⁶ The most well known example being Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray 1955).

use music and dance to identify themselves with a gang. Being in a gang gives them a sense of family and belonging, which they express through the communal energy of dance. The conflict between the gangs, however, is also portrayed through movement. Throughout the film, dancing and fighting become almost synonymous. This pairing shifts the central goal and expectation of musical numbers since it represents conflict and disharmony. While this contradiction does not yet place West Side Story in the realm of tragedy, it certainly lays a foundation for the development of a tragic plot line. A story following teenagers with this much restless energy and conflict will most likely not end happily.

Dancing as Fighting: Musical Energy, Tragic Undertone

The opening sequence sets up the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks, and also elaborates the idea of dancing as fighting. Instead of exchanging blows as they run around the neighborhood, the two gangs jump, twirl, and use stylized fighting moves to symbolize the battle and their aggression towards each other. This style of conflict is continued in a more abstract way during the dance at the gym. Both gangs attend and the Jets plan on holding a war council with Bernardo to determine the specifics of their all-out rumble. The dance becomes a direct preliminary engagement between the two sides.

Maria and Anita are introduced together in the dress store where they work right before the dance scene, as Anita is finishing Maria's dance dress. At first Maria wants to change the dress by lowering the neckline or dyeing it red, but once she puts it on she loves it. Dressed in white, with only a red sash, she is a vision of innocence with a hint of the future. As she says in the film, "White is for babies, I will be the only one there in a white dress." It is exactly this beautiful, youthful image that catches Tony's eye at the dance. Maria begins to spin in joy after she talks about this night as her first as a young American lady. As she spins, however, the image distorts so that colors separate and she seems to double. This effect foreshadows her double life as a young American lady, that she must be both Bernardo's sister (Puerto Rican) and Tony's lover. The colors shift, until the image of her spinning is enclosed with red. While moments before she asked Anita to dye her dress red to be more grown up, this red tint implies that her part in the story will end badly. The doubled spinning suggests the turmoil of her feelings over the next day. The fact that she ends up surrounded with red brings in images of blood, both in the realm of sexual maturing (menstruation and loss of virginity) and death. Maria will in fact become a woman through the course of the film, but the red tint gives the screen an eerie glow through which the audience senses that it will be a tragic road.

Maria's spinning fades into the first image of the dance, which is made up of several spinning female figures tinted red against a black backdrop.

Their quick, uneven movements again hint at some turmoil in their lives that is about to occur. The deaths in the film have the strongest impact on the women, who are not allowed any part of the gang's activities but must suffer the consequences of the gang's rumble. The girlfriends left behind—Graziella (Riff's girlfriend), Anita (Bernardo's girlfriend), and Maria—all end up crying over the wasteful deaths caused by the gangs. Until this scene, only the boys dance. The shift to female dancers comes right after Maria's introduction, suggesting a widening of the story to include female characters in the conflict of the narrative. The red images are blurred, so it is impossible to tell if the women are white or Puerto Rican. The lines between ethnicities are therefore also blurred, which suggests that there is no real difference between those who are allied with the Jets or the Sharks.

More dancers enter the frame, the musical beat quickens, and soon the color jumps from red and black back to Technicolor. The couples in the gym at first move as a unified mass, following the same steps. There is an emphasis on throwing their hands up into the air as in the original Jets dance. Now, however, instead of jumping and stretching their arms straight up, the dancers put their arms up and with a sudden, almost convulsive bending at the waist send them back towards the floor. While this style of dancing echoes popular dance movement from the 1950s, and certainly goes along with the jazzy tune, it shows the breakdown of the Jet's original light, airy, and

confident dancing. The falling motion of the arms brings to mind images of collapse, which correspond to the tragic undertone of the film.

As soon as Bernardo and his friends enter the dance, the atmosphere shifts dramatically. The Puerto Ricans stop dancing to go over and talk to him, while the Jets and their supporters stop to plan their actions. Even the music fades away as the two sides gather. They literally divide the gym in half, with the green, blue, and orange clad Jets on one side and the purple, black, and red Sharks on the other. As the tension builds and the leaders step forward, one of the few adults in the film moves between them. The clueless, stuttering man, who we assume is a teacher responsible for running the dance, announces that they are going to have a “get together dance.” This character is an indictment of the adult system of authority and resolution. After the aggression and hatred the characters have shown towards each other, it seems unlikely that they will put their differences aside and fix things with this weak attempt to force integration. This suggestion sounds particularly feeble since the Jets and Sharks show their anger towards each other through dance. The young people have no respect for this man and openly mock him as they do the police officers. Only after Riff and Bernardo enter the dance floor do the others follow, clearly indicating that these two are the sources of authority. Though they half-heartedly attempt the “get together dance,” it was doomed to fail and when the music stops, everybody moves back to their original partner. In a more traditional musical, dancing brings people together and this “get

together dance” would have been a success.⁷ West Side Story, however, revolves around the youth culture and the disillusionment of society after WWII. As I mentioned earlier, the old-fashioned song and dance was no longer a viable option as audiences began to reject the simplistic formulas of the musical. The end of the studio system brought greater experimentation with genre conventions, which in turn fostered an expectation of innovation and rejection of classical formulas creating skepticism toward overly utopian classical musicals in the younger movie-going generation (Lev 217-222).

The next dance song is the mambo, which is appropriate because it combines the Latin style associated with the Sharks with the Jet’s jazz rhythm. The elaborate dance routines that follow are patterned after the fighting between the two sides. First, both sides dance at the same time, separated on different sides of the gym. They follow the same rhythm and use identical dance steps but dance in segregated sections. Soon the Sharks take over the center of the dance floor and show off their Latin dancing. The Jets then take over center stage and do their dance. Soon Riff, Bernardo, and their girls perform, shifting the dance battle from the entire gangs to just these two, the leaders who will die in the upcoming rumble. The entire dance seems to be comprised of couples, which emphasizes the musical’s focus on creating the couple. Two of the couples were formed before the film started (Riff and

⁷ The hoedown in Oklahoma, for example, features the song “The Farmer and The Cowman (Should be Friends).” The cowboys and ranchers at first hesitate to dance together but the story ends with the union between Curly and Laurey settling the groups’ differences.

Graziella and Bernardo and Anita), and in a twist, the film is more about dissolving these couples, as the men die, rather than re-affirming them. The dance scene gives the audience a chance to see the couples happily showing off their unity through dance before the war council occurs and violence escalates. Although this segment of dance is the most directly symbolic of the physical battles between the Jets and the Sharks, ironically it is also the happiest part of the dance. Earlier, everyone had a serious look on their face and the dancing seemed almost compulsive instead of joyous. As they competitively dance, everyone in the gym smiles and the energy of the dance increases dramatically. Riff performs incredible feats of athleticism, leaping into the air and flipping, and Bernardo lifts up Anita and swirls her around the dance floor. These youths are happiest when there is a fight of some sort, whether in the playground or on the dance floor. It is this tension and aggression towards outside forces that gives them energy and, in an ironic way, allows them to joyously come together in opposition to the “other.”

In the midst of the energetic mambo, the music suddenly fades and the dance floor blurs. This is the moment when Tony and Maria see each other and fall instantly in love. Like the tragic hero who burns brightly and quickly, a love as intense as that of Tony and Maria is doomed to live a short, passionate life and then die out tragically. The other dancers and the gym begin to disappear and soon Tony and Maria are standing right in front of each other. The background blacks out, with the exception of a few multi-colored

lights that imitate starlight. They begin a gentle ballet-like dance, moving slowly and gracefully around each other in sharp contrast to the mambo. Once again they use finger snapping. This time, Tony and Maria snap their fingers twice quickly, which symbolizes their romantic pairing. The dance later includes a single finger snap, as Tony and Maria will representatively join to become one (as they sing in “One Hand, One Heart”). They speak briefly and her one comment about him as she touches his face, “so warm,” is harshly contrasted with the final scene, when he is lifeless and growing cold. Tony and Maria lean in to kiss and the music begins to build again, first with low, ominous horns and then with uncharacteristically light bells. Right as they kiss, a police whistle sounds, suggesting that what they just did was a crime of some sort, and Bernardo jumps into the frame, pushing Tony away. The brief happiness of the shared joy in dancing the mambo, and in Tony and Maria meeting, dissolves back into old grudges and conflicts. The use of the musical dance scenes cannot push out the tragic undercurrent.

The Use of Color in Creating Enmity and Inevitability

From the very start, color plays an important role in West Side Story. Color is used to characterize the gangs as incompatible, which foreshadows their conflict and acts as a constant reminder of the film’s tragic undertone. The overture starts by playing a bit of “Quintet,” the group song leading up to the rumble. Right from the start, the music brings in the prelude to the most

violent moment in the film. Over an abstract outline of the Manhattan skyline, the screen becomes a bright yellow, a color usually associated with the Jets in the film. As the overture moves into a piece of the love song “Tonight,” the color becomes red. This association between the lovers and the color red, which symbolizes both passion and death, is repeated through the film, helping to foreshadow tragic future events. As the overture changes to play a bit from “Maria,” Tony’s song about Maria’s beauty, the colors shift again, moving quickly through purple to blue. Purple and blue are closely linked with the Puerto Ricans. Through the romantic songs, the colors shift from Jets’ colors to Sharks’ colors.

Throughout the film, the Jets and Sharks become associated with specific color palates. The Jets wear more orange, yellow, and green, which seems to be Riff’s color. The Puerto Ricans dress in a combination of purple, blue, and red. Even the walls in the Puerto Rican apartment building are blue and purple. While there are exceptions to this, the gangs seem color-coded at times, which serves several purposes. First, it helps distinguish them from each other when mixed together. It gives a uniform appearance to the two groups, emphasizing the unity within the groups and the separation between the gangs. The choice of colors suggests a fundamental incompatibility between the gangs since, looking at the color wheel, the Jets’ colors cover one side of it and the Sharks’ colors come from the other side. The emphasis on color also brings in the issue of skin color, which prevents the Puerto Ricans

from looking the same as the descendants of Northern European immigrants. Through the use of color in the film's mise-en-scene, the gangs are portrayed as fundamentally different, and therefore their conflict is doomed to continue since they remain incompatibly colored at the end of the film. Their conflict sets the stage for tragedy.

There are a few instances where colors from the two sides are combined or exchanged. These moments reflect the character dissolve of the musical, when the romantic couple comes together and their union ideally dissolves their differences. Since the film ends tragically, however, the exchange of colors (representing the potential utopian exchange of values and the possibility of love overcoming all impediments) is not enough to save the couple. When Tony is first introduced, he is wearing a blue shirt. Blue becomes associated with the Puerto Ricans and the shirt links Tony with them visually from the start, foreshadowing his relationship with Maria. Maria likewise crosses the color boundary when she sings "I Feel Pretty." In one key moment, she jumps onto a table, wrapped in purple fabric, as the other girls call her Miss America. The shiny purple material suggests a Puerto Rican dress, but the girls in the shop refer to her as an American icon. Underneath the purple, Maria wears a double-layered dress with yellow as a base and red on top. The yellow, a Jets color, serves as a visual reminder of Maria's feelings for Tony. The red on top is both a Puerto Rican color and symbolic of her romantic feelings. Even in this happy scene, however, the red

also hints at the bloody conclusion of her love. Tony comes to the store dressed in a blue shirt again and Maria takes off her overdress so that she wears only yellow. This reversal of color visually represents their union, especially since Tony wears yellow and Maria wears light violet/blue as they sing “Tonight” together. The dissolve is part of the musical syntax, representing the potential resolution of the dual-focus narrative. Just before Tony arrives at the store, Anita takes off her purple patterned overdress to uncover an orange one underneath. Again, orange is a Jets color. It seems ironic on Anita, until she reveals her tolerance for Tony and Maria’s love. While she advises against it, she becomes Maria’s confidant and her orange dress reflects her sympathy towards the young lovers.

Throughout the film, the filmmakers make significant use of the color red. On the color wheel, red comes between the Jets’ orange and the Sharks’ purple, suggesting an area of meeting and conflict between the rival gangs. As discussed above, red has strong associations with passion, blood (death), and therefore a loss of innocence. In a film where color is so carefully used, each color choice becomes significant. Red shows up in particularly notable places. When the Jets first gather and plan to challenge Bernardo to a rumble, the wall behind them is bright red. This set foreshadows the disastrous conclusion to the rumble and right from the start the audience feels that the rumble is a bad idea. During Tony’s introduction, he moves boxes of Coca-Cola down a stairwell with a red railing and red fire escape overhead. The

gym where the dance is held has unusually painted red walls. This scene, as described above, is the location for both a “dancing battle” between Jets and Sharks and also for the first meeting of Tony and Maria. The fact that these events occur surrounded by red walls reflects the passion of both the violence and romance. The red also suggests the tragic deaths of Riff, Bernardo, and Tony, particularly because the location of the rumble repeats this imagery with its red ceiling.

The sky before the rumble is blood red, which tints most of the scenes in the “Quintet” ensemble song red, foreshadowing unhappy events to come that night. The first shot of the rumble location uses the same red and black tint as the start of the dance scene, this time on a close-up of chain link fence instead of dancers. The chain link ties back to the opening scene, with the Jets walking behind (visually trapped by) another fence. The rumble is the inevitable result of the anger and pride that trapped them from the start of the film. When Maria goes to meet Tony at the end of the film, she wears a solid red dress. The dress refers back to her first scene, when she asked Anita if she could dye her party dress red. Maria wanted to be a grown woman, and now after losing her virginity to Tony and then losing Tony to the hatred of the gangs, she is one. There is no blood on the playground where Tony gets shot. In a way Maria’s dress represents the blood that would be there. The passionate red color, which originally had a romantic connotation, now is overcome by Maria’s anger and hate, potentially refueling the cycle of

violence. With these very consciously placed color references, the tragedy of the young lovers and the inevitability of violence between the gangs are foreshadowed throughout the film.

“Somewhere,” The Impossibility of a Happy Ending

From the moment Tony and Maria see each other at the dance they fall in love. This love, however, is destined to fall apart, as it cannot survive the world in which they live. As I established in the definition of tragedy in the introduction, the inevitability of a disastrous end is necessary for the film to be considered tragic. Through their well-intentioned actions, their attempt to stop the fighting between the Jets and Sharks, Tony and Maria meet their unhappy fates. While Tony and Maria love each other, West Side Story sets up a world that is incompatible with their love. They imagine a place where they can be together in the duet “Somewhere,” but even they recognize the impossibility of it. “Somewhere” refers to an imaginary place and with the foreshadowing of disaster throughout the film, the audiences knows they will never make it there.

The audience is introduced to Tony before meeting him, since Riff and the other Jets describe him as a loyal friend with a reputation for being able to fight. Once Tony is on screen, he is constantly moving, filled with an energetic exuberance even though he is performing menial labor carting boxes around. His song, “Something’s Coming,” brings forward a different side of him, as a dreamer who wants to make something out of life. Right away,

then, he is separated from the juvenile delinquent mentality. As he imagines what great thing is coming for him, the camera pans over to laundry hanging behind him, which cuts to lace in the dress shop where Maria talks to Anita. As discussed in the previous section, Maria is also introduced in her place of employment, getting ready for the dance. Cutting from one directly to the other both links Tony and Maria in the viewer's mind as anomalous in the world of juvenile delinquency and establishes them as a couple before they even meet. Tony and Maria are set up as a traditional musical couple. He wants something exciting to happen to him and she wants to fall in love. Being associated with opposite gangs in an older musical would not be a death sentence. It goes along with the dual-narrative structure of the musical and in a more traditional musical would be resolved through song and dance as their differences fade and they end the film happily.

Tony and Maria are not allowed to truly come together in the world. This containing effect is achieved by constantly isolating the couple through tight and individual camera shots. When they first meet, Tony and Maria are on opposite sides of the gym, in different shots, and the world around them shifts out of focus. Each of them is contained in a focused center of a blurry screen. As soon as they see each other, they enter a constricted world. By the time they are in the same frame, the lights are dimmed and the gym becomes an abstract place, no longer representing the world. As soon as the lights return, Bernardo pushes Tony out of the frame. Maria and Tony now occupy

the farthest points in the frame, with Jets and Sharks in between them as a visual representation of the problem with their union. They cannot be together while the gang warfare continues. When Tony leaves the dance singing “Maria,” praising Maria’s beauty and his changed perspective on the world, he moves through a very artificial looking line of houses. Most likely, the houses are projected onto a screen behind him instead of being real sets. It gives him the effect of walking in a dream world, with the sky pink and purple (Sharks colors). Tony pauses for a while in the playground, singing out Maria’s name in joyous praises. This happy image is corrupted later in the film when he meets Maria after being told that she is dead. He sees her and calls her name in surprise and happiness once again, but Chino shoots him before he can reunite with his love.

The Lover’s Duet, Foreshadowing Tragedy

Perhaps the most memorable love scene between Tony and Maria is their duet “Tonight,” sung on the fire escape outside of Maria’s room. The balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* inspires the scene, but following the established visual constriction of the lovers, it has an uneasy undertone to it. The scene begins with Tony searching for Maria through a cramped alley lined and covered with the metal bars of fire escapes. Maria appears above him in what should be a romantic vision of beauty and hope. The scene is dark, however, which obscures most of her body in long shot. The brick

buildings, metal bars, and the road paved with bricks create numerous checkered patterns, which gives the alley a cage-like feeling, as though Tony is walking into a trap. This differs greatly from the Shakespearian garden surrounding Juliet's manor. After Tony climbs up the fire escape to join Maria, they are kept in close-up and medium close-up shots and usually remain on different levels.

Once they begin to sing, the camera pulls out slightly to show Maria kneeling and Tony sitting hunched over on the railing in a somewhat awkward position. This composition keeps Maria at a lower level than Tony and they must strain to look at each other. After Tony moves down to sit by Maria, there is a sudden cut to a tight close-up of Tony's face. The camera returns to a shot of the two of them, only to move into a tight close-up of Maria's face. These close-ups trap Tony and Maria in the frame, not giving them space to move, just like the cramped fire escape restrains them from moving around too much or dancing. In old-fashioned musicals, the union of the couple was symbolized by joining together in song and dance, a dissolve into utopia. Tony and Maria do enter a different world to some extent, since Maria's parents hear them talking quietly but cannot hear them singing, but West Side Story never allows them to truly escape the world in which they live. They may hide from it in certain scenes but Tony and Maria are inevitably trapped. Even after moving back to a shot of the two of them, Tony and Maria embrace

but look different ways, creating an odd disconnect between them during a very romantic song.

As “Tonight” crescendos, Tony and Maria stand, looking first at each other and then out towards the camera. The world around them begins to blur again, like at the dance, and they are trapped in the middle of two blurred sides of the frame. While this image could represent their romantic felicity at being next to each other, the rest of the film’s hints of underlying darkness and tragedy suggest that the blurred shot represents the impossibility of their love in the film world. They can only be together in restricted close shots or with the world blurred out through the use of special effects. As Tony starts to leave, the ladder, railings, and shadows cut the lovers into segments visually. At one point they look through two railings at each other, gripping them as though the rails are bars on a cage, which continues the trapped metaphor from the start of the scene. The dialogue is equally awkward. After Tony says, “I love you,” Maria responds with “Yes. Yes, Hurry,” creating a verbal disconnect as well as a visual one.

Tony comes to find Maria in the dress shop, their third scene alone, and they pledge their love for each other in symbolic wedding vows. They begin to use mannequins to represent their parents, who are never seen in the film. Tony and Maria are both too scared to confront their parents in real life, so they again create a fantasy world around them, where not only do their parents wear elegant clothing that they would not be able to afford, but they

approve of their children's love. Acting out the first meetings between the mannequins (parents) and lovers is both humorous, as they imagine conversations, and saddening, since only in this imagined world can their love gain approval. Their play-acting moves into a fantasy-wedding scene, where they vow to love each other, and that only death can part them. As they say their vows, a yellow light streams down from the ceiling. While this light is supposedly sunlight, it looks too artificial to be natural light and adds to the effect of the scene as an idealized, pretend one. They are briefly in a rare unobscured long shot together but they quickly kneel, which gives the impression of a medium-long shot. Otherwise, they remain constrained in medium and close shots once again. Tony and Maria pray to become one in their song "One Hand, One Heart," but this has a potential alternate reading in addition to the traditional romantic one. They say only death can part them, as it does by the end of the film, and they do in fact become one, not because they join together, but because Tony is killed. This euphoric wedding scene is abruptly interrupted by harsh orchestral music and cut to a red sky, suggesting that the romance will end just as suddenly.

In their last scene alone together, Tony confronts Maria after unintentionally killing Bernardo and they sing the love duet "Somewhere." As Maria says, "It's not us. It's everything around us" that is problematic. Again the camera remains tight, keeping the two of them in medium and close-up shots. The light coming through her colored glass door casts a blue

and red design on the far wall, giving the set an abstract look, as if they could be somewhere else, not just in a slum apartment. The scene darkens, creating more shadows and obscuring Tony and Maria's faces. At one point, the camera moves behind the frame of her bed, which appears like bars over their faces, trapping them together in a world where they are unable to win. By the end of the song they are silhouetted together in a medium-long shot. This is one of the few longer shots of them, but they are too dark to see clearly, which has the same effect as the blurry mattes in previous scenes. In the original show, "Somewhere" is a ballet, a dance in which all the Jets and Sharks come together and leave their differences behind as they move in harmony. Eliminating this cohesive moment from the film gives it a darker feel because the film refuses to allow the couple to have even this imagined moment of utopia through dance.

While Tony and Maria have pure intentions, to be together and stop the fighting between their two sides, every step they take to accomplish this goal leads them closer to their tragic end. Approaching each other in the gym causes conflict between the Jets and Sharks. There is already tension between the two sides, but their obvious attraction heightens the feelings. Maria later convinces Tony to go to the rumble and stop the fighting. His interference, instead of stopping the conflict, causes Riff and Bernardo's death. He tries to prevent violence but unintentionally escalates it. Tony decides to go to the police, which would have gotten him in trouble but saved him from death.

Maria again convinces him to do otherwise and Tony ends up dying because of it. Even something as simple as sending a message to Tony that she will be late becomes fatal after the Jets harass Anita and she gives Tony a fake message. Tony and Maria go through the film with the best intentions, trying to find a way to love each other in a world full of hate, but they just end up moving towards an inevitably tragic end.

Doc and his Role as an Ignored Voice of Reason

While West Side Story centers on Tony and Maria's love story and the rivalry between the Jets and Sharks, there is a side character, outside of these direct groups, who provides a valuable point of view. Tony's boss and owner of the candy store, Doc, gives his opinion as the voice of an older generation, which offers an innocent, old fashioned view of the youth's actions. Doc only shows up in a few scenes but his comments hold a lot of significance and offer a counterpoint to the violent youths who are obsessed with fighting for control of the streets. He acts as a sort of prophet and voice of reason, albeit one that gets ignored for the most part. Doc's introduction comes right before the war council between the Jets and Sharks. The Jets treat Doc like the other adults in the film, ignoring his warnings and mocking his supposed naiveté about the way their world operates. The Jets crowd into Doc's store as he prepares to close up for the night and tell him he is not closing until they hold their war council. Doc repeatedly asks the youths why they choose to fight, why they

act the way they do. In this first scene, he suggests talking to the Sharks to settle their argument, or even playing basketball, a physical yet non-violent way to sort out their conflicts. The Jets brush aside Doc's suggestions and he rolls over and allows them to proceed. The Jets and police officers treat the Puerto Ricans as "other," coming to America to steal territory and power from settled Americans (Sandoval-Sanchez 69). Lieutenant Schrank goes so far as to kick the Puerto Ricans out of the candy store, telling them that they are destroying the neighborhood. Doc provides a vital counterpoint since he bridges the gap between immigrant (which he potentially was) and established American. He is the only character who exemplifies the potential for utopian reconciliation since he tries to mediate the two sides.

In describing their problem with the Puerto Ricans, the Jets say that the immigrants make trouble for them. Doc responds by saying, "For you, trouble is a relief." The Jets enjoy controlling the street, but without challengers their life becomes dull. Doc brings in the significant point that the Jets make trouble so that they can fight to resolve it. Fighting restores their belief in masculinity, which underwent a crisis in the post-war era. The youths have no occupation, no responsibility except their loyalty to the Jets, and no ambition for their lives. Doc's counterpoint emphasizes the conflict between generations. The Jet's immigrant relatives (parents, grandparents) worked hard to move to America and settle themselves. The Puerto Ricans likewise work for a living, although it could be hypothesized that the next

generation might become similar juvenile delinquents. The Jets are completely unproductive members of society. In exasperation, Doc allows the Jets to have their war council, but says, “I’ll dig you an early grave, that’s what I’ll dig.” Later Doc finds out about Tony and Maria and, as the cautious voice of reason, he tells Tony that he is very worried for the both of them since Tony is too love struck to be scared. Here he not only gives an outside opinion on the Jet’s actions, but he also contributes to the constant foreshadowing of the tragic end of the film.

In a more traditional musical, Doc’s well-intentioned interactions with the youths in the neighborhood might have had a positive influence. He is the only real father or adult figure who tries to look out for the young people. Since the Jets continually ignore him, he is ineffectual in this role and falls to the side. As an older man, Doc most likely experienced both World Wars and the Great Depression. In comparison to these traumatic national and international events, the struggle to maintain authority over a piece of street seems trivial. The Jets do not have this larger worldview of things.

In trying times, people found relief through film. The musicals of the 1930s, for example, celebrated abundance and always concluded happily, since their audience could not always experience this plenitude in real life. The 1950s in general were a time of stability, between WWII and the growing social movements that exploded in the 1960s, such as the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and anti-war protests. With a more stable

economic and political climate, as well as the greater flexibility possible after the demise of the studio system, films could branch out to explore more diverse topics and darker subject matter because people relied on them less for wish fulfillment.

Toward the end of the film, Doc loses his resigned exasperation towards the gangs and becomes disgusted by their behavior. As he tells the Jets after they harass Anita, “When do you kids stop? You make this world lousy,” to which Action responds, “We didn’t make it.” This is the first moment when, in a quiet, calm way the Jets reflect on themselves as a product of previous generations. They are not the sole creators of their world. They inherited a world with problems that they try to deal with everyday. Doc sends the Jets away and goes down to tell Tony that Maria is dead (so he thinks), but again Tony will not listen to him. Instead of just being worried for him now, Doc slaps Tony to get his attention, lamenting that physicality, to “bust like a hot water pipe,” is the only way he can get the attention of the younger generation. Doc’s role, while minor, contributes to the dramatic effect of the film’s ending. Doc starts out as a mild-mannered, simple character who is contrasted with the violent, restless energy of the young gangs. In the end, he is a dejected figure, resorting to violence because of the tragedy before him.

Conclusion

West Side Story maintains many conventions from classical musicals, including the creation of a dual-focus romantic couple, the reversal of the image-sound hierarchy in big dance numbers, and the use of the myths of entertainment. Most of these classical elements, however, are corrupted in some way. The story centers on Tony and Maria's love, but their relationship is doomed to end tragically. The gangs' dancing comes naturally out of them and at first seems to be a product of their communal joy. As dancing and fighting are linked, however, the dance numbers take on an edge and seem to also embody the youths' restless anger. Even group production numbers that do not directly involve fighting, like the biggest Puerto Rican number, "America," have a critical tone to them. "America" captures a playful argument between the Puerto Rican men and Puerto Rican women. They joke and smile with each other but the lyrics contain real truths about the hardship of immigrants and the challenges of living in America. The one song that perhaps most directly captures the intersection of tragedy and the musical is the ensemble song "Quintet," which comes right before the rumble. The song overlaps singing from the Jets, the Sharks, Tony, Maria, and Anita. The different rhythms and tones contrast (the gangs, for example, sing a rough fight song, while the others sing versions of the romantic "Tonight"), and the auditory dissonance they create links this musical production number with the tension between the gangs, which leads to a tragic conclusion.

The myth of integration also has an interesting role in the film. In classic musicals, the sense that the viewer has a role in the characters' successes is a positive, uplifting aspect. In a tragic musical like West Side Story, however, having a role in the conclusion is not desirable. The production numbers are choreographed as though on a stage, with an audience's view in mind. At the end of the film, Maria points the gun out at the gangs (and the camera) and accuses them (us) of killing Tony, Riff, and Bernardo, "not with guns and knives, but with hate." Not only is the ending sad, but her speech lays the blame on a larger society that allows prejudice and hate to flourish.

The comfortable conclusion of classical musicals is absent and even the final image of Tony being carried off by Jets and Sharks is not enough to resolve the conflicts the movie develops. Although there is one sign of peace, there are many other signs of the continuation of the struggle. The leadership of the Jets passes to Ice, which is apparent when the tomboy Anybodys refers to Ice as "daddy-o," the gang's code for the leader. Unlike Shakespeare's play, which tells the audience right in the prologue that the lovers' death ends the feud between their parents, West Side Story offers no such definite conclusion. In fact, the end of the film seems to contain more animosity between the groups. Each side is still bitter over their losses and even Maria and Anita, who wanted integration between the sides, are consumed by their grief and newfound capacity to hate.

Tony and Maria are honest people who tried to do the best they could for themselves in the world they live in. It is because of their well-intentioned actions, however, that they end up tragically, with Tony dead and Maria dead inside. The amount of foreshadowing throughout the film, and the fact that the world Tony and Maria live in is incompatible with their love, makes their fate inevitable. The high energy of the film and its upsetting conclusion allow the viewer to experience some catharsis at the end, relief that while the real world is darker than the West Side is in the film, we can see the problems from a distance and feel better that we are not directly a part of them.

West Side Story is a groundbreaking musical that pushed the boundaries of the genre by including a tragic plot, while still conforming to musical traditions. As the first tragic musical, West Side Story opened the doors of possibility for more films to experiment with musical form. Twenty years later, Pennies From Heaven was released, which pushed the terms of the musical and its union with tragedy further.

Pennies From Heaven:

Modernism and the Questionable Hero

The 1970s was a time of great change for American Cinema. The classic Hollywood studio system was decidedly over, and the recession of the late 1960s left the film industry in doubt about its future. Instead of focusing around mass-produced genre films, directors began to make fewer, smaller budget films in the early 1970s. In the late 1970s film trends shifted towards large-scale blockbusters in the hopes that a few very successful films could earn huge profits. Film producers turned to a fresh, inexpensive talent pool of young film school graduates, which included directors Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Brian De Palma. Often these filmmakers had studied American film history and international cinema, and when they entered the industry they brought with them influences from the work of European auteurs, particularly French New Wave directors like François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and Alain Resnais. The auteur model of filmmaking credits an individual, usually the director, with creative control over a film, so that the finished product appears to reflect their singular vision. This contrasts with the model of the studio system, where the director worked as part of a team.

Part of the cinematic upheaval of the 1970s was the resurrection and renovation of genre traditions. Cawelti outlines four possible types of genre transformations, which are the creation of humor through exaggerating

generic conventions, creating nostalgia by generating an aura of a past time and relating it to the present, calling attention to the myths of genre as inadequate, and re-affirming genre myths while simultaneously recognizing them as myth (Cawelti 259). Genre films had been mass-produced in the studio era because of the cost-effective assembly line structure and the guaranteed audience for specific genres. However, the influx into the industry of film school graduates, who had studied genre and classic Hollywood films, caused a blending and shifting of genre form (Cook 160-61). This was particularly true of the musical, since after a series of failed big budget musicals in the classic form,⁸ producers became less willing to risk the budget for a genre that was consistently losing money. It seemed that the classic musical was approaching its end, and a number of “alternative” musicals moved in to fill the void (Cook 209).

One film that challenged the musical genre by mixing elements of realism and tragedy into the musical mold by incorporating large-scale production numbers is Pennies From Heaven. The film was released in 1981, but was heavily influenced by the creative alterations of the genre shifts of the 1970s. In her book The Hollywood Musical, Jane Feuer describes the film as “modernist, and even Brechtian” (Feuer 126). The modernist impulse of the film is evident in its separation of the harsh reality of the story line and the

⁸ Examples of musical that failed at the box office include Hello, Dolly! (Gene Kelley, 1969), Camelot (Joshua Logan, 1967), Song of Norway (Andrew Stone, 1970) and Star! (Robert Wise, 1968) (Cook 209).

imitations of pop culture of the 1930s that is reflected in the production numbers. This film uses the spectacle of the musical to capture the imagination of its self-centered protagonist who despite his dreaming remains grounded in harsh realities. Since films from the 1970s began experimenting with blending genres, the concept of mixing tragedy with the musical became less shocking. Perhaps this is why the film makes direct use of big, classical production numbers to make the contrast greater and emphasize the contradictions between the musical form and tragic subject. Abstract musicals such as Tommy (Ken Russell 1975) and All That Jazz (Bob Fosse 1979) in the 1970s had already pushed movie viewers' expectations regarding the musical. In order to be considered part of this high-art, modernist genre movement, Pennies From Heaven had to show something equally challenging and thought provoking.

Pennies From Heaven contains a self-centered and destructive figure, Arthur Parker, whose life ends tragically when he is sentenced to hang for a murder that he does not commit. Near the film's end, there is a cut from a close-up of his face as he stands next to the noose to a fanciful production number, and the audience assumes that he is executed. In 1978, the BBC released a miniseries called Pennies From Heaven. Dennis Potter, a London film critic, wrote the series, which was directed by Piers Haggard. The six-part series was a hit, and people applauded its brave combination of stark reality and over-the-top, lip-synched popular 1930s songs. As one reviewer

put it, “the overall concept is extremely imaginative, counterpointing squalid ordinary lives with impossibly romantic and bouncy lyrics” (O’Conner). The same reviewer critiqued the transition from songs to “real life,” calling them too jarring and confusing. This quality, however, is one of the strengths of both the miniseries and the film. The audience members get pulled into the world of the musical so easily because they are conditioned to accept it. By shifting suddenly to a bleak world that resembles reality, the film and miniseries challenge the assumptions of the musical. Separating the world of song and dance so harshly from the “real world” of the film takes the technique from West Side Story of keeping Maria and Tony confined in their own world a step further. In West Side Story, the musical numbers come “naturally” out of the youths. Their life energy is reflected in their almost constant dancing. The characters in Pennies From Heaven, especially Arthur, cannot show their musical selves to the world because the world is too dark a place to accept them. This sense of despair is most clearly seen in Arthur’s wife, who constantly questions his attempts to sing and gets frustrated with his unrealistic desires.

Soon after the miniseries aired, Dennis Potter agreed to condense the storyline, move the characters from England to the United States, and write a feature-length film version. Herbert Ross directed the film and kept the name of the miniseries. While the shortened length of the film version required cutting a lot of material, Potter commented in an article about Pennies From

Heaven, “I like the picture for its compression, its ironies. In essence, it’s a love letter to old movies, and the British can’t do that very well. In the BBC version, for instance, they carefully shot it so you couldn’t see the feet when people were dancing” (Qtd. in Chase). This compression allows the film to have a more tragic arc, since it eliminates extra story lines and focuses on Arthur, the flawed yet still tragic figure.

Arthur is a sheet music salesman from Chicago. The story takes place in 1934, in the midst of the Depression. While Arthur and his wife Joan are not destitute, they are unhappy in their marriage and struggle to make ends meet. Arthur, ever a dreamer, has big plans to make a name for himself, first as he tries to expand his sheet music sales and later when he attempts to run a record store. On one fateful sales trip, Arthur gives a ride to an accordion playing bum,⁹ who plays an important and disturbing part later in the plot. The accordion man is marked as an outsider, and therefore a disruptive force through his vagrant lifestyle, his verbal mumbling and stuttering, and his darker skin tone. On his trip, Arthur also meets Eileen, with whom he falls in love and then impregnates before leaving her to fend for herself. Eileen moves to the city to find Arthur and ends up aborting her pregnancy and working as a prostitute in order to survive. These harsh events are very unlike the traditional problems characters in musicals face. Arthur’s fate is similarly dreary. He is accused of murdering a blind girl (who was actually murdered

⁹ The accordion player is never named and in the credits is listed as “accordion man.”

by the accordion man) and is sentenced to hang for a crime that he did not commit. Throughout these bleak events, however, Arthur imagines what the world would be like if he lived in a musical. Characters break into big production numbers that mimic old-fashioned musicals and Pennies From Heaven treats these moments affectionately. As Potter mentioned, the film is an ode to classic musicals, meant to evoke them in a fond, loving way rather than maliciously. The film recognizes the world of the musical as impossible, yet still something to enjoy and to imagine.

Arthur as a Common Man and Tragic Hero

As discussed in the introduction, for a film to be tragic, the protagonist must maintain the audience's good will. Since Pennies From Heaven has a central character with dubious morals and who does not always act in an honest or decent way, the question of whether the audience sympathizes with him is crucial. In the case of Arthur, he has his faults, but the audience still manages to see some aspect of good in his character. He can be a generous figure, which is apparent when he buys dinner for the accordion man, a vagrant stranger, and gives him a quarter before parting. More significantly, Arthur believes so fully in the power of music—its magic and possibilities—that the audience feels his pain when reality fails to live up to the impossible examples given to him by Hollywood films and popular songs. As Potter said in an interview, “Most human beings have a bit of Arthur in them...that bit of

you which says, ‘there’s something better,’ ‘I love,’ ‘I yearn,’ ‘I ache’” (Qtd. in Chase).

Arthur lies so much and so well that he ends up believing himself. He is sincere when he tells both his wife and Eileen that he loves them. He loves his wife for the security of their home and her father’s savings, even though he is dissatisfied with their lack of a physical relationship. Eileen and Arthur, on the other hand, more closely resemble a classic musical couple in the tradition of the folk musical (Feuer, Hollywood Musical 129). The woman should represent stability and connection with the earth (as Eileen does before she leaves her farm and her job as an elementary school teacher), and the man brings energy and motion to the couple (Arthur’s role as a wandering salesman) (Altman 307). Arthur’s belief in his sincerity, his repeated claims that Eileen is the girl that he waited, hoped, and dreamed for (although he is already married), creates sympathy for him. He tries to find happiness in his world and recreate the joy present in the songs he sells. Instead he finds himself rejected by bankers, failing in multiple business ventures, sexually unsatisfied unless he is with Eileen, and chased by the police for a crime that he did not commit. The hardships he faces combine to create a sympathetic, or perhaps just pathetic, character. Either way, he has the audience’s compassion. Arthur is played by Steve Martin, whose background in stand-up comedy provides an interesting textual layer for viewers who are unused to seeing him in more serious dramatic roles.

On the surface, Arthur appears to be more of a wanderer than someone who possesses a definite purpose and drive, as I have defined the tragic hero. This is not the case, however, since Arthur's true devotion and ideals come through in the musical numbers. While his flights of imagination do not move the story along, they offer energetic interludes that reflect Arthur's intense desire for life to imitate the musical. His devotion and actions primarily occur in his mind, but the film allows the movie viewers to see into his thoughts, giving them a deeper look at Arthur before they determine his character.

Not all tragic heroes come from grand origins or try to make dramatic changes in the world. In 1949, Arthur Miller wrote a persuasive article for the *New York Times* called "Tragedy and the Common Man," in which he articulated the ways that ordinary people can assume the role of tragic figure. Miller discusses the "tragic flaw" often associated with tragic figures. This flaw, "or crack in character, is nothing—and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status" (Miller 149). Miller playfully suggests that calling tragic figures "flawed" is unproductive, and that the real issue is the tragic figure's desire to find his or her rightful place in life and society. This concept reflects Arthur's longing to find a world where he can live his dreams, where the world of the musical can come to life. Looking at his ambitions in this way, Arthur's fantasies become his way of

resisting life's unpleasantness, although he is never able to evade the economic restrictions caused by the Depression.

Miller goes on to define "right" (referring to the "rightful place" of the tragic figure) in tragedy as "a condition of life...in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man [sic], perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct" (Miller 150). This idea of suppression contrasted with flowering places tragedy in association with freedom, like the freedom Arthur seeks through his elaborately imagined musical numbers. Again Arthur's dreams take on greater significance as expressions of personal realizations and resistance against the dull world around him. His imagination, reflected in the musical aspect of Pennies From Heaven, is therefore linked directly to the development of tragedy in addition to the film's musical form. This concept is complicated since Arthur attempts to escape the world through the staging of songs that are reflective of highly artificial 1930s Hollywood musicals. Until the end, when Arthur stands on the gallows, he does not sing the words himself. So while his fantasies are an attempt to escape from life, they are bound by the conventions of the film musical and Arthur is not allowed his own voice. Although this constraint works somewhat against Miller's argument, it puts Arthur at a more restricted, and therefore more sympathetic, position, which emphasizes that he is a tragic figure.

Dark Opening Imagery: Foreshadowing Tragedy

Pennies From Heaven opens like a typical classical musical, with sunbeams streaming from behind fluffy clouds and the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer title across the screen. The sunbeams brighten as the first few major credits come up, accenting them in a highly stylized way. Elsie Carlisle sings a roughly recorded rendition of “The Clouds Will Soon Roll By,” adding to the illusion of the film as a 1930s musical. Yet the song’s focus on storms passing by is ironic, since through the progress of the credits, stormy weather appears and the world gets darker. Rain imagery repeats throughout the film, both in the words of the songs and key moments when it actually does rain. Storms are symbolic of hard times, which refer both macrocosmically to the Depression that hangs over America and to the events that lead Arthur to his tragic death. Soon the camera moves down beneath the clouds and the sunbeams shining through the credits lessen and disappear. The sun becomes obscured behind the clouds and the world darkens. The clouds, which at first were cheerfully colored and bright, become darker storm clouds. There are flashes of light created by lighting now, not rays of sunshine. The camera proceeds down and rain begins to fall diagonally across the screen. The image is still highly stylized; the rain coming down from the clouds is clearly fake, resembling the special effects of a 1930s film. The song offers a comic counterpoint to the image now, and lines like, “goodbye to stormy weather” played over storm images gives the viewer a sense of the film’s playful

ironies. Despite the upbeat and positive message of the song, the dark visuals foreshadow the unhappy events in Arthur's life. From the start, Pennies From Heaven plays with this combination of tragedy and the conventions of the musical.

After continuing down through illustrations of city buildings, the film cuts to a black screen with "Chicago, 1934" written on it. The film then cuts to Arthur's bedroom and a very bleak picture. The first shot of Arthur is a close-up of him lying in bed with his eyes open. It is an awkward, invasive shot since the low angle makes it seem like the audience is lying in bed with him. Arthur's discontent is apparent from this first image. Instead of being asleep until his alarm sounds or resting peacefully, his open eyes capture his restlessness and unhappiness. His eyes are drooped somewhat, as though he is in a trance. The fact that the audience's first image of Arthur is a close-up immediately centers him as the main focus of the story, and suggests that the viewer will know him closely. After the alarm rings, he moves closer to his wife, Joan, and wakes her up by trying to convince her to have sex with him. While the opening song and simulated clouds gave the impression of imitating a depression-era musical, this blatant exchange between a married couple would never occur in a traditional musical. Arthur openly discusses his desire for sex and his wife rejects him. Joan is terrified of physicality and constantly pushes away Arthur's advances.

Later in the film, Arthur explains to Joan that the songs he sells, the popular songs of the time, are all about sex: they just deal with it in a euphemistic way. Musicals of the 1930s would likewise bring in the subject of sex, but indirectly and with wit. The use of vulgar language in the film would also not be acceptable in traditional musicals. At times Arthur “speak[s] in a form of language familiar to filmgoers of the time but tabooed in Hollywood musicals of the depression,” which creates an “intentional intertextuality that is based on the collision of historical eras” (Dunne 171). This intertextuality contributes to the potential clash within a musical with tragic elements. Pennies From Heaven sets itself up to be a musical, but from the first image of Arthur pressuring his wife to have sex with him, the audience must re-evaluate what they consider to be a musical. The opening first sets up a world of idealized song during the credits, and then proceeds to shock the viewer with the image of Arthur and Joan unhappily in bed together. They are disconnected and not like a couple in the musical should be. Arthur is not meant to be with Joan. A truer, classic musical union comes after he meets Eileen and they realize that they are kindred spirits. Eileen is played by Bernadette Peters, who fashions her performance as a mixture of Ruby Keeler, Ginger Rogers, June Allyson, and Betty Boop. Drawing on icons from the 1930s places Eileen, and by extension the film, in conversation with classical musicals.

The innocent 1930s musicals for the most part glossed over the details and unpleasant aspects of life.¹⁰ In many ways Pennies From Heaven brings out these little overlooked moments in order to push the musical to a more realistic, intimate level that allows for a tragic plot line. After Joan leaves the bed and moves to the bathroom, Arthur follows her and they converse in the bathroom, a place that was not shown on film very often because it was considered vulgar. The bathroom is cramped, and the camera shoots Arthur and Joan by capturing their reflections in the small bathroom mirror. Joan looks at Arthur through the mirror instead of turning to face him, demonstrating their lack of connection as a couple. At this point, Joan prompts Arthur by saying, “I don’t know what you mean Arthur,” and he begins to “sing” the first musical number of the film. His lips move along with the words of “I’ll Never Have to Dream Again,” but Connie Boswell’s voice comes out. Lip-synching is very common in musicals, either using a better recording of the onscreen performer’s voice or matching a completely different singer’s voice to the onscreen character (for example, most of the leads from West Side Story had their singing voices dubbed by other performers). Usually, however, the recorded voices contribute to the myth of spontaneity, the illusion that the characters can break out into flawless song at

¹⁰ Some early musicals did hint at darker issues. In Gold Diggers of 1933 (Mervyn LeRoy 1933) for instance, one of the lead girls suggests that the other chorus girls might have to resort to prostitution in order to survive. The concept of “gold digger” itself is a glorified form of prostitution. The difference in these early musicals is the potential for song and dance to change the world. The show they put on is a success and in a way the production numbers “solve” the girls’ problems.

any time. The fact that a female voice accompanies Arthur's apparent singing disrupts the scene and draws attention to the viewer's assumptions about the musical. The fact that Arthur lip-synchs other people's songs instead of singing his own does not stop Pennies From Heaven from being a musical, but it does make the film self-reflexive and questions the authenticity of other musicals and the utopias that they present. This first number also challenges musical conventions since it cuts between Arthur either moving his lips to the song or standing motionless behind Joan as she brushes her teeth (a perfunctory action not usually present in Hollywood films). The song is clearly in Arthur's head and not actually being performed. This sets up the pattern for numbers throughout the film, letting the audience know that the world of the musical is an imaginary one. The fact that Arthur relies on popular songs to express himself shows how much he has surrendered himself to the myths and the world of the musical. He reflects the audience's willingness to enter into the world of the musical, and perhaps explains why this film makes some people uncomfortable. It constantly cuts back to reality and denies the full feeling of utopia that classical musicals create so well.

Pennies From Heaven begins by introducing Arthur, its flawed, self-destructive protagonist. The opening scene has elements that suggest the film is a musical, but also challenges the audience to look beyond the previously restricting genre conventions. The film uses production numbers to further character development and add an ironically upbeat façade to a definitively

tragic plot line. The rest of the film continues the dichotomies introduced in the opening segment, and constantly poses the question: how does one reconcile the discrepancies between the fantasy world of the musical and the jarring consequences of real life, where a song and dance cannot really change the world?

The Inevitability of Tragedy

Not only must a tragic figure have the audience's good will, but his or her painful, unhappy ending must also be inevitable in order for the story to be considered tragic. West Side Story used color, the visual separation of the couple from the real world, and the ongoing conflicts between the Jets and the Sharks to suggest the impossibility of a happy union between Tony and Maria. Pennies From Heaven likewise uses elements of foreshadowing to point the audience to the inevitable conclusion of Arthur's death. The broadest technique is the conflict between the complete grimness of the "real world" Arthur lives in and the impossibly optimistic and extravagant world of the imagination, filled with large-scale production numbers in classic musical forms. As one reviewer put it, Arthur is "a dreamer who believes in the singular optimism of the words of the popular songs he sells... Arthur, clearly, is doomed" (Canby).

The sharp contrast between the real world and the world of song and dance makes them incompatible. For example, after a banker refuses to give

Arthur a loan, they break out into song (“Yes, Yes, My Baby Said Yes, Yes”) and dance through the bank in an increasingly lavish, Busby Berkeley style number with lines of chorus girls. While the song provides an entertaining display of spectacle, the irony of its presence is immediately apparent, since the banker did not agree to give Arthur a loan. Arthur imagines that the banker does, that everything will work out the way it might in the world of the musical, but the audience sees the impossibility of this. The number is too grand, too lavish to have any bearing on the world that the opening scene has set up. The number cuts off harshly, not quite finishing the song, and therefore leaving the viewer hanging and dissatisfied. The film cuts to Arthur driving down a long barren road with nothing but diegetic driving noises around him. The cut is severe and unsettling, and clearly the song and dance have not changed anything. Arthur tries to imagine a world where everything ends happily, but he ends up back in his drab world, and the audience understands that he is on a tragic trajectory. Even he says towards the end of the film, “I always knew something terrible was gunna to happen to me.”

The other major element of foreshadowing is the use of rain imagery. The starting song, “The Clouds Will Soon Roll By,” and the title song, “Pennies from Heaven,” both use rain imagery and are repeated during the film. It rains twice during the film, once during the diner scene, right before the accordion man sings “Pennies from Heaven,” and again after Eileen and Arthur get out of the movie theater. The diner scene associates rain with

Arthur meeting Eileen, and also with the presence of the accordion man. Both of these elements are crucial in Arthur's death, since if he had not gone back to see Eileen, then he would not have been driving past the crime scene and been falsely accused of murdering the blind girl. The accordion man is the real murderer, although the authorities never realize it. After Eileen and Arthur exit the Movie Theater, Arthur comments, "Always the same... Come out of the movies, the goddamn world has changed." In this case his comments are very true, since right then he finds out he is being searched for as a suspect in the blind girl's murder. Rain is usually associated with hard times (macrocosmically, the Depression), and unhappiness (Arthur's discontentment with the world and his wrongful death). Its presence in the film helps foreshadow Arthur's tragic end.

The Use of Musical Numbers and Transitions

Most classical musicals integrate song and dance numbers into the plot, either through a show within a show setting or as organic outbursts of rhythmic energy creating the myth of spontaneity. The musical seeks to pull the audience into a fantasy world where songs and dance seem natural, and give the audience a feeling of participation in the creation of the film. Pennies From Heaven works in part against this naturalization of musical numbers. The most memorable songs push the boundaries of production numbers by completely separating them from the world of the film and therefore creating a

jarring contrast. The film questions the role of song and dance as commentary on life by using production numbers in complex and ironic ways. It critiques the musical form and complicates it with tragic undertones yet, in the end, the film justifies the use of the musical in dealing with life's unpleasantness.

The title song, "Pennies From Heaven,"¹¹ starts while Arthur and the accordion man are eating dinner together in a diner while the weather storms outside. Arthur, always discontent, says that he is hungry but does not eat his food. This comment refers back to an earlier scene with Joan, when Arthur refuses breakfast, claiming that he likes feeling empty. The accordion man is a vagrant, living on the street and rarely able to afford a decent meal. Arthur's physical emptiness, symbolizing his dissatisfaction with the world, is in a way self-induced. Arthur refuses to accept his modest surroundings and instead dreams of bigger and better things, like a record shop or even more ideally, a world that reflects the lyrics of the popular songs he sells. The accordion man is the worst off of the main characters in the film with regards to material situations. He has no money—Eileen is the only person to put any change in his case—and he plans to spend the night sleeping in an alley. Ironically, he is the most musical of the characters, since he sings and plays his piano accordion for a living, and yet his life least reflects the world of the musical. In the critical reviews of Pennies From Heaven, this number is often referred to as "show-stopping." This term is somewhat ironic in the context of the

¹¹ Sung by Arthur Tracy.

film, since all of the musical numbers dramatically halt the action of the story. The accordion man's song and dance is striking however, primarily because of its restraint. It effectively pulls in the larger, meta-diegetic world of the Depression, even though (or perhaps because) it features a lone dancer.

The accordion man mumbles and stutters when he speaks, but gains confidence when he enters the alternate reality of the musical. Sitting across from Arthur in the diner, the accordion man suddenly begins to "sing." This song is the first instance when someone other than Arthur leads the number. The accordion man lip-synchs the song and dances with it, although it is still assumed to be Arthur's fantasy. Arthur remains seated in the diner booth throughout the number, never getting physically involved, but acting as a spectator to the accordion man's performance. The song comes across as a sort of sermon from the most unsuccessful person in the scene to the rest of the people in the diner. After starting in a close-up of the vagrant's face, with his intense, hard eyes, the wall of the diner slides away and he moves out into the rain. Slowly he moves from booth to booth, staring at the people seated there who do not return his gaze. The compartmentalized feeling of the diner emphasizes the isolation people feel in everyday life, an isolation that is eliminated in the world of the musical, where everyone can pull together through song and dance. The lyrics of the song talk about rain as necessary to make people grateful for sunshine. Looking at this more abstractly, the song encourages people to look at hard times as a way of appreciating both the little

things that make life better, and also being thankful when things get better, as of course they will in the world of the musical. The fact that this sermon of sorts comes from the accordion man is appropriate, since he constantly thanks people after he performs on street corners, even though people rarely give him any money. If he can have a positive view of the world, Arthur can as well, even when he gets upset about the state of his life and his marriage.

After dancing in the rain, the accordion man moves to a more artificial set, a backdrop of large Depression era images, and the rain begins to fall in the form of small gold coins instead of water. The vagrant continues dancing his fluid, enjoyable routine as he would in the world of the musical. The pictures behind him, however, draw the viewer's attention away from him especially after it shifts to an extreme long shot, making the accordion man a small figure in the corner. The images of unemployment lines, starving people, and people on the street both reflect the accordion man's current situation and also refer to a larger picture of America in the grips of a crippling Depression that backlights Arthur's story of personal tragedy. This musical number is entertaining, and yet also has a dark edge to it, since it uses the Depression as a literal and figurative background, an ever-present undertone.

The most directly self-reflexive part of the film comes towards its end, after Eileen and Arthur run away together but before they know that the police are searching for Arthur, in a number entitled "Let's Face the Music and

Dance.” Arthur and Eileen go to the movies to watch Follow the Fleet (Mark Sandrich 1936). During the onscreen number “Let’s Face the Music and Dance,” Arthur begins lip-synching the lyrics. Soon he and Eileen move in front of the screen and imitate Fred Astaire and Ginger Roger’s dancing. The film then cuts to the two of them in Astaire and Roger’s costumes on the set from Follow the Fleet. This complex arrangement of performing in a film within the film becomes even more layered because “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” is itself a staged performance in the world of Follow the Fleet. Pennies From Heaven does not explain this layering, and uses the “number instead for its Depression-era combination of glamour and despair, its motif of transcendence through dancing” (Feuer, Hollywood Musical 128). This is the first number where the source text (Follow the Fleet) is directly shown in the film, instead of just being imitated or referenced. In the original number, Astaire and Rogers play people who are down on their luck and considering killing themselves. Once they meet, however, Astaire sings a song with somewhat hopeful lyrics about living life while you can. The lyrics warn that “there may be trouble ahead, but while there’s moonlight, and music, and love, and romance, let’s face the music and dance.” The overall message is one of living life, but there is a darker undertone (the references to trouble, teardrops, and so on) that fits with the tragic trajectory of the film. While the source of the song and potential suicide do not fit directly with Eileen and Arthur’s story, the general feeling of the song matches their predicament.

The transition into the number takes a much more gradual path than the sharp, jarring transitions of earlier numbers. It takes its time, letting Arthur start lip-synching a little, and moving into a more animated performance mode. Eileen and Arthur even have a brief conversation while the number begins. Eileen tells Arthur that she would like to have a baby someday, but then she begins to cry. Eileen seems to understand the misfortunes of life, mainly because of her trials: being forced to leave home, have an abortion, and become a prostitute after Arthur abandons her. She knows that she cannot trust Arthur, and this knowledge makes her more cynical. Arthur, with his face turned towards the screen and the light from the movie reflecting onto it, has a naïve, happy look on his face. Once again, Arthur's firm optimism and belief in the power of the musical shines through the despair. After telling Eileen, "There must be something on the other side of the rainbow," he looks lovingly up at the screen. For Arthur, the world of the musical represents a utopia that might exist on the other side of the rainbow. The audience and Eileen, however, realize that the world of the musical is impossible in the Depression-era world constructed throughout Pennies From Heaven. Eileen's more worldly experience shows in her tearful, melancholy expression, as red light illuminates her face. In the scene before this one, Eileen states her worry that "there isn't time," which foreshadows Arthur's upcoming misfortunes, and develops her as a grounded and newly realistic person (when contrasted with her earlier performance of

“Love is Good for Anything that Ails You”). Her hesitancy to accept Arthur’s optimism has two results. Firstly, Eileen’s expressions mirror Rogers’ on the screen, since Rogers only cheers up after she begins to dance with Astaire. Secondly, her sad looks cloud this moment of potential utopia, holding the film back from totally entering the world of the musical. They may begin to dance like Astaire and Rogers, but the world of Pennies From Heaven will never be allowed to resolve as cleanly as that of Follow the Fleet.

“Let’s Face the Music and Dance” works in a complex, interwoven way to both challenge the world of the musical and Hollywood’s infiltration of real life, as well as re-mystify the musical and re-affirm the myth of entertainment. After Eileen and Arthur enter the screen and take over Astaire and Roger’s places, a line of men dressed in top hats and tails and carrying canes (signature costume and props used by Astaire) line up along the side of the stage. They begin to dance along with Eileen and Arthur, who command the center stage area. This is the first number that allows Arthur and Eileen to dance together. They share three other numbers, “Have You Ever Seen a Dream Walking?”, “I Want to be Bad,” and “Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries,” but they do not dance in any of them. “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” also gives them, at first, lots of space to move through and command. This dance is the first time utopia seems almost possible. Entering the film allows Arthur and Eileen to glimpse this perfect moment, but since Pennies From Heaven has led the audience to expect tragedy, the viewer knows that this ideal

moment cannot last. The darker undertone is present throughout the song in the form of the chorus men, who constantly surround the couple and encroach on their dancing space. They get progressively more violent and imposing in their interactions with Eileen and Arthur, and the number ends after the chorus men plant their canes in the ground to grow up like bars across the frame. The final image is of Arthur and Eileen, still on the set of Follow the Fleet, trapped behind these bars.

While Eileen might not share Arthur's optimism, she smiles at him when he begins to sing, and her look suggests her true affection for him. The world they live in may be full of disappointment and tragedy, but Arthur and Eileen have a genuine connection that gives them some comfort and fulfills the essential element of the musical, the formation of a couple through dance. This number performs the myths of entertainment. Showing Arthur gradually assuming the role of Fred Astaire on the screen re-enforces the myth of spontaneity. Arthur's reaction to the film is utterly sincere and his performance grows out of it. Although he moves into a highly artificial set, starting the number in Arthur's world gives the audience the feeling of the song coming naturally out of Arthur. This argument may seem unlikely, since the audience is presented with a multi-layered structure of the show within a film within another film as the source of the dance number. Once again, however, Arthur's faith in the power of film covers up these ironies and allows the spectator to view the number as genuine and impromptu. The myth

of the audience also comes into play, since Arthur and Eileen begin the scene as audience members themselves. When viewed in a movie theater, the shot that captures them dancing in front of the theater screen creates the illusion that they are outside of the screen, actually dancing in real life. Part of the allure of integrated musicals is the feeling that anyone from the audience could do what the characters onscreen do. Anyone could dance like Fred Astaire and have the feeling of utopia. By entering the screen world, Arthur acts out this fantasy for the audience, re-affirming the possibility that everyone watching could likewise enter the world on the screen.

More than any other production number in Pennies From Heaven, “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” captures the possibility for happiness, utopia, and the union of the couple, along with the dark undercurrent and inevitability of tragedy. What adds another dynamic to this conflict is its mediation through the world of the musical. Arthur and Eileen express their joy in life through this elaborate fantasy, but significantly this fantasy is not created by them, but rather through a classic musical. The musical offers Arthur, Eileen, and the audience a chance to escape from their everyday lives and enter a world of song and dance where they can feel what utopia would feel like. As the chorus men and the canes turning to bars demonstrate, however, the musical might offer relief, but it can also trap you. Arthur’s blind acceptance of the song lyrics and constant shifting into fantasy states does not save him from meeting an inevitably tragic end.

Tragic Ending: Going Out with a Song

Pennies From Heaven offers two contradictory endings. In the first, Arthur stands on the gallows, ready to hang for the crime he did not commit, while Eileen, obscured behind a window, seems to watch. In the second ending, Arthur is magically resurrected, saying, “We couldn’t have gone through all of that without a happy ending. Songs ain’t like that, are they?” He and Eileen have a final production number with lines of chorus girls dressed like pennies (echoing Gold Diggers of 1933). Throughout the film, the production numbers have represented the characters’ fantasies and have had no impact on the real world of Depression-era Chicago. With this in mind, the audience recognizes the final number as either Arthur or Eileen’s imagination, not an actual occurrence. Instead of providing assurance and reinforcing the world of the musical, this tacked on final number calls all happy endings in the musical into question.

After the police chase down Arthur, the film jumps right to his execution, skipping the trial and legal process that the mini-series relates. While this omission is partly to keep the film to feature length, it has another, formal reason. By skipping the process through which Arthur is convicted, the film comments on the arbitrary enforcement of the law. The evidence against Arthur is laid out in an earlier scene, and although he is innocent the police hunt him down because it is convenient for them. Arthur’s capture

dissolves from a close-up of his face to the outside of a rundown building with Eileen standing in an upper window. The camera stays with her, jumping closer so that she is more visible, while a priest asks Arthur if he has any last words. Arthur begins to recite and then sing the lyrics of “Pennies From Heaven.” A little way into this recitation, the camera jumps from Eileen in the window to Arthur standing on a very stylized gallows with three shadowy figures around him. As Arthur speaks, the camera pulls into a close-up, where it remains for most of the song. This is the first time Arthur sings a song in his own voice, and it comes at the time of his death. The lingering close-up shot reminds the viewer of the first shot of Arthur, lying unhappily in bed next to his wife. Although he is about to hang and has tears in his eyes, somehow Arthur seems at peace with his fate. He seems to understand the song lyrics and his final act is to pass his optimism to the audience. The close-up shot makes his final words a direct address to the viewer (or perhaps Eileen, who functions as a viewer in this scene).

As the song finishes, the camera cuts to a dark street where Arthur runs to meet Eileen, and they lip-synch “The Glory of Love.” After the number, the camera moves up through the clouds and back to the opening shot of the film and the credits roll. This ending seems very typical of the musical, but the film that comes before it creates a disconnect that does not allow the viewer to accept this happy ending. The ending is “diegetically inappropriate,” and so “discord results, the sort of discord that forces one to

reexamine other happy endings in other Hollywood musicals” (Dunne 171). Ironically, the song Arthur sings on the gallows does a better job of continuing the optimism of the musical. He is about to hang, but the upbeat song and Martin’s particular performance style offer some ray of hope, that belief in songs can comfort and save you spiritually, if not physically. The spirituality of songs is reinforced by the presence of the minister asking Arthur for his final words, which end up turning into a song. In contrast to this quiet, personal moment with Arthur, “The Glory of Love” seems overblown, overdone, and does not offer the closure that the audience expects from a final number espousing that love conquers all.

The major conflict in these two endings is the question of inevitability. As I have argued throughout, a tragic ending is inevitable. The narrative and visual evidence require Arthur’s death for the crime he did not commit. So Arthur dies and the film is tragic. However, the world of idealized songs and the utopian musical created in the characters’ fantasy world demands that the movie conclude with a happy ending. So these two forces create an interesting pull between an inevitably tragic world of the Depression and the inevitable happy resolution of the musical. Pennies From Heaven solves the dilemma by doing both endings, but the results are unsatisfactory. The audience does not truly experience the cathartic release associated with Arthur’s death, nor do they truly believe in the possibility of a happy ending. The interplay between these two endings resolves nothing, but their

contradictory impulses make the viewer look harder at genre expectations and film conventions. A film can be both tragic and a musical, even when these ideas conflict.

Conclusion

Pennies From Heaven uses the aesthetics and grandeur of classic musicals in order to comment on the impossibility of their existence in a dark and cynical world. The almost absolute separation between extravagant song and dance numbers and the harsh reality of the Depression creates a challenging contrast. Much about Pennies From Heaven is difficult for viewers, which is perhaps why the film was a commercial failure. It was ahead of its time and people were unwilling to accept, even after the genre reinvention of the 1970s, a film that exposed the very roots of deception in the musical. Songs and dances cannot, despite the attempt at a happy ending, change the position of the characters within the film. The gangs in West Side Story become exalted in dance, and the conventions of the musical remain a constant comfort even through the tragic conclusion. Arthur and Eileen, however, are thrown in and out of their musical fantasies, and can never (with the exception of Arthur's rendition of "Pennies From Heaven" before he hangs) express themselves using their own voices. They are trapped in a "real world" that will not accept the musical but has constructed them to desire it.

Jane Feuer described Pennies From Heaven as an ultimate movement into self-reflexivity, from which the musical might not return. Genres, however, tend to follow cyclical and not linear progressions, and the musical moved on past this restricting approach to flourish once again. Tragedy in the musical likewise did not vanish with this incredibly dark film, but twenty years later was reconfigured in Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge.

Moulin Rouge:

Reinventing the Movie Musical

Before 2001 and the release of Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge, many critics had declared that the musical was a dead genre. Attempts to revive it in the 1990s included big budget films with limited commercial success such as Evita (Alan Parker 1996) and animated Disney films. When setting out to make Moulin Rouge, Luhrmann and co-writer Craig Pearce worked consciously to re-invent the musical in a form that would be more accessible to a contemporary audience. Luhrmann's previous films, Strictly Ballroom (1992) and Romeo and Juliet (1996), both featured love stories, and Luhrmann wanted to continue this trend with his third film. As he says in an extensive interview quoted in John Muir's book Singing a New Tune, the project stemmed out of Luhrmann's love for old movies, particularly musicals, and the "artificial storytelling that made you *feel* the joy of Top Hat and The Band Wagon and the drama of West Side Story" (Muir 165). Mentioning West Side Story as an inspiration suggests that Luhrmann recognized the power of tragedy to shift the genre into new territory, and sought to do the same with Moulin Rouge. It makes sense, then, that part of his re-working the musical includes starting with a tragic plot line, in this case, the Orpheus myth.

The Orpheus myth originated in Ancient Greece. Orpheus is a beautiful poet and singer who can charm everyone with his song. He falls in

love with Eurydice and they marry. She gets bitten by a snake, however, and enters the underworld. Orpheus refuses to accept this loss and travels into the underworld to bring her back. While there are several variations of the story, the end result is always the same. Orpheus rescues Eurydice but must not look back at her until they have left the underworld. At the last minute, he looks back and she disappears into the underworld once more. While Moulin Rouge does not match up exactly with the narrative of the Orpheus myth, the myth provided inspiration and a starting point for Luhrmann and Pearce for their five-year writing project.

Christian, who both plays the central figure of the film and also narrates it as a flashback, is a clear Orpheus figure. His spontaneous bursts into song transfix anyone who hears him. Christian is an idealistic young man who wants to live a Romantically impoverished life directed by Bohemian ideals (truth, beauty, freedom, and love). The Bohemian movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century included artists, writers, musicians, actors, and so on who wanted to live life according to ideals that were based on artistic pursuits instead of material concerns. Christian moves to Paris at the start of the flashback, and the rest of the film takes place in and around the Moulin Rouge, a decadent nightclub where rich men came to experience the Bohemian world in a tamed, unthreatening way (Muir 168-69). The Eurydice of the film is Satine, the jaded star dancer of the Moulin Rouge, with whom Christian falls in love. The Moulin Rouge serves as the underworld for the

film, from which Christian tries to rescue Satine. The film focuses around the creation of a play, “Spectacular, Spectacular,” within the film that often mirrors the lives of the characters until, during the opening night performance, the two completely merge. Like Orpheus and Eurydice, Christian and Satine are doomed to end tragically; Satine dies opening night and Christian is left alone to try and find meaning in a world within which he has loved and lost.

Starting with a well-known tragic love story as the base narrative, Luhrmann then experimented with ways to shift the form of the musical to make it more appealing to contemporary audiences. One major aspect of his project is the use of popular songs in the film. The use of songs in Pennies From Heaven gives the film a modernist twist, since the songs are separated from the “real world” in the way art and life should be separated in modernism. They also have a nostalgic effect, since they are used without alteration, even keeping the original singers’ voices. Popular music in Moulin Rouge, in contrast, has a decidedly post-modern effect. The songs are taken into the film and made new again through their combination, situation in the film, and some musical reworking. The songs become innovative through their incorporation in the film, but the audience still recognizes the source material, suggesting that there is no possible originality, only layers and layers of mass consumer culture.

In order to revive the musical genre, Luhrmann set out to make a film that pushed against the conventions of form so that it became almost

experimental. The interesting thing about his process, however, is that instead of shifting the genre to re-mystify it, he leaves it open to examination. As Pearce explains, “Moulin Rouge is overtly emotional, but...there’s a whole philosophy and intellectual thought process that has gone into evolving that style and designing that contract with the audience” (Muir 177). Part of this design is allowing the audience to see the way the film works, and understand it as a film in conversation with the conventions of the many musicals that came before it. Another aspect of Moulin Rouge that changes it from previous musicals is its incorporation of Bollywood film conventions.

Bollywood refers to films that come from Mumbai, India, and have a set of expectations much like American genre films. Bollywood films often focus on visual stimulus in extravagant sets and costumes. They do not follow classical Hollywood editing conventions, especially not in the musical numbers. Having musical numbers at first makes these films seem closest to American musicals, but Bollywood films include aspects from a variety of genres. Generally there are elements of family drama or melodrama, action sequences, romance, and comedy segments (situational or slapstick). An example of Bollywood and genre blending is the well-known film Sholay (Ramesh Sippy 1975). Sholay combines elements of many genres including the musical, western, and melodrama. This combination is clearly captured in the juxtaposition of two adjoining scenes. The musical number “Holi Ke Din” shows the elaborate festival of colors, a time when the village gets together

and throws colored powder and liquid dye into the air. The communal singing and dancing, the elaborate crane shots, and the celebration of color and excess put this scene in the realm of the musical. The song crescendos but is interrupted at the end by a hut bursting into flames. Bandits ride in on horses and disrupt the world of the musical, returning the film to the conventions of the western. While Bollywood films typically end with Hollywood-style closure, there are many tragic endings along with happy ones. Tragedy and musical numbers are not incongruous. It is in fact very common to have musical elements in tragic stories, since music pervades Bollywood film. In Sholay, for instance, the main character sacrifices himself, volunteering to single-handedly hold off a group of bandits, which results in his death. The encouragement to mix the elements of American genre conventions offers an incredible freedom to filmmakers and opens up new possibilities.

After seeing a Bollywood film in the mid-1990s, Luhrmann was inspired by its use of spectacle, and wondered how the style could be adapted to appeal to a western audience (Muir 166). His answer appears in Moulin Rouge, which presents to western viewers a reflection of Indian cinema in the setting of “Spectacular, Spectacular,” the highly stylized construction of the Moulin Rouge, the abundance of color, and the sometimes dizzying editing. When viewing Moulin Rouge in the traditions of American genre, the requirements of musical form apply. In the following section I will examine

how the film works as a tragedy and a musical, and explore the ways in which Moulin Rouge offers a postmodern look at the tragic musical.

The Acknowledgement of Artifice

Unlike West Side Story and Pennies From Heaven, Moulin Rouge makes no attempt to conceal or apologize for its artificiality. In fact, the film thrives on the energy that comes with removing any realistic pretenses. Using artificiality, genre conventions, and pastiche of films and popular culture makes it a highly post-modern work. Musicals in general tend to have a distancing effect on the audience, since the characters on the screen break into song and dance, a highly unrealistic activity in everyday life. The questions become: why does Luhrmann emphasize this disconnect with reality, and how does this disconnection effect the part that tragedy plays in the film?

The structure of the film constantly reminds the viewer of the layers of artifice that construct the film. From the very start, the audience members are aware of their positions as audience members. The film opens with a conductor, who moves his arms as though directing the off-screen source of the film's music, standing in front of a drawn red curtain. This technique distances the audience from the film, reminding it that the film is "a presentation—a movie—not an imitation of life" (Dunne 181). Interestingly, the conductor is facing the audience. Traditionally a conductor faces away from the audience and towards the musicians she or he is directing. By facing

the audience and having the musicians not visible, the film suggests that it is the audience who will be conducted through the film. The conductor is a visual representation of Luhrmann's ever-present hand in the film.

The sepia toned introduction, sung by Toulouse (one of the bohemians) dressed as he is at the end of "Spectacular, Spectacular," introduces Christian's character. The distancing effect is continued as Christian begins to narrate an extended flashback that takes up most of the film. The narrative is based on a complex organization of writing and narration. Christian narrates the main plot in flashback while he types the story on his typewriter. The audience never sees Christian speaking in the outer narrative, but his voice reads the words as he types. Within the flashback, Christian again writes on his typewriter; this time he constructs a script for "Spectacular, Spectacular" that closely mirrors his relationship with Satine, so much so that by the end of the flashback they act out their own parts and love for each other on the stage.

The layers of storytelling and interpretation give the film a self-reflexive tone, and this technique in some ways provides distance for the audience, since they only see the story through these several layers of context. For example, when the bohemians ask Christian to write a show for them, the audience experiences his indecision through the words he types and reads in the outer narrative, the visuals which represent Christian's memory of the event, and the response Christian imagines his father would give if he knew

that Christian was going to work for the Moulin Rouge. Since the film's narrative structure constantly reminds viewers that they are watching a consciously constructed film, it keeps people from completely giving into the colorful, exotic world of the musical. This distance makes the emotion associated with the tragic plotline essential to the film. There are moments when the characters, and therefore the audience, experience perfection, but these are fleeting and seem to appear only to give contrast to the darker tones and powerful emotions. Christian undertakes a cathartic journey through his writing, which at times takes on a frantic pace, and the audience feels compelled to join him.

Sound plays an important role in creating the playful artificiality of the film, for instance, through the use of Mickey Mousing. Mickey Mousing refers to the use of music and sound effects in direct correspondence with the film's visuals. For example, when the bohemians spy on Christian and Satine inside the elephant, their quick head movements when they turn to look at each other are accompanied by swishing and popping noises. Mickey Mousing was used in early cartoons, hence the name, and was also widely used in the accompaniment of silent films. It fell out of favor as the advent of synch sound technology led filmmakers to strive for greater realism and less abstract representations. Its use in current films therefore has a comic effect, since it places extreme, self-reflexive emphasis on simple movements. Luhrmann uses Mickey Mousing for comic effects, which are most often

linked to the Bohemians, and sometimes to Zidler (the rotund, red-mustached proprietor of the Moulin Rouge). Exaggerating comic elements help keep the comic separated from the tragic parts of the film. For instance, the romantic couple, Christian and Satine, is never associated with these heavily comic elements unless they are in the presence of the comic characters. The amount of Mickey Mousing in the film follows a definite pattern, with many instances of it in the beginning, and then the number dwindles until, towards the film's tragic conclusion, there are none. In this way, Luhrmann can control the emotional responses of the audience, preparing them to experience the tragedy by gradually pulling away the comforting comic element. This is not to say that the end is devoid of comedy, with the chaos in the final part of "Spectacular, Spectacular," but as the audience in the Moulin Rouge laughs, the film audience understands that the finale has life or death significance, and that by ignoring the Duke's demands the Moulin Rouge will be forced to close.

The most jarring aspect of artificiality is the rapid, unusual editing. The editing was perhaps the most discussed aspect of the film in critical responses at the time of its release, often in a negative way¹². The rapid cuts, swirling camera movements, and lapses in continuity editing left many people uneasy. Moulin Rouge is a film that celebrates excess and extravagance; many viewers have drawn a parallel between this film and those by Busby

¹² Although the film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Editing, many critics disliked the film's radical editing choices.

Berkeley. Part of this excessiveness is created by the quick editing. The shots come one after another in rapid succession, as though there is too much to see and experience to settle with slow moving editing. Luhrmann explained his use of extreme editing and camera shots as a way to “remind our audience that they’re watching a movie. Don’t go to sleep! Don’t go into a dream!” Dunne suggests, “an audience suspicious of Hollywood musicals in the first place can be disarmed in this way” (Dunne 182). The self-reflexive quality of the editing adds to the other elements of artificiality in the film to keep the viewers constantly questioning what they see. In this way, the film does not work like a classic musical, even though it uses generic standards. Playing with the form allows Luhrmann to play with classical content as well, adding a tragic plot. At times the editing is so chaotic, for example in the first dance scene at the Moulin Rouge when the shots begin to blur together in a tangle of color and bodies, that the effect of having the heroine die is muted in comparison.

Christian and Satine as Tragic Couple

Christian and Satine come together like a classical romantic couple. At the start of the film, they represent radically divergent ideals and positions in society. She is somewhat wealthy, but still lower class and restricted to life in the Moulin Rouge. Her actions are determined by Zidler and her position as a courtesan, in which she is a commodity that can be bought and sold by

men. Her past has left her unwilling to open herself to love. Christian is poor, but it is a voluntary poverty that he undertakes in an attempt to live an idealized life. The one flashback of his father suggests his middle or upper class origins, which he forsakes in pursuit of a life as a writer. Christian is also free to do as he pleases, while Satine must defer to Zidler's controlling hand. Christian naively believes that love is the strongest force possible and desperately wants to fall in love. Through song and dance, they come together and complete a character dissolve, through which they blend the conflicting aspects of their character to create an ideal couple. Like the traditional backstage plot, their romantic union corresponds to the success of the show, "Spectacular, Spectacular." The line between the film and play becomes so convoluted that by the end, Christian is on stage performing the part that he inspired, and the audience in the Moulin Rouge assumes that the Duke's attempts to kill Christian are part of the show. Moulin Rouge mixes this backstage plot with elements of the folk musical. The wandering figure, Christian, settles down because of the connection his romantic interest, Satine, has to the "land" (her home, the Moulin Rouge). Importance is placed on community, created between the Moulin Rouge dancers and the bohemians. There is a malevolent figure, the Duke, outside of this central community. Lastly, the songs seem to come out of the characters as natural expressions that are part of everyday life.

Christian comes to Paris filled with idealistic fantasies about love and the bohemian lifestyle. When he meets Satine, Christian is at first intimidated by her brazen display of sexuality, and deterred by her overdone and flamboyant attempts to seduce him. Their meeting is also complicated because of mistaken identities, since Satine believes Christian is her future investor, the Duke. Satine begins the film as a worldly, practical courtesan, who prizes material security out of fear of poverty. Christian and Satine first begin to come together as a couple when Christian sings “Your Song.” His Orphean gift of song cuts through the layers of miscommunication and acting to connect them as a couple. As the song continues, they leap out of the window of Satine’s room into a miniature, foggy replica of Paris. Entering this dream space allows them to briefly experience the utopia of the musical. It is during this number, as Christian sings a song from the popular music lexicon and quotes other films (he leaps onto the small Eiffel tower imitating Gene Kelly in Singin’ in the Rain), that he falls in love with Satine. She puts aside her earlier pretending in genuine admiration of his talent. Christian believes that Satine loves him in return, but when he admits to being a writer and not the duke as she thought, Satine changes back into her practical, unromantic self, just in time to put on another “show” for the Duke.

Their true union as a couple comes a little later, during the “Elephant Love Medley” number. As Pearce describes it, “Christian’s got to do the ultimate thing...it must be the ultimate expression of his Orphean gift so she

will fall in love with him. It's obvious what it must be: a medley of the greatest love tunes of all time" (Muir 173). The number is built as a sort of love song battle, with the two exchanging lines from popular love songs back and forth. About two-thirds of the way through the song, Satine shifts from singing retorts to Christian's arguments and sings with him in his line, "We could steal time, (Satine joins) just for one day." For the rest of the song, the two of them sing almost exactly the same lines. Musically, Christian and Satine are now joined as a romantic couple. The return of the opera-singing moon and the repetition of the line "how wonderful life is, now you're in the world" refers the viewer back to their first love song. Now it has become a duet instead of a solo sung to Satine, and this reflects the fact that their love is now mutual.

Christian's persuasive singing gradually convinces Satine to open herself up to the prospect of being in love. The character dissolve begins here, as Christian imparts to Satine some of his idealism regarding love. As she absorbs his sincerity and optimism, she begins to lose her ability to act a part, to pretend to love the Duke and carry on a relationship with him. Before she can go to Christian towards the end of the film and try to convince him that she does not love him any more, she must put a physical barrier, a veil, over her face to help her act out what used to be an easy façade. While the audience knows that Satine is a courtesan and has had many previous relationships, she is with only Christian during the film. Being exclusively

with Christian makes their affair different from Satine's relationships as a courtesan and shows the way that his belief in the sanctity of love influences her.

Satine's practicality does not shift to Christian until the very end of the film. He begins to become disillusioned when Satine sends him away to save him from the Duke. He cannot believe that she would treat him like that, and his faith in the utopian potential of living with bohemian ideals is shaken. While Satine's final confession of her love briefly revives Christian's idealism, her death devastates him even further. He takes on some of her skepticism and disillusionment at life's potential, completing the character dissolve. Christian is forced to realize that there are some things that can overcome love. He in fact refers earlier in the film to Satine's consumption as "a force darker than jealousy, and stronger than love." It is only at the very end of the film, after Christian has cathartically written the story of his and Satine's love, that he reaches a balance between accepting the harshness of the world and embracing the potential of love to brighten it, if only for a short time.

If the film ended as the curtain falls after "Spectacular, Spectacular," then it would follow a traditional narrative trajectory for the show musical. The romantic couple comes together through song, something causes them to separate, but they are re-united through the show within the film. The declaration of their love, a symbolic marriage, is linked to the success of the

show. Moulin Rouge, however, does not end with the curtain coming down and the romantic couple kissing. As the actors in the show line up for a curtain call, Satine falls into Christian's arms and dies on the stage, an appropriate finale for someone who lived her life by pretending. Her death devastates Christian, but he types in his over-viewing narrative that his story is about "a love that will live forever." While the ending separates the lovers and denies them the traditional happy ending for the musical, this end is not without hope.

Foreshadowing Death

Even before Satine's entrance, the audience knows she is going to die. Toulouse sings the first song of the film, "Nature Boy," in reference to Christian. The song seems to float along, much like the wanderer (Christian) that it talks about. The song sets the tone for the film, "evoking an intense sense of loss at the same time that its final lines ("the greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love, and be loved in return") proclaim an indestructible human truth, salvaged somehow from the perilous journey of life" (Knapp 104). The song reflects the plot of the film from the beginning, and the audience is prepared for Christian's emotional journey into love and loss. The song progresses as the camera moves through a grainy, sepia view of Montmartre, with degenerate people, some in stupors from Absinthe, occupying street corners. This dark, depressing scene of the bohemian world

starts the film with an ominous tone, and contrasts with Christian's memories of bohemian energy and potential. The camera continues into the window of an apartment building across from the Moulin Rouge, moving into an introductory shot of Christian, curled up in his dirty room, with a bottle of what is most likely Absinthe hanging from his hand. The sepia tone of the shot gives it an even grungier, rough look.¹³ The shot is also very dark, so that at first Christian blends in with the furniture and piles of papers. When he looks up, his face has a pained intensity on it, and his skin appears sweaty and dirt-stained. A few clear, no longer sepia-toned shots of his apartment follow as still frames in which Christian changes positions. Although we do not see him move, he gets closer to his typewriter, the main instrument through which he communicates to the audience.

When Christian finally sits down to write, a blue light illuminates his face. This harsh colored lighting effect is used repeatedly during the film to give scenes certain feelings. The harsh, cold blue light on his face suggests Christian's unhappy state. He begins the film alone and clearly upset, signaling from the start that the flashback he narrates will not have a happy ending. The first words he speaks and types become a recurring motto throughout the film, "the greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love, and be loved in return." He goes on to introduce the Moulin Rouge and central

¹³ The look of the apartment comments on and contrasts with the opening of An American in Paris (Vincente Minnelli 1951), where the Gene Kelly character lives in a "poverty," which is bright and idealized.

characters, Zidler and Satine. An image of Satine appears briefly, but she is covered with shadows that obscure her. This makes her a mysterious figure, but also ominously hints at her fate in the film. At the end of this introductory voice-over, Christian says, “the woman I loved is... dead,” with “dead” said in a whispered tone, so that the viewers are not entirely sure that they heard it. Before Satine really appears on screen, Christian gives away the ending. Like any formula film, however, the viewer watches it not to see what happens, but how it happens, to experience the film.

Satine first appears on a swing far above the audience, coming down from the ceiling in a shower of glitter and smoke. The room darkens before she enters and the music stops. Overall, her entrance has a more ominous tone than would be expected for a beautiful courtesan/dancer. The song she performs, “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend,” draws on the audience’s pop culture knowledge to link Satine to another ill-fated star, Marilyn Monroe.¹⁴ The song opens with the line, “The French are glad to die for love,” and as Satine sings “die,” the camera cuts briefly to a shot from her death scene. The audience is again not entirely sure what it is seeing, since the strong shadows across her face in this flash-forward obscure her. In the close-ups of Satine on the rope swing, blue light makes her face appear blue, much like Christian’s in his introduction. In this instance, the blue indicates Satine’s cold practicality, her inability to love. This is mirrored in her song, which praises material

¹⁴ Monroe sings a version of the song in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Howard Hawks 1953). Monroe infamously died of a drug overdose at the relatively young age of 36.

support over love. The blue also makes her skin seem impossibly pale, making her look almost dead and accenting the bright red of her lips, which themselves symbolize Satine's position as a courtesan and the blood that comes from her mouth as her consumption worsens. As the song continues, Satine begins to swing precariously over the crowd. After her song, Satine goes up on the swing once again. As she prepares to sing the final notes of the song, she gasps for breath and falls off the swing. One of the male dancers catches her and carries her back to the dressing area, where she is laid out as though dead. Her fainting at the end of the song foreshadows her death at the end of the show; the height of her success will correspond with the end of her life.

It is only on repeated viewings that all these elements of foreshadowing become clear and the audience realizes that the film tells them from the very start that Satine will die. This knowledge has several purposes in the film. Firstly, it is necessary to fulfill the qualifications of tragedy. Knowing that Satine's death is imminent gives the viewer an omnipotent position of power, from which they can see how fate moves the characters and how their choices lead them to the end. In other words, knowing that Satine will die makes her death inevitable. This realization makes the viewer look at Christian and Satine's actions in relation to her impending death, which makes a happy ending impossible. Satine faces this realization, too, when Zidler tells her about her consumption and she decides to stay with the Duke to save

Christian. She knows her own life is over, and the greatest act of love she feels she can do is to save his life. By the end of “Spectacular, Spectacular,” when she admits her true feelings for Christian, she understands that their love is stronger than death. Not that their love could save her from dying, but that it will live on through Christian’s writing (and in a non-diegetic way through the film itself).¹⁵

In addition to the foreshadowing of Satine’s death, the film contains a dark presence that shifts throughout the film. At first glance this figure seems to be embodied in the Duke, an obvious obstacle and counterpoint to the couple’s potential happy ending. The Duke becomes a particularly ferocious adversary when he signs paperwork with Zidler and crushes his hat in a demonstration of potential jealous rage, saying, “It’s not that I’m a jealous man, I just don’t like other people touching my things!” The Duke continually states what he is not: not jealous, not naïve, not an imbecile, and so on. But for each time, his actions suggest to the audience that he actually has these characteristics. His rage surges again later when Satine refuses to sleep with him and he attempts to rape her. The Duke’s manservant Warner adds to his threatening persona, since Warner walks around with a gun and seems capable and willing to kill for the Duke. During “The Pitch,” the Duke has an important spoken line, “And in the end, should someone die?” The line

¹⁵ While Moulin Rouge is radical in its form, its narrative conclusion remains conventional. The female lead dies in order to both preserve her beauty and perfection, as well as inspire the male artist to create his art.

is thrown away and not considered. It becomes evidence of the Duke's lack of theatrical knowledge and incongruity with the creative directors of the show. When viewed in relation to the end of the film, however, it becomes another instance of foreshadowing, since someone does die at the end of the show.

Looking at the film in relation to traditional folk musicals, the Duke could be compared to Jud Fry in Oklahoma!, a malevolent male presence lusting after the heroine even though the audience knows she is destined to end up with the hero. The Duke, however, is an extremely complicated character. Despite his dark presence, Christian and Satine openly fool him and make him comical. The Duke is also a pitiable figure, since he ends the film walking alone into the snow, a defeated individual much like Christian at the start of the film. This comparison to the hero further creates him as a sympathetic character. Satine's actions towards the Duke are no less questionable than his, since, as he says, "You made me believe that you loved me!" In a film that prizes love over any other ideal, it seems cruel to play with the Duke's emotions.

The Duke is characterized in contradicting ways. On the one hand, the Duke is portrayed as a powerful figure, since he controls the fate of the Moulin Rouge. He represents consumer capitalism, which has the potential to destroy art (pitting him against the Bohemian ideals). On the other hand, the Duke is depicted with a lisp and long hair, which makes him an effeminate

character and complicates his portrayal. The Duke is generally denied a singing role, except for a brief, comical line during the pitch for “Spectacular, Spectacular,” where his voice wobbles and he is barely able to sing a line, and more seriously in the Tango scene. In traditional musicals, negative characters are often unable to sing or dance, which removes them from the world of the romantic couple. All these elements that make up his character create a complex and contradictory figure. He is not a fully evil or despicable character; he is just trapped in his class and unable to find connection with the vibrant bohemian world. The Duke helps convey the dark undertone of the film, without being the direct cause of it.

If the Duke is not ultimately the film’s antagonist, who or what is? This question leads the film back into the realm of tragedy, where the inevitably unhappy ending is caused not by a person, but by some degree of fate interwoven with the decisions made by the characters. Christian and Satine allow themselves to fall in love with each other, which causes their downfall. Satine would have died anyway, but her death would not be tragic without its effect on Christian and the previous hope that their love would conquer all obstacles, come what may. The end is somewhat tragic for the Duke as well, since all his attempts to buy Satine fail and he ends up alone. The failure of his quest for Satine mark a failure of the capitalist system in which the Duke is engrained. The destruction of his beliefs leaves him heart-

broken, if not because of the loss of Satine, then because of the failure of his money to purchase love.

The Tango: Musical and Tragedy Combined

The most powerful combination of musical and tragedy in Moulin Rouge is “El Tango De Roxanne,” a large-scale musical number in which one of the bohemians, the Argentinean, sings about the trials of loving a prostitute.¹⁶ The use of the tango is significant because “the tango genre itself is already loaded with pessimistic notions of love and a barely contained violence-tinged physicality” (Wood 322). This makes it a highly appropriate style for a song warning about the dangers of falling in love. The Argentinean sings specifically to Christian, but later when the Duke realizes that Satine has been playing with him and is not really in love with him, the song’s message applies to him.

The main part of the number takes place in the empty floor of the Moulin Rouge. It starts simply and diegetically, with a piano and violin providing music and a single spotlight giving it a theatrical feel. The bohemians and dancers at first sit along the outer areas and watch the Argentinean dance with Nini (a Moulin Rouge dancer who plays the part of the prostitute in the dance). As the song builds, however, they begin to join,

¹⁶ The number is derived from the 1978 Sting song “Roxanne,” but put into a tango beat and form.

first lone men and then couples. Compared with the costumes from earlier Moulin Rouge scenes, the dancers are dressed very simply, in black, white, and earth-toned undergarments, and without masses of skirts. The simplified mise-en-scene of the number focuses the viewer's attention on the movement and visual relationships of the dancers, as well as the number's crescendo of auditory power. While previous scenes from the Moulin Rouge contained large quantities of dancers, this is the first dance where the performers move in unison, instead of in many different ways. This relative simplicity reflects their common concern: the fate of Satine and the show. It also allows all the energy in the scene to be collected and focused into the creation of emotion and the "Roxanne" narrative. Many other numbers have incredible energy, but it is scattered and distracted, so does not convey the intensity of the tango. The large-scale, increasingly complicated dance numbers are typical of classic musicals such as The Gay Divorcee (Mark Sandrich 1934), which ends with masses of dancers performing the production number "The Continental."

The cutting in "El Tango De Roxanne" repeatedly juxtaposes the dancing inside the Moulin Rouge to Satine and the Duke in the "gothic tower." The tower is constructed from stone and its solid, harsh quality is reflected in the lighting choices. Again, blue light is used dramatically to suggest a lack of emotional connection. In the previous scene in the tower, when Zidler sings "Like a Virgin," the lighting is much more natural, which makes this later lighting choice stand out even more. The warm, almost

reddish light that fills the Moulin Rouge also emphasizes the cold blueness of the tower. The warmth is associated with the dancers and bohemians, who together represent the community at the base of the folk musical. Christian stays with this group for most of the song, adding to its positive associations.

After an extended, yet tense lull in the number and a conversation between the Duke and Satine, Satine sees Christian walking in the street and can no longer pretend to love the Duke. Seeing this, the Duke yells at Satine and begins to forcefully disrobe her. The number begins again in full power, and the dancer's violent movement reflects the struggle between Satine and the Duke. The music builds, with a highly dissonant quality that increases tension and suspense in the scene. The shots cut from close-ups to long shots, which creates intensity and suggests Christian and Satine's painful physical separation (Wood 323). The dissonance is particularly important; it is the contrast between Christian's slower, heartbreaking song segment and the faster "Roxanne" that makes the music so powerful. At first each section is sung separately and then they are layered on top of each other. The Duke, in his only real singing part, adds another layer by singing Christian's segment in a lower register, linking him with Christian (since they both desire Satine) but with a disturbing undertone. The mix of these voices and refrains causes auditory dissonance, which is so powerful that it can generate an almost physical reaction in viewers.

The “Roxanne” narrative works like a miniature tragedy within a larger framework. The emotions of the characters build, until the end when Christian, the Duke, and the Argentinean are all yelling the lyrics as loud as they are able. The volume and layers build until they cannot go further, at which point the Argentinean mimes killing Nini and the camera cuts back and forth between Nini’s body and Satine, who the Duke throws onto a bed. While the number seems to be building up for the worst, that is, for the Duke to succeed in raping or killing Satine, she is saved at the last minute by the same dancer who caught her after she fell from the swing earlier in the film.¹⁷ The silence that follows the music gives the audience a moment to recover from the character’s cathartic release of emotion.

This number is an important scene in the classification of Moulin Rouge as a musical tragedy. It takes a large-scale song and dance scene, a standard element of the musical and similar to what one might find in a Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers film, and through this number creates tension and a sense of impending violence and misfortune. The musical number should be the site of comfort and utopian potential, but “El Tango De Roxanne” subverts the norm and creates emotional upheaval and the suggestion of tragedy. The song began as a sort of game, with Nini laughing at the role she would play.

¹⁷ This character, Chocolat, is the only black character in the film and occupies an essentially non-speaking but crucial role in the narrative by saving Satine twice. The topic of race in the American musical has been the site of some critical investigation. For example, Steve Cohan’s book Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader contains several essays that discuss the issue of race in the musical.

By the end of the number, however, no one is laughing. Instead a circle of men stands silently around Nini's "dead" body.

Conclusion

Pearce describes Moulin Rouge as the story of someone who goes "from being a hyper-idealistic young person to a more mature person who still has their ideals, but realizes that some things are bigger in life than all of us...like death" (Muir 168). In a way, this trajectory of Christian's character reflects the journey of the musical. His depressed state at the start of the film as he begins to narrate the flashback corresponds with many people's doubts that the musical would survive after the end of the studio system. Pennies From Heaven was made with this pessimistic outlook, depicting a dreary world in which song and dance can never really exist, much less change anything. The younger, more naïve Christian is associated with classic musicals both literally (his use of The Sound of Music to astound the bohemians) and figuratively, since he believes writing and song can change the world and capture the perfection of Truth, Beauty, Freedom, and most importantly Love.

At the end of the film, Christian represents the musical as re-imagined by Luhrmann and Pearce. Songs, dance, the idealistic world of the musical is possible, which is expressed in the success of "Spectacular, Spectacular," and this world provides the audience with joy and excitement. Loss, death, and

the failure of love to “overcome all obstacles” are also possible, however, since no song or amount of applause can bring Satine back. Moulin Rouge recognizes both of these worlds, not in a drastically segregated way as in Pennies From Heaven, but in a way that accepts the inconsistencies of tragic musicals and moves on in an optimistic frame of mind. Christian is portrayed at the end of the film in a bright space, free from both the dizzying editing and special effects and the dark somber tones he experienced earlier in the film. Christian is ready to move on, to take the time he spent with his love, this crucial life experience, and to make from it a work of art. The film encourages audiences to do the same, to experience the film, to keep it with them, but also to recognize that films are finite and the experience of viewing films cannot last indefinitely.

Concluding Thoughts

The preceding chapters examined the way in which three primary examples of tragic musicals, West Side Story, Pennies From Heaven, and Moulin Rouge, used the musical form (including production numbers, creation of the romantic couple through character dissolve, and the possibility of experiencing the feeling of utopia) to create a potentially contradictory tragic plot. After my detailed analysis of the way these films combine the musical and tragedy, the next step is to look at what this combination accomplishes and why it effectively moves audiences.

Genre movies are predictable and audiences enjoy them because they can instantly recognize the structure, iconography, and basic plot. The tragic musical shifts viewer expectations, creating a new sub-genre much like those outlined by Altman as the folk, fairytale, and show musical. Although the tragic musical is a separate sub-genre, it uses the audience's knowledge of both the musical and tragedy. The familiarity keeps the films from being entirely startling, especially after West Side Story brought the possibility of tragedy in a musical into the audience's film vocabulary. The idea of genre is built on viewer expectations, and by the time Moulin Rouge was released, viewers recognized the potential for a tragic plot. The extensive use of foreshadowing, which is essential for the creation of tragedy, cues the audience from the start to expect an unhappy conclusion. Like other genre

films, viewing is more about the experience and journey rather than the film's ending.

Tragic musicals stretch and shift the definition of the musical but still fall within its genre definition. In each film there is a heterosexual romantic couple that drives the film through a dual-narrative structure. The tragic musical, however, demystifies the musical in that it does not allow the couple to remain together. The definition of the musical never specifically says that the couple must end happily, just that they come together through song and dance. In tragic musicals, the couple can be together but only for a short time. Separating the couple in the end calls the possibility for utopia and the detached optimism of classical musicals into question. This challenge makes the films more accessible to modern audiences, who are skeptical of the overly bright and impossibly optimistic view of the world offered in classic musicals.

The production numbers in tragic musicals can still contain some of the joy and optimism of classic musicals, but there tends to be a dark undertone to them. The musical numbers are the place of greatest utopian potential, but the characters are never allowed to completely escape the constraints of the world. The feeling of utopia cannot be experienced fully in a tragic musical, and this restriction becomes central in the ending, when one member of the couple dies. Interestingly, in each film one of the lovers is left alive, as though their visible suffering is a necessary element in creating the

tragic conclusion. The dark undertones that pervade these films and infiltrate the musical numbers shift the form of the musical, presenting new possibilities. The tragic elements are foreshadowed and explored so that by the end of the films, the viewer expects death. This would never be possible in, for example, an Astaire/Rogers film, where the mise-en-scene is so sterilized and artificially idyllic that the death of part of the romantic couple is inconceivable.

The tragic musical transitioned from following classic musical conventions in West Side Story, through the modernist experimentation of Pennies From Heaven, and into post-modern pastiche with Moulin Rouge. After this evolution, where will the tragic musical go? One film that came out in 2007 offers an answer. Sweeney Todd (Tim Burton) follows the tragic path of a barber in a graphically bloody period musical.¹⁸ Since death in the musical is no longer shocking, Sweeney Todd confronts the viewer with brutal violence, many murders, and a macabre plot involving using human flesh as pie filling. The film adds excess to offer something original and marks a potential shift for the future of the tragic musical. It continues the extreme stylization of Moulin Rouge, which brings up an interesting question, why do these recent tragic musicals gravitate towards stylization? Is it because the musical in general has a tendency towards artificiality?

¹⁸ Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street was originally a stage musical, which opened in 1979.

Tragedy has long been considered a high art form, associated with Greek drama, operas, and Shakespeare. The musical is recognized as a popular art form, a type of mass entertainment. Combining the two provides an interesting dichotomy not unlike the dual-focus narrative of the musical itself. Both of these forms also have incredible potential for emotional impact. Tragedy offers catharsis, and the musical captures the kinesthetic potential of dance and rhythm. The use of music itself in film can have incredible emotional impact. When combined artfully, these elements have the ability to move audiences more than they could individually. This makes the tragic musical the most powerful sub-genre of the musical.

Filmography

All That Jazz. Dir. Bob Fosse. Perf. Roy Scheider. Columbia Pictures, 1979.

An American in Paris. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Perf. Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron. MGM, 1951.

Applause. Dir. Rouben Mamoulian. Perf. Helen Morgan, Joan Peers. Paramount Pictures, 1929.

Band Wagon, The. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Perf. Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse. MGM, 1953.

Broadway Melody, The. Dir. Harry Beaumont. Perf. Charles King, Anita Page. MGM, 1929.

Camelot. Dir. Joshua Logan. Perf. Richard Harris, Vanessa Redgrave. Warner Brothers, 1967.

Evita. Dir. Alan Parker. Perf. Madonna, Antonio Banderas. Hollywood Pictures, 1996.

Jazz Singer, The. Dir. Alan Crosland. Perf. Al Jolson. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1929.

Follow the Fleet. Dir. Mark Sandrich. Perf. Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers. RKO Radio Pictures, 1936.

Gay Divorcee, The. Dir. Mark Sandrich. Perf. Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers. RKO Radio Pictures, 1934.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Dir. Howard Hawks. Perf. Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell. Twentieth Century-Fox Film, 1953.

Gold Diggers of 1933. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1933.

Gold Diggers of Broadway. Dir. Roy Del Ruth. Perf. Nancy Welford, Conway Tearle. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1929.

Hello, Dolly! Dir. Gene Kelley. Perf. Barbara Streisand, Walter Matthau. Chenault Productions, 1969.

Meet Me in St. Louis. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. Perf. Judy Garland. MGM, 1945.

Moulin Rouge. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Nicole Kidman, Ewan McGregor. Bazmark Films, 2001.

Oklahoma. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. Perf. Gordon MacRae, Shirley Jones. RKO Radio Pictures, 1955.

On the Town. Dir. Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly. Perf. Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra. MGM, 1949.

On With the Show. Dir. Alan Crosland. Perf. Arthur Lake, Betty Compson. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1929.

Pennies From Heaven. Dir. Herbert Ross. Perf. Steve Martin, Bernadette Peters. MGM, 1981.

Pennies From Heaven. Prod. BBC TV. DVD. BBC Video, 2004.

Rebel Without a Cause. Dir. Nicholas Ray. Perf. James Dean, Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1955.

Romeo and Juliet. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes. Bazmark Films, 1996.

Shall We Dance. Dir. Mark Sandrich. Perf. Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers. RKO Radio Pictures, 1937.

Sholay. Dir. Ramesh Sippy. Perf. Amitabh Bachchan, Dharmendra. Sippy Films, 1975.

Singin' in the Rain. Dir. Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly. Perf. Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and Debbie Reynolds. MGM, 1952.

Song of Norway. Dir. Andrew Stone. Perf. Toralv Maurstad, Florence Henderson. ABC Pictures, 1970.

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