

Introduction

What is musical theatre? Most people would agree that it is a combination of song, visual spectacle and verbal text that is performed live in theatres. It can be difficult to be more specific, however, since there is enormous diversity in works of musical theatre. Its popularity suggests it must entertain its audiences, which provokes a supplementary question; what is it about musical theatre that audiences find entertaining? One might say something about the self-referential quality of the texts or discuss whether the plots reflect current social concerns, but how do these features relate to an understanding of what it is about musical theatre that audiences find entertaining or why musical theatre remains popular?

Musical theatre works and performances vary widely.¹ Some have very little dance, though they have spectacle of a different type, for example *The Lion King*; others tell their stories through dance, such as *Cats*. Some works are through-composed, like *Les Misérables*, while others use music diegetically or metatextually as *Cabaret* does. Some musicals contain a linear narrative that is presented in an 'integrated' or 'realistic' fashion, such as *My Fair Lady*; others dispense with linearity and use other narrative constructions, as *Assassins* does. Some performances require the vocal range and musical style of rock music, as in *The Rocky Horror Show*, or other popular music styles, such as the gospel and R'n'B influenced *Dreamgirls*. Other works rely on a nineteenth-century romantic aesthetic in tonality and vocal range, as, for example, in *Phantom of the Opera*; while still others rely on the development of a 'Broadway' vocal sound and a big-band-inspired musical language like that used in *Gypsy*. Some use stories made popular in film, for example *Beauty and the Beast*; others use literary sources – *Show Boat* for example, which is based on a novel of the same name – while yet others use biographical information to flesh out a story around the music of a well-known composer or performer, like the bio-musical *Buddy*. What these works have in common is that all of them contain some combination of sung music, narrative and live visual performance, and all are vibrant and entertaining to varying audiences. In this study I will use the term 'musical' to refer to all these types of performance, while analysing the ways in which different combinations of musical, vocal and narrative construction, signifying in association with live performance, characterisation and spectacle, contribute to the potential for musical theatre to be entertaining. The aim is to investigate how pleasure is stimulated in

¹ Musical theatre is used here as the generic form that includes musical drama, musical comedy, jukebox musicals, dance musicals and all the sub-genres that are performed live in theatres. In the rest of this book the term 'musical' will be used interchangeably with musical theatre to signify these works. The term will be assumed to exclude film musicals.

audiences by different parts of the musical theatre text and different sub-genres of musical theatre performance in order to explore the multifarious ways musical theatre functions as entertainment.

Musical Theatre

But why is this book interesting, relevant or necessary? It is, after all, possible to enjoy musical theatre performances without writing about them. Like many people I have enjoyed many evenings at the theatre watching musical theatre performances, and I have spent many more performances in the pit as a musical director. But then, after almost 20 years working in musical theatre I became an academic, a lecturer and a researcher. Some of the shows I had worked on and admired were denigrated because of their lack of political relevance, not by audiences who adored them, but by my colleagues and many in the academic establishment. A case in point is *Little Shop of Horrors*² whose ironic re-creation of the B-movie genre is comic and gloriously eccentric, its use of musical styles and lyrics is witty, its music well-crafted. But I didn't find this viewpoint shared in much of the literature.

David Savran suggests that 'Until very recently ... historians and critics of twentieth-century theatre have obstinately (if inadvertently) endorsed the binary opposition between highbrow and lowbrow'.³ He suggests many reasons for musical theatre's status, not the least of which is its ephemeral form, the common practice of adaptation, and its disposability. Stacy Wolf builds on Savran's arguments to discuss the 'anxious relationship' between departments of drama and other departments in the humanities, which she suggests is mirrored by a similarly anxious relationship between musical theatre courses and the rest of the curriculum.⁴ There is an issue that both point to, and that is the politics of pleasure, for, as Savran says, 'no theatre form is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away'.⁵ Wolf agrees, suggesting that studying musical theatre texts allowed her and her students to 'think about pleasure, to talk about affect, and to use our visceral engagement with musicals as a crucial part of our analysis'.⁶

My experience, alongside Savran's and Wolf's observations, suggests that musical theatre can be provocative and entertaining, but that often either the provocation or the entertainment is overlooked. Musical theatre is denigrated as

² Book and Lyrics by Howard Ashman, Lyrics by Alan Menken.

³ David Savran, 'Toward a Historiography of the Popular', *Theatre Survey*, 45/2 (2004): p. 212.

⁴ Stacy Wolf, 'In Defense of Pleasure: Musical Theatre History in the Liberal Arts [A Manifesto]', *Theatre Topics*, 17/1 (2007): p. 52.

⁵ Savran, 'Towards a Historiography', p. 216.

⁶ Wolf, 'In Defense of Pleasure', p. 52.

‘just entertainment’, and yet providing entertainment is not only valuable, but difficult. As a teacher I discovered that students love musical theatre, and that its study allows them to access difficult ideas and theoretical frameworks. Wolf suggests that we should use our own and students’ preferences and passions, because ‘pleasure motivates’.⁷ Then, as a researcher, I discovered that there are many writers and fellow academics who are interested in the form, but that the literature doesn’t appear to engage with the ways in which musical theatre reaches out to and communicates with its audiences. Instead, the diverse literature tends to fall into several categories. For example, musicals can be studied as literary texts,⁸ from a musical perspective – including the relationship with text and narrative structure,⁹ in terms of the musical’s development in history¹⁰ or social history,¹¹ or by addressing the subject in relation to specific issues such as gender.¹² In addition there is a large body of work on film musicals particularly of the classic Hollywood era,¹³ and another body of work on opera¹⁴ and on voice.¹⁵ The study of entertainment is equally problematic, with a body of literature focusing on a post-Marxist reading of its economics, and very little that questions the ways in which pleasure is generated.

But, as Savran suggested above, one of the problems of studying musical theatre and its performances is the ephemerality and the disposability of the performance texts. It is not surprising, therefore, that the study of music for film and the musical film have been more developed than the study of musical theatre, nor that study of the written texts and their histories and contexts is more common than the study of those texts in performance. However, the Lincoln Center in New York has an immensely important resource in the Theatre on Film and Tape archive in which are contained filmed copies of many of the musicals that have appeared

⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸ For example, Sandor Goodhart (ed.), *Reading Stephen Sondheim* (New York and London, 2000).

⁹ For example, Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor, 1993).

¹⁰ For example, Andrew Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2000) or William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹¹ For example, John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves* (Hanover and London, 2003).

¹² For example, Stacy Wolf, *A Problem like Maria* (Ann Arbor, 2002).

¹³ Such as Rick Altman (ed.), *Genre: The Musical* (London and New York, 1981), Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (eds), *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* (Exeter and Portland, 2000) and Steven Cohan (ed.), *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* (London and New York, 2002).

¹⁴ For example, Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton, 1991) and *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001).

¹⁵ For example, Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge and London, 2006) or Michel Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry* (Ithaca and London, 1992).

on Broadway in the past 30 years. There is a smaller archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London recording works from London's West End. While there are always issues of authority, viewpoint and authenticity attached to the study of live performance on film, this resource allows researchers to begin to address musical theatre as performance.

Realism and Integration

In the literature on musical theatre, there appears to be a lack of clarity about the term 'integration'. This term presupposes a particular construction of materials that implies, among other things, an evolution of musical theatre towards an ever-increasing focus on linear narrative as the defining feature of the combined musico-dramatic text. There is a body of scholarship that presumes a historical trajectory of the development of musical theatre from fragmentation to integration, which leads to the privileging of those musicals that support that trajectory, and an analytical process of looking first at the plot and then questioning how the songs support it. As Savran says,

Many of the most important achievements of the pre-*Oklahoma!* era ... remain in archives and private collections, if they exist at all. Although the progress narrative that relegates all pre-*Oklahoma!* musicals to the Dark Ages is deeply problematic, Rodgers and Hammerstein were undeniably instrumental in securing the permanence and widespread dissemination of the plays ... And they did so by promoting the very progress narrative their works allegedly produced.¹⁶

As an example of the progress narrative, Raymond Knapp, when discussing *Anything Goes* (1934) talks of it as an example of the 'pre-"integrated" era' of the American musical – a useful shorthand to identify time and style. He suggests that 'the case can and should be made that its songs are anything but haphazard', and identifies how the songs, despite using Tin Pan Alley conventions, drive the show forward.¹⁷ Identifying the functions of songs in driving the plots of shows is a useful analytical process, and is appropriate to Knapp's thesis. The shorthand of integration is also useful as a descriptor, but it is not the only analytical model available. This example demonstrates the canonical acceptance of integration which leads to the focus on story supported by other elements. An analytical model based on the primacy of the story fails to acknowledge the many other functions that music might have, or other analytical approaches that might be used

¹⁶ Savran, 'Towards a Historiography', p. 214.

¹⁷ Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton and Oxford, 2005), pp. 88–97.

particularly when addressing musicals whose story may not be the main focus of the entertainment.

However, there are recent studies of musical theatre that point to an increased interest in its dramaturgical construction and its performance, not as 'integrated' but as disjunctive and diverse. In the cover note to *The Musical as Drama* Scott McMillin suggests that 'until recently the musical has been considered as either an "integrated" form of theatre or an inferior sibling of opera'.¹⁸ His argument is that neither of these views is accurate. The musical relies on the suspension of the plot for the song, and, since music uses a different pattern of time organisation, it necessarily incorporates a variety of time structures. It is possible therefore, that dance, song, music and dialogue explore different aspects of the action and the characters using different organisations of time. D. Miller, in *Place for Us*, proposes that the through-composed musical destroyed the structural opposition between narrative and number, which he regarded as the 'continual feats of negation that made the Broadway musical uniquely, preciously utopian'.¹⁹ There is an understanding here of the musical as a combination of materials that are individually disjunctive.

Knapp has developed these ideas most fully in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* in which he argues that 'the effect of adding music to a dramatic scene that might otherwise play naturalistically serves to exaggerate its content, adding a dimension of artificiality at the same time that it often also strives to tap into a deeper kind of reality, one accessible only through music'.²⁰ He suggests that music pulls in two opposing directions so the audience simultaneously pays attention to the emotional realities of the music and the performance of that music by the actor-singers on stage. He argues that the effect of this dual attention of the audience to both the acted character and the musical emotion, in connection with the removal of real time, is that the musical theatre song

imposes a kind of suspended animation so as to intensify selected emotional moments and through this dramatic hiatus directs us all the more urgently to see behind the mask/make-up/costume of the performer – even as he or she embodies the role being played more fully through the enactment of song.²¹

Here is an understanding of the musical that is not simply founded on its narrative but on the theatricality of performance and the disjunctions it might contain. Moving even further from study of the text, Bruce Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business* makes the case for studying musical theatre as an embodied practice connecting the historical context with performance conventions and the bodies of

¹⁸ Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton and Oxford, 2006).

¹⁹ D. Miller, *Place for Us* (Cambridge and London, 1998), p. 57.

²⁰ Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, p. 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

performers and spectators.²² These texts provide the foundations and starting points for the present study, whose aim is to understand the processes of communication and engagement that operate between performers and audiences during musical theatre performances.

The integrated musical also relies on the performance of 'psychological realism' by characters in staged situations, and a continuation of this 'realism' through speech, song and dance. In the course of the following chapters both integration and realism are argued to be problematic constructs that are challenged in a number of ways. The separation of song from scene, so that each allows different aspects of plot or character to be revealed, highlights the lack of 'realism' in musical theatre performance. The musical simultaneously signifies itself as 'realistic', and is written in ways that promote the idea of integration and the suspension of disbelief, even while incorporating textual and performance strategies that undermine that framework. So empathy and its disruption might be juxtaposed in the creation of entertainment.

Other musical theatre performances deliberately challenge a fixed concept of distance between performers and audiences by a variety of means. These include juxtaposition of music and narrative or lyric, reflexive awareness between character and performer, or the alienation caused by narration and choral presentation in book musicals. These devices challenge psychological continuity for performers and readers. Non-linear and revue style musicals also require performance conventions other than those of integration or realism. They therefore need to be analysed effectively and positively; from the perspective of what they are rather than what they are not. This provides a challenge to the construction of 'realism' in musical theatre performance, and its correlation with the trope of 'integration' in its history and textual analysis. Simultaneously the diversity of form and content observable in musical theatre raises the question of how it entertains its audiences. Instead of relying only on integration there is juxtaposition, reflexivity, parody, alienation and camp to be considered in many musical theatre performances.

In her seminal study of film music, *Unheard Melodies*, Claudia Gorbman asks

What is music doing, and how does it do it? ... What and how does music signify with the images and events of a story film? ... How does music in film narration create a *point of experience* ... for the spectator?²³

The point of experience Gorbman refers to is important in analysing the processes by which audiences identify with performers or characters and empathise with their situations. However, the point of experience is also important when considering the ability of musical theatre to create irony or parody, to present complex webs of divergent signs for comic or political effect, or to create sensation, all of which

²² Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business* (Carbondale, 2005).

²³ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 2.

might be factors in the process of entertaining. Several of the questions Gorbman poses in relation to film music are addressed here in relation to musical theatre, provoking analysis of the text not as integrated or realistic, but as diverse, reflexive and distancing. What is music doing and how does it do it? What and how does music signify with the images and events of a live theatrical performance? How do different musical theatre texts create different points of experience for audiences that contribute to sensations of pleasure or being entertained? These are the questions that provide the starting point for this book.

Chapter 1 explores signification in the musical theatre text, Chapter 2 traces the signification of vocal timbre and genre, Chapter 3 focuses specifically on questions of integration and distance, while Chapter 4 explores how ironic and parodic or at least disruptive meanings are created by juxtapositions in different parts of the texts. Chapters 5 and 6 begin to move away from the ways the work's structures contribute to pleasure or bliss, to focus on the performance text. Chapter 5 explores non-linear constructions in the written and performed texts that can be read both as linear narratives and complex meta-narratives, thus revealing multiple points of experience for audiences. Chapter 6 considers the issue of altered musical and dramatic time in relation to the psychological realism of performers. It is in these chapters that cognitive neuroscience is introduced to begin to account for the diversity of stimuli that audiences are reading and blending to produce a plural or complex understanding of the musical theatre performance. This leads, in Chapters 7 and 8, to a questioning of the experience of attendance at live performances. These final two chapters see musical theatre performances as events and narratives that are simultaneously understood, felt and shared, individually and communally. They build on both cognitive and theoretical frameworks to propose ways in which musical theatre entertains its audiences.

Entertainment

As established above, one of the starting points for this research is the popularity and ability of musical theatre to entertain. In this book I make a common-sense assumption about popularity based on commercial or critical success, gained through the entertainment of audiences. This provides the basis from which to explore how performances are constructed and enacted so that audiences might be entertained.

There appear to be several strands in the literature on entertainment. The first takes a post-Marxist perspective and places entertainment in an ideological

framework in a binary separation from art. In Europe Molière was a catalyst for the separation of art and entertainment.²⁴ He elaborated a definition of what the theatre should do: it should provide pleasure and the arbiter should be the people.²⁵ This separation still provides the theoretical foundation for entertainment being held in a binary relationship with art. In this ideological framework entertainment is also linked with leisure time in a binary opposition to work that relies on a notion of ‘mass entertainment’ provided by specialists for ‘the people’. This work builds on the work of the post-Marxist, Theodor Adorno.

Adorno explored the dialectical relationship of art and entertainment, elite and popular, highbrow and lowbrow in his writings about ‘the culture industry’ and ‘the entertainment industry’. His work was based on the structural analysis of popular cultural forms that led him to believe that the repetitive and formulaic character of cultural goods made them cosy, predictable and capable of answering to the individual’s need for security and the producer’s need for predictability in the market.²⁶ In this argument, amusement goods are designed to achieve sensation and consequently they insulate the recipient from social awareness. The possibility of resistance is destroyed and pleasure becomes a form of helplessness.²⁷

Brooks McNamara, in the introduction to the 1994 *Popular Entertainments Issue of The Drama Review* defines ‘[t]raditional popular entertainments’ as consisting of ‘live amusements aimed at a broad, relatively “unsophisticated” audience’ created for profit by professional showmen.²⁸ This demonstrates that the same ideological framework was still being used to promote the binary separation between entertainment and art, low and high, that Adorno had outlined. This is one of the frameworks that this book challenges, not by engaging with it, but by exploring alternatives.

The second strand of thought relates to Schechner’s spiralling braid linking efficacy and entertainment. Richard Dyer argues that

while pleasure has surely always been intended and taken in artefacts and performances, the idea of entertainment is distinctive in its emphasis on the primacy of such pleasure, ahead or even instead of practical, sacred, instructional or political aims and functions.²⁹

Perhaps most musical theatre performances exist towards the entertainment end of this polarity, but Schechner asserts that no performance is either purely efficacious

²⁴ Richard Dyer, ‘The Idea of Entertainment’, in *Only Entertainment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 5–9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁶ Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London and New York, 2003), p. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁸ Brooks McNamara, ‘Popular Entertainments Issue: An Introduction’, *The Drama Review*, 18/1 (1974): p. 3.

²⁹ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, p. 1.

or purely entertaining. He argues instead that each performance will have some features of efficacy and some of entertainment, and more importantly, that different vantage points can affect how the performance is perceived.³⁰ Although this strand provides a continuum along which entertainment and efficacy are connected, musical theatre performances are still seen within an ideology of social functionality, against which they are denigrated.

A third strand of thought explores pleasure and *jouissance* in the text, its gaps and excesses. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, identifies two types of text: the texts of pleasure and bliss.³¹ The text of pleasure ‘contains, fills, grants euphoria’.³² It is linked with a comfortable practice and is typical of ‘readable texts’. The pleasurable text is bound up with the consistency of the subject, confident in its values, of comfort, of expansiveness, of satisfaction.³³ This is a different subject than the alienated, isolated and manipulated subject of Adorno’s discourse.

The text of bliss is referred to in some translations as *jouissance* and explained as relating to the sexual and the sensual. It is a ‘text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts ... unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language’.³⁴ There is an excess in this text, created by events or moments that exceed social or structural function.³⁵ This text is outside pleasure and criticism and appears in the trace of a cut, in a ‘dialectical moment of synthesis’, as a ‘living contradiction’.³⁶ Barthes explains that pleasure and bliss are parallel forces, and that a way of establishing their opposition is that ‘pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot’.³⁷

While not wanting to propose a simplistic correlation of pleasure and bliss with types of entertainment, there may be some sort of parallel with the etymologies of entertainment. Rick Altman explores two etymologies of the term. The first relates entertainment to the French ‘entretenir’ meaning ‘to keep up, to maintain, to foster or to feed’. This suggests connections such that ‘let me entertain you’ might parallel ‘let me hold your interest’ or ‘create a bond between you and me’.³⁸ This version of entertainment holds the interest and draws the spectator in, fosters and

³⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York, 1988 [1977]), pp. 130–1.

³¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York, 1975 [1973]), p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³³ Roland Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’, in *Image, Music, Text* (London, 1977), pp. 179–89.

³⁴ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁸ Altman, *Genre: The Musical*, p. 175.

feeds her interest. It may be pleasurable or joyful, perhaps building an empathetic identification with character and plot.

The alternative etymology derives from the French 'divertir', related to divertimento and divertissement, meaning to divert attention or take one's mind off other things. This perhaps explains the alternative understanding of the word entertainment as related to sensationalism, fun, the parodic, spectacle, comedy and camp. This entertainment is not produced through a process of drawing the spectator into an empathetic relationship with plot and character, but through difference, juxtaposition or excess. This may be the text that is denigrated as 'only entertainment', but it may also relate to the disruptions and excesses of the text of bliss. It can also relate to ideas about utopianism, not in the production of models of utopian worlds, but in the feelings performances embody in their representational and non-representational signs.

Richard Dyer critiques the *mise-en-scène* approach to analysis of film musicals where the non-representational signs are assumed to be functions of the representational, and instead suggests analysis of the non-representational signs in their cultural and historical specificity.³⁹ He includes colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody and camerawork as non-representational signs that code emotions.⁴⁰ In this thesis the utopian sensibility results from drawing attention to the contradictions and thus to the gap between what is and what could be. What film musicals do, he proposes, is to manage these contradictions so that superficially they seem to disappear.⁴¹ The cracks that appear in the attempt at integration in a film like *Funny Face*, which contains contradictions between art and entertainment and between numbers-as-escapism and narrative-as-reality, offer a sense of a utopian possibility. Contradictions can also be identified in musical theatre between comedy and music or between narrative and number, as well as between representational and non-representational signs.

Caryl Flinn's use of the term 'utopia' is derived from Dyer's. She looks for the contradictions, disparities and gaps in multidisciplinary performance as a source for 'utopian performatives'.⁴² She differs from Dyer, however, in that the utopias she proposes are created in reception rather than in production.⁴³ She also insists that such gaps, or the representational and non-representational elements that produce them, are not necessarily subversive, and that excess and utopian thought are not necessarily progressive. Rather they offer alternative agendas, and even then only impressionistically since they are never represented but only glimpsed and alluded to.⁴⁴

³⁹ Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in *Only Entertainment*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴² Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia* (Princeton, 1992), p. 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 155–6.

Jill Dolan also glimpses ‘utopian performatives’ in the gaps that are subjectively read, in this case in the experience of live performances.⁴⁵ She suggests that ‘utopian performatives’ are moments in which attention is drawn in ways that lift everyone slightly above the present. They are hopeful moments that are ‘emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense’.⁴⁶ These utopian performatives are related in her theorising to ‘Bertolt Brecht’s notion of *gestus*, actions that crystallise social relations’,⁴⁷ and they offer spectators space for critical contemplation. Here again, rather than looking for utopias as representations of a better world, she looks for moments which spring from a ‘complex alchemy of form and content, context and location ... as process, as never finished gestures’.⁴⁸ This thinking on the power of entertainment, whether experienced as pleasure or bliss, and whether observed in the written text, the performance text or the experience of the performance by the audience, will provide the basis for the arguments that follow. The experience of empathy with characters and the experience of ironic detachment, through meta-narratives or through camp spectacle, contribute to the sensations musical theatre performance elicits. So entertainment will be read here in relation to the pleasure of the readable text and the bliss of the disrupted utopian moments perceived in its discontinuities.

Finally, in musical theatre performance, there is also the sound of the voice, about which Barthes writes in ‘The Grain of the Voice’.⁴⁹ Notwithstanding the imprecision of Barthes’ writing⁵⁰ this essay provides a catalyst that draws the argument back from the written text and the physical gestures of the performance text to the vocal and musical articulations of the corporeal and embodied performance text. Although there is debate about how ‘the grain’ is to be interpreted in practice, it serves here to highlight the importance of the embodied performance text and the vocal delivery of song in discussions of pleasure, bliss and, above all, entertainment in musical theatre.

Conclusion

Setting aside the role of marketing, there must be features in the construction of musical theatre performances that allow them to engage and possibly manipulate

⁴⁵ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, 2005), p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’.

⁵⁰ Noted in Dominic Symonds, ‘The Corporeality of Musical Expression: “The Grain of the Voice” and the Actor-Musician’, *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 1/2 (2007): pp. 167–81, which also refers to Nicholas Till, ‘Roland Barthes on the Voice in Modernity’, which identifies a passage in Barthes’ ‘Lesson in Writing’ as equally ‘problematic’.

the emotional attachment of their audiences and so achieve their enormous popularity. What are the features of musical theatre that lead to its ability to stimulate emotional engagement, to move and to entertain? Some theories of entertainment have been referred to above, that provide a foundation from which to progress.

This study will draw on the existing canon of musical theatre works to provide examples that effectively exemplify and problematise integration, realism and entertainment. The majority of the works studied here have been performed in London or New York in the last 30 years. There are some unlikely inclusions; a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta is included since their works are still performed and are canonically argued to be influential in the development of musical theatre. This inclusion allows exploration of the consistency of practices in the relationship of music, lyrics and narrative from a number of works across the history of musical theatre. A Brecht/Weill opera is included to focus the discussion of debates about *gestus* and distance. Compilation and revue style shows such as *Mamma Mia* and *We Will Rock You* are analysed not from the perspective of economics and globalisation but in light of their production of audience identification and pleasure.

The exploration begins by identifying how signification works in musical theatre texts through the interaction of music with lyrics and narrative in the production of plot and character. Then the trope of integration is critiqued, which opens up a discourse about the diversity and complexity of narrative constructions in musical theatre texts. The focus moves then to the exploration of texts in performance to challenge the construction of realism and to explore reflexivity and distance in performances of musicals with and without linear narratives. Finally, musicals that sit outside the canon of integration are analysed to propose ways of theorising revue, biographical and compilation musicals in relation to musical identification and entertainment. Flowing through these arguments are references to discourses of the singing voice, first in its aesthetic signifying role, later as corporeal embodiment of emotion, and finally as producer of identification and cognitive empathy.

Given the diversity of types of musical or sub-genres outlined at the start of this chapter there can be no clear sense that any particular mode of construction is entirely responsible for the ability of musical theatre texts to reach out to and entertain all its audiences. However, there are cognitive and physiological responses to music and voice that might play a part in the representation or stimulation of emotional attachment or identification. Mirror neurons and vocal touch have an effect on empathy which may contribute to the text being read as 'realistic' by its audiences. At the same time, and conversely, disruption and excess might contribute to a Barthesian construction of *jouissance*. So 'realism' is a term to be challenged and deconstructed, even though entertainment may result partly from the empathy created through a linear narrative and a particular construction of realism. Alternatively, *jouissance* may be the partially glimpsed result of a deconstructed or alienated narrative.

