
A Problem Like Maria

**A PROBLEM
LIKE MARIA**

Gender and Sexuality
in the American Musical

by Stacy Wolf

Ann Arbor

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is for Jill

Preface

This is a book about women and musicals. More specifically, this is a book about musicals from a feminist, lesbian perspective. It asks how someone can be a feminist and also be an ardent fan of musicals. How can it be that so many women who were raised on musicals or who became fans of musicals once they were exposed to them in college or during visits to New York City or through film versions—how can it be that so many of them adore musicals even as they consider themselves feminists and/or identify as lesbian? How can it be that some of them came of age and of identity while leading double lives—reading and discussing feminist theory and doing political activism by day and learning tap routines and singing “That Terrific Rainbow” from *Pal Joey* in skimpy costumes by night?

This book began with my own curiosity about the passion I had for musicals in spite of my politics. As a feminist who came of age in the 1970s and early 1980s, I believed that all of my pleasures should be appropriately feminist; that I should identify with strong, non-stereotypical women characters and reject representations that relied too heavily on a woman needing a man. Although I never felt consciously pressured by this ideology, I was well aware that the musicals I adored and in which I frequently performed featured women who only seemed to sing about love, who needed men to fulfill their dreams, and who hardly seemed like good role models for my growing feminist sensibilities. My secret life was about musicals, about my embarrassing but undeniable attachment to them, about the absolute seductiveness of their song and dance.

Eventually I learned to accept these apparent inconsistencies in my tastes and pleasures, and once I came out publicly as a feminist

musical theater fan, many feminist and lesbian friends and colleagues admitted that they too felt this way. (We were aware, of course, of gay men's well-established and well-known connection to musicals.) So began my journey to figure out how these contradictions could exist. Attachment to musicals seemed to be generationally and historically specific. It seemed to be invited by the musical's singing and dancing and by its availability in many forms—live on Broadway, recorded on cast albums, visible on television and sometimes on film. And the musical seemed to offer connections to its spectators, especially socially marginalized spectators, who often interpret performances in surprising, unconventional ways.

In an effort to understand these contradictions of identity, politics, practice, and pleasure and to figure out the musical's ineluctable power, I turn to mid-twentieth-century musicals—classics born of the art form's "Golden Age" that continue to see high school, community, and university theater productions, as well as Broadway revivals—and to four women who starred in them: Mary Martin (1913–90), Ethel Merman (1909–84), Julie Andrews (1935–), and Barbra Streisand (1942–). These four women held and hold great mainstream appeal; they were and are stars. At the same time, these women are "lesbian" idols.

As I researched the lives and performances of these women, looked at and listened to the musicals in which they starred, and explored the ways in which those musicals were received, I found that musicals can be seen in at least two ways: first, as they generally have been seen—as enormously popular sources of mainstream entertainment, sometimes containing liberal messages of tolerance, providing conservative representations of women and heterosexual couples; and second, as sources of pleasure and power for feminist and lesbian spectators. In this book, I neither reject musicals for their seemingly inherent conservatism nor celebrate the women in musicals simply for their virtuosic performances but rather show that musicals offer complex and sometimes contradictory meanings. Desiring spectators, then, can readily interpret musicals in ways that stress women's power and de-emphasize heterosexual romance. The wonder of the musical is its ability to do double duty—to promote conservative values *and* to provide empowering representations of women, sometimes simultaneously. As a form of popular culture, the musical by definition appeals to mainstream values. Still, like many forms of mainstream culture, musicals can contain both explicit and covert

allusions to queerness. Musicals are necessarily political, even as they appear to be only entertainment.

While composers and lyricists are often cited as the authors of musicals, it is the performers who endure in the cultural imagination. With voices recorded on original cast albums or soundtracks, photographs preserved on record liners or videocassettes or DVDs, and gestures captured on film, the images of performers in musicals outlast the run of a play or the release of a film. In this way, the four female subjects of this book have become icons of American culture. The American musical may be just as powerful for those spectators who come to know and love it solely through its manifestations far from Broadway and perhaps never even witness it live.

This book explores the lives, careers, and performances of four of the most famous women in American musical theater and film history, reinterpreting these women from a feminist, lesbian perspective. In the 1950s and early 1960s, each of these women portrayed a particular version of femininity that was innovative in its time and that can be read now from a feminist and lesbian point of view. Each reached the pinnacle of musical theater and film stardom, but in very different roles. Martin's "tomboy," Merman's "butch Jewish mother," Andrews's "femme," and Streisand's "queer Jewess" each presented new and diverse images of women for mid-twentieth-century audiences and continue to function as "lesbian" representations today.

The roles, careers, and star personalities of the four women overlap in striking ways. Both Merman and Martin played Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun*; both Martin and Andrews played Maria in *The Sound of Music*; Merman, Martin, and Streisand each played Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*; Martin, Streisand, and Andrews each performed in cross-dressed roles (*Peter Pan*, *Yentl*, *Victor/Victoria*). Merman and Martin so dominated musical theater in the 1940s and 1950s that their names are synonymous with the genre. Andrews and Streisand both debuted on Broadway and have since made blockbuster musical films and less successful nonmusical ones. Across generations, Merman and Streisand—both dark; "ethnic"; multiply mated; and brash—have reputations as difficult to work with; Martin and Andrews—both blond; graceful; seemingly ageless; and finding true love in the second, rumored-to-be-gay, manager husband—present themselves, whatever the reality, as being delightful cast members.

All four women exemplify musical theatrical or filmic stardom of

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their generation, all exhibit indescribable charisma, and all invite lesbian interpretations. Martin, Merman, Andrews, and Streisand, viewed and heard together, present a range of performances of femininity: the blond and the dark, the lithe androgynous and the curvy Jewess, soprano and alto, lilting coloratura and textured belt. By analyzing the lead women's ranges and their differences, this book opens up possible ways of imaging and hearing "lesbian."

The introduction situates the project historically, critically, and theoretically. It takes the concepts of performance, context, and audience and explains how they are mutually dependent and how each contributes to the meanings of a performance. Context, for example, focuses on representations of women in midcentury American culture. From *Peyton Place* to *Queen for a Day*, from *I Love Lucy* to *Gone with the Wind*, theater, film, and television tend to feature women as wives, mothers, ingenues, or temptresses. In contrast, musicals—replete with singing and dancing, with women stars and feisty female characters—often present quite a different view of womanhood. The "audience" in this book refers to a "lesbian spectator," which is a position occupied by desire, not by identity; by a willfulness (which anyone can possess) to see and hear musicals from a feminist, lesbian perspective. The "performance" includes the various musicals and their theatrical conventions, as well as the specific performances of the four women, both on stage and film and in their offstage lives as stars.

The next four chapters take up each of the four women, roughly in chronological order as based on the key musicals discussed in each chapter. Although Merman was older than Martin and debuted on Broadway almost a decade earlier, *South Pacific* and *Peter Pan* opened before Merman's performance in *Gypsy*. In addition, it is important to understand Merman's dark, butch, seemingly Jewish persona in relation to what was much closer to the norm of 1950s womanhood—blond, petite, sweet Mary Martin. The chapter on Andrews concerns her performances in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Streisand's chapter moves into the 1960s, focusing on the film version of *Funny Girl*.

Chapter 1 investigates Mary Martin. The friendly girl from Texas was not only a star of enormous proportion but also half of a powerful producing team that brought *South Pacific*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Sound of Music* to the Broadway stage. Martin's marriage to Richard Halliday, noted by many to be a queer "passing marriage," legitimated his

control over her career and her wardrobe and gave her the freedom to play feisty, unconventional women who eschewed traditional heterosexual romance. This chapter focuses on her roles in *South Pacific* and *Peter Pan*, reading her as a tomboy who holds great appeal for lesbian spectators.

Chapter 2 explores the life and career of Ethel Merman. The undisputed queen of musical theater and a great belter whose stance was described as “ramrod straight,” “the Merm” had a strong, undeniably masculine style that calls up a butch lesbian performance. Although she was often thought to be Jewish and although her real name was Zimmermann, Merman was not Jewish. Still, her public reception and her self-construction rely on stereotypes of Jewishness. This chapter includes a reading of *Gypsy*, in which Merman played the quintessential pushy Jewish stage mother at the same time the stereotype was gaining visibility in fiction and on film and television. It argues that Merman-as-Rose resists the bourgeois heteronormativity of the Jewish mother role in music, character, and narrative and provides queer pleasure for lesbian spectators.

Julie Andrews, the subject of chapter 3, may be British in origin and speech, but she has come to represent the all-American girl. This chapter reads her through lesbian desire as the “femme,” arguing for the validity of the visible femme—the femme without a butch—in lesbian studies. Andrews achieved fame by starring in the “Cinderella stories” of Lerner and Loewe—*My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*—on Broadway and in *Cinderella*, the only musical that Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote for television. Even in these avowedly heterosexual musicals, Andrews emerges as singular and available for “femme” lesbian interpretations. I examine her gestural vocabulary and musical habits in television specials, including her award-winning performance with Carol Burnett at Carnegie Hall and several television specials that she hosted.

Barbra Streisand might be said to define superstardom in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Her career on stage, in films (both as star and as director), on television, and in music continues to flourish forty years after her Broadway debut as Miss Marmelstein in *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* and her two critically acclaimed television shows in the early 1960s, “My Name is Barbra” and “Color Me Barbra.” Streisand’s Jewishness in body, face, voice, and gesture not only calls up the idea of Jewish femininity but actually came to define it. Chap-

ter 4 focuses on Streisand's Broadway and film portrayals of Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*. Streisand's performance refers to and remakes prevailing heterosexual stereotypes of Jewish women—the belle juive, the Jewish mother, and the Jewish American Princess. As a character extraordinarily talented, rare, uncompromising, peculiarly seductive, and ultimately without a man, Fanny played by Streisand invites lesbian readings.

The Sound of Music could be called a lesbian ur-text, as chapter 5 demonstrates. If Andrews in *The Sound of Music* suggests innocence and sweetness to mainstream culture, she represents freedom, power, and charm to many lesbian spectators. This chapter includes an ethnographic section to investigate why and how the film of *The Sound of Music* is so significant to some lesbians' coming-out stories. The different interpretations of the film exhibit a wide range of uses and pleasures. The chapter considers the Broadway play version to show how the character of Maria invokes lesbian desires and how the whole musical exhibits a kind of lesbian sensibility. This reading attends both to Martin's personal and financial investment in the project (it was her idea, and it took years to come to fruition) and to her performance, through the evidence of photographs, the cast recording, reviews, and Martin's autobiography. The chapter also examines the differences in the movie version and Andrews's performance to account for Andrews's status as an icon among lesbian spectators. *The Sound of Music's* narrative hinges on the arrival of an outsider who changes the children and then the whole household. If this outsider is imagined as a lesbian, this well-loved film produces strikingly amusing and very persuasive lesbian readings.

The women in this book and the musicals in which they starred continue to sustain those of us who grew up on them, who found them later, or who are being introduced to them now. My project here is to account for meanings and uses as yet unarticulated, for pleasures as yet unrevealed. Like all forms of culture and representation, the American musical offers ways of being, and it suggests that the best being happens through song and dance.

Acknowledgments

This book began when I was driving from Madison to Tallahassee for my first job as an assistant professor. As the air grew warmer and heavier, I contemplated my new life, listening to taped cast albums of *Funny Girl* and *The Sound of Music*. At one point—I think it was when I was singing “My Man” at the top of my lungs somewhere in South Carolina—it struck me as highly ironic that I, a freshly minted Ph.D. in feminist performance studies, would be so in love with musicals and so dependent on them for my sustenance. Since that drive in the car, many people have helped me to make sense of that peculiar yet telling moment. These words of thanks cannot begin to express how many people have supported me through this project.

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(December 1997): 493–509; and “The Queer Pleasures of Mary Martin and Broadway: *The Sound of Music* as a Lesbian Musical,” *Modern Drama* 39 (spring 1996): 51–63.

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Mary Martin (1913–90)

Leave It to Me: 1938

One Touch of Venus: 1943

South Pacific: 1949

Annie Get Your Gun: touring company 1947; television 1957

Peter Pan: 1954; television 1960

The Sound of Music: 1959

Jennie: 1963

Hello, Dolly!: London production 1965

I Do! I Do!: 1966

Ethel Merman (1909–84)

Girl Crazy: 1930

Anything Goes: 1934

Annie Get Your Gun: 1946; revival 1966

Call Me Madam: 1950

Gypsy: 1959

Hello, Dolly!: later in Broadway run 1964; revival 1970

Julie Andrews (1935–)

The Boyfriend: 1954

My Fair Lady: 1956

Cinderella: television 1957

Camelot: 1960

Mary Poppins: film 1964

The Sound of Music: film 1965

Star!: film 1968

Victor/Victoria: film 1982

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Barbra Streisand (1942–)

I Can Get It for You Wholesale: 1962

Funny Girl: 1964; film 1968

Hello, Dolly!: film 1969

Yentl: film 1983

Other Musical Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein Cited

Carousel: 1945

The King and I: 1951

Flower Drum Song: 1958

Other Musicals Noted

Show Boat: 1927

Babes in Arms: 1937

Cabin in the Sky: 1940

Carmen Jones: 1943

Guys and Dolls: 1950

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn: 1951

Kismet: 1953

By the Beautiful Sea: 1954

Damn Yankees: 1955

Candide: 1956

The Music Man: 1957

Once Upon a Mattress: 1959

She Loves Me: 1963

Fade Out—Fade In: 1964

On a Clear Day You Can See Forever: 1965

The Apple Tree: 1966

Hallelujah, Baby!: 1967