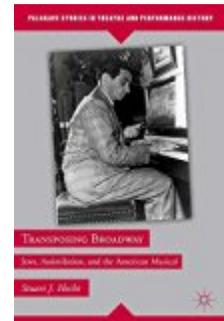


Stuart J. Hecht. *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical*. New York: Palgrave, 2012. 240 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-11327-5.

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Published on H-Judaic (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



## Jews and Surrogate Jews on Broadway and the “Cost” of Assimilation

“From the 1910s on, America’s Broadway musical was developed primarily by Jews” (p. 1). So sounds the stirring opening salvo of Stuart J. Hecht’s social and literary survey of the Broadway genre, *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical*. Before long the thesis arrives: “This book’s thesis is that Jews shaped the musical, aside from its entertainment value, to represent their grappling with the promise of the American Dream and the methods of assimilation that might help one achieve it” (p. 4). Future chapters do occasionally address this thesis, but with two notable exceptions, the songwriter Irving Berlin and choreographer-director Jerome Robbins, the long list of Jewish composers, lyricists, librettists, and directors who developed, shaped, and grappled with the American Dream and Jewish assimilation are largely absent from the pages that follow.

Instead the central protagonists in Hecht’s story are non-Jewish characters who serve as surrogates for the Jews who created them. In rare cases, a musical under discussion includes a historical Jewish character such as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* (1964) and Leo Frank in *Parade* (1998), and we also meet fictional Jews, most notably the characters in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). For the most part, however, the characters who inhabit *Transposing Broadway*, whether Irish (*Irene* [1919], *Sally* [1920], *Little Nellie Kelly* [1922]), African American (*Dreamgirls* [1981], *The Color Purple* [2005]), Hispanic (*In the Heights* [2008]), gay (somewhat marginalized with one page devoted to *La Cage aux Folles* [1983]), or Jewish (*Funny Girl*,

*Fiddler, Ragtime* [1998], *Parade, The Producers* [2001]), are either stand-ins for the Jewish creators who invented fictional characters from scratch or borrowed them from earlier sources, and as time progresses, the shows Hecht explores are increasingly populated by characters created by a later generation who share the ethnic identities of their respective non-Jewish characters, albeit inspired by the Jewish characters who paved the way.

Hecht’s approach thus markedly contrasts with the stunningly long parade of Jewish players offered in Stewart F. Lane’s recent *Jews on Broadway: An Historical Survey of Performers, Playwrights, Composers, Lyricists and Producers* (2011) (reviewed in H-Judaic, August, 2012). As Hecht interprets the American musical, outsiders struggling to assimilate and achieve the American Dream, from Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun* from 1946 (book by Dorothy Fields and lyrics and music by Berlin, both Jewish writers) to Harold Hill in *The Music Man* from 1957 (with book, lyrics, and music by Meredith Willson, who was not Jewish), are products of a genre that was “developed primarily by Jews.” In this view of the musical, nearly anyone can serve as a Jew, even Fred Astaire, provided he was assimilated into the mainstream of American culture: “It was almost like Astaire was himself Jewish beneath the relaxed urbanity” and “someone the immigrant might himself become” (p. 49).

As an assimilated Jewish historian of the genre that Hecht credits as “developed primarily by Jews,” I recall in my impressionable youth taking pride in what Jews had

achieved in this field. At the same time, although musicals such as *Fiddler* and *Cabaret* (1966) struck a cultural chord, it never occurred to me, even as an adult, to view assimilated outsiders such as Annie Oakley, Harold Hill, or Fred Astaire as surrogate Jews. Admittedly, Hecht's negative take on Jewish assimilation took me aback, for example, when he regularly makes statements such as "the pressure to assimilate" without taking into account the willful desire to assimilate (p. 194). A sentence that begins on an apparently positive note, "ultimately the Dream was largely realized," concludes somewhat ominously with the admonitory question, "but at what cost?" (p. 61). With rising polemic intensity at every turn Hecht invariably disparages assimilation in favor of acculturation, a term also introduced early in the book, which in contrast to the selling out, the "cost," of assimilation, constitutes a desirable state that preserves one's identity and adopts "only the outer trappings of being American when participating in public life" (p. 2).

Unfortunately, Hecht's criteria for Broadway social progress leave no room to contemplate dramatic or artistic quality. Consequently, words, music, and dramatic expression receive short shrift. For Hecht, musicals are primarily social documents judged almost exclusively by the extent to which their stories and characters pay or manage to avoid the exorbitant cost of assimilation. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hecht puts forward *Fiddler on the Roof* as "one of the most important American musicals ever produced" (p. 185), a musical that eschews assimilation and instead "demands recognition and respect for difference" (p. 186). In contrast to some of the shows Hecht praises for their social merits, *Fiddler*, coincidentally, was well received artistically and commercially and has long been recognized as a milestone of Broadway history by most criteria. For Hecht, however, the aesthetic value of *Fiddler*, *In the Heights*, and *The Color Purple* is at best secondary. The central basis for their success as musicals is that they challenge the goal of assimilation and offer "an inversion of the assimilation formula" (p. 197).

Even *Porgy and Bess* (1935), although described as "magnificent," ultimately fails because it offers only an inauthentic and disrespectful "white man's vision of impoverished black life" (p. 187). At the same time Hecht criticizes *Porgy and Bess*, we don't hear too much about the fact that *The Color Purple* also plays on stereotypes or that its creative team was racially integrated (the book writer Marsha Norman and lyricist-composer Allee Willis were white and its other lyricist-composer Stephen Bray and the composer Brenda Russell were black). Although neither *Porgy* nor *Bess* end up being assimilated

within their self-contained racial culture, and although *Porgy and Bess* has for several generations been widely regarded as a great work of American theatrical culture, in Hecht's social history of the musical the work fails. Whenever one criterion of value opposes the other, social meaning invariably trumps art.

Readers less versed in Broadway lore should be forewarned that *Transposing Broadway* contains more than a few errors of various degrees of egregiousness. For starters, Hecht's distinction between book musicals and musical comedies assumes erroneously that musical comedies are not also book musicals. In fact, in Hecht's short list of eight canonic musicals that first appeared between 1945 and 1965, five would be considered musical comedies by any Broadway historian I can think of. In incorrectly labeling the early *Watch Your Step* (1914) and *Shuffle Along* (1921) as revues he is in good company, but it needs to be said that these shows too are book musicals (and musical comedies as well), which, to oversimplify, means the shows have dialogue and stories as opposed to sketches and skits. Surely the "jazzy blue note" Hecht refers to in *Oklahoma!* (1943) belongs to "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" rather than the title song. The first lines of a song, for example, "There's a Place for Us," is not necessarily the same as its title, in this case "Somewhere."

By uncritically repeating Jewish novelist Philip Roth's quip in *Operation Shylock* (1993) that credits a Jew, Berlin, for turning Easter into a fashion show in his song "Easter Parade," Hecht ignores the fact that displays of fashion in New York's annual Easter parade were a signature event for decades before Berlin captured this event in song. While the plot summaries, which constitute a major component of Hecht's book, are generally (albeit by no means invariably) accurate, readers familiar with the stage version of *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* and not the film, or those familiar with both, will wonder why Hecht neglects to clarify that he is using the film rather than the stage version as his source (since his subject is the Broadway stage musical readers would logically assume the latter). To set the record straight, Rosemary introduces "I Believe in You" in the 1967 film, but not in the original 1961 stage version.

The most substantial, thoughtful, and provocative chapter is Hecht's detailed comparative "tale of two musicals" from 1998, *Ragtime*, a hit based on the panorama of fictional and real characters in the years before World War I so vividly captured in E. L. Doctorow's strikingly imaginative 1975 novel, and *Parade*, the tragic and un-

fortunately true story of Leo Frank, the Jewish manager of a pencil factory in Atlanta, who was almost certainly falsely convicted of murder in 1913 and lynched by an angry mob in 1915. The latter show, despite its Tony Award-winning book by Alfred Uhry and Tony Award-winning score by Jason Robert Brown and outstanding direction by Hal Prince, abruptly closed after eighty-four performances. In his attempt to answer the important question of why these musicals faced such different fates, Hecht blames the failure of *Parade* on its audiences and the genre itself. Broadway scholar Ethan Mordden goes even further in *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen* (2004), a source not included in Hecht's bibliography, when he characterizes *Parade* as "the most appallingly tragic story in musical-theatre history" and the only musical "that has stirred real anger in people," and raises the possibility that Brown, Uhry, and Prince "created theatre too powerful for theatergoers" (pp. 277-78). Although he repeats the frequently held misperception that "Frank was finally exonerated by the state of Georgia" (p. 160) in the 1980s,

when in fact Frank was pardoned but emphatically not exonerated, Hecht offers a rich discussion of how musicals can convey social meaning, both in this provocative and disturbing show and in its more palatable contemporary. In contrast with most of his treatments of other shows, Hecht's discussion of *Ragtime* and *Parade* also offers at least some meaningful consideration of the role music plays in a musical.

In *Ragtime* the Jewish immigrant Tateh experiences great financial success and upward social mobility. In short, he assimilates and achieves the American Dream. The protagonist of *Parade* is falsely tried and convicted for murder and dies an ignominious death. The trial did lead directly to the establishment of the Anti-Defamation League as a branch of the B'nai B'rith, but of course this positive action came too late to save Frank. By the time readers complete this worthwhile if somewhat one-dimensional survey, it is not too much of a challenge to figure out which of these shows Hecht would rather see.

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**Citation:** Geoffrey Block. Review of Stuart J. Hecht, *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

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