From revolution to revolt in theatre artistry: A shift in American attitude from Vietnam to Watergate reflected in the musicals "Chicago" and "Hair"

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FROM REVOLUTION TO REVOLT IN THEATRE

ARTISTRY: A SHIFT IN AMERICAN ATTITUDE

FROM VIETNAM TO WATERGATE

REFLECTED IN THE MUSICALS

CHICAGO AND HAIR

by

Erin Auerbach

Bachelor of Fine Arts
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

From Revolution To Revolt in Theatre
Artistry: A Shift in American Attitude
From Vietnam To Watergate
Reflected in the Musicals
*Hair* and *Chicago*

by

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This thesis traces how the artistry of the Broadway musical reflects the condition of the American attitude as influenced by the events of its time. From two historical events, Vietnam to Watergate, there is a shift in attitude evident in two pieces of musical theater, *Hair* and *Chicago*. What is fascinating is that both Vietnam and Watergate are tragic events: one because of the unnecessary loss of life, and the other because of a loss of faith. *Hair* is a revolutionary play that indicates the survival of spirit and compassion through rock music and lyrics that reflect the culture of its characters. *Chicago*, however, treats murder with a tongue-in-cheek attitude in its seductive dances and vaudeville acts, luring an audience into inhumanity. Commercial art thrives on plays that appeal to its target audience as proven by today's successful runs of *Rent* (a musical often compared to *Hair*) and the revival of *Chicago*.

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

Musicals, comedies and dramas told mostly through song and dance, are often a highly valid form of commercial art, and that art is influenced by society. This is evident in the shows *Hair* and *Chicago* as influenced by Vietnam and Watergate, respectively. Society has a dramatic influence on the art it produces and how people respond to it. Theater is full of social commentary, yet musicals are often scorned for being a more frivolous form of theatre arts. In many cases this criticism is valid; however, there are indeed times when musicals have just as much importance as the so-called straight play.

Musicals can also achieve depth while providing engrossing entertainment. Entertainment is defined by *Random House Word Menu* as, "diverting, amusing, and engaging public performance".¹ The entertainment that *Hair* and *Chicago* provide allows the audience member to walk away with more than a good time. There is some food for thought to be consumed in both musicals. Through melody and repetition, songs are remembered far more easily than spoken words. This is important to comprehend because the more one remembers, the more he or she can digest the message of the work. A song is sung and a dance is performed when mere words can no longer express the character's motivations or needs at that given moment.

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In Hair, when Claude sings, “Where Do I Go?,” the ballad’s melody helps the lyrics stick in the mind of the audience. As Claude ponders his moral obligations to his country (Should he go to Vietnam?) verses his moral obligations to himself (Should he run from the draft in protest of a war that he finds immoral?), the audience is given a tough question to consider.

In Chicago, the “Cell Block Tango” provides a humorous account of how six women wound up in prison for murder. The reasons range from the ludicrous: “If you pop that gum one more time, Bernie...and he did!”, to the vengefully scorned: “There were (my sister) Veronica and Charlie doing number seventeen- the spread eagle!”. The audience’s reaction to these women is not one of contempt or disdain, but one of humor and delight. Most people have been betrayed at one time or another, and most have been driven to distraction by people’s annoying habits and idiosyncrasies. The thought of actually committing a capital crime as result of them is a titillating, delicious thought that a jaded audience readily embraces, yet the show is a result of society’s influence, not an advocate of violence. In The Theatre of Revolt, Robert Brustein writes of Artaud’s theater of cruelty.

Artaud himself never advocates perversity, sadism, or violence in daily life. What he proposes is the theater serve as a harmless “outlet for repressions,” in much the same manner as the analysts couch: “I propose to bring back into the theater this elementary magical idea, taken up by modern psychoanalysts, which consists in effecting a patient’s cure by making him assume the apparent and exterior attitudes of the desired condition.”

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Chicago is an excellent outlet for a jaded society.

Both Hair and Chicago rely on traditional forms while using distinctly different innovations to woo their respective audiences. In All You Need Is Love: The Story of Popular Music, Tony Palmer writes:

Hair, in 1967, seemed a natural progression: it allied the integrated form with a new musical language...Hair was a revue. It was successful because of its glorious music, but also because the revue was such an old form it seemed new. 5

In its Broadway form (most of the book was eliminated from its original run at Papp’s Public Theater), Hair is a virtually bookless show that uses music to convey its message. There is nudity to show its flower children’s vulnerability and profanity to show their raw defiance. There is an unashamed honesty and freshness about it. Clive Barnes the New York Times wrote, “In fact, it has been made into the frankest show in town... a great many four letter words, such as love, are used freely”. 6

Chicago is also traditional in form as a series of vaudeville acts. Vaudeville is broad circus-like sketches that are usually comic in nature. Where Hair glows with warmth and honesty, Chicago shimmers with icy cynicism. It is murder as a metaphor for show business, the embracing of corruption running rampant in society; shady ladies, flashy lawyers and media all too willing to embrace their gory crimes to their gossip thirsty public. By telling the story in vaudeville acts, it is an account of the tainting of public morals and its decline into a three ring circus.
In his review of the original Broadway production, Edwin Wilson of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote:

Mr. Fosse is saying that the three elements of our society—the media, trial law and show business—have much in common. In their theatricality, their desire for sensationalism, and their emphasis on razzle dazzle they are inextricably intertwined. In our world, we turn criminals into heroes and heroines and dramatize their deeds to the point where we cannot tell fact from fiction. Crime becomes glamorous, no matter how rotten.

Dance is a vital ingredient to *Chicago* as well. In *Hoofing On Broadway*, Richard Kislan writes:

While show dancing has always been popular on the American stage its present ascendancy may be attributed to a true and deep artistic need to turn away from the written and spoken language that has generated so many of the lies of our time and make contact again with the more honest, primitive, and universal language that genuinely motivated movement affords. All who have encountered the promises of politicians, the contradictory claims of rival nations, or the just plain deception by a loved one know that in each case, the culprit, the agent of deception, has been words. To that public—those who no longer spontaneously believe what is said or trust what is read—*the incorruptible messages of the body represent an alternative form of communication to be cherished in life.*

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sought after in popular entertainment, and understood, valued and encouraged in theatrical art.⁸

The issue examined in this thesis is how and why these shows are reflections of the American attitude during Vietnam and after Watergate. Connecting Hair to Vietnam is simple and direct. The semblance of plot in Hair is tied together by a man's choice to go to war in Vietnam or stay at home (and dodge the draft). He is contending with the middle-class values he has been raised with against his own liberal feelings and self-righteousness. In broad historical context, Vietnam is a war that was fought on the principles of communism as a threat to the American capitalist way of life. The characters in Hair are hippies, flower children questioning the desires and motives that drive a capitalist society.

Hair has depth in the purity of its young souls. Though many would regard the characters as lost, the play makes the viewers question how bereft of soul Capitalistic America is in light of these good hearted youths who demand equality and reject avarice. Its protagonist, Claude, does recognize the possibility of squandering away his life as a drugged out hippy on the run from the law, but in the end, he acquiesces to duty and pays the ultimate price. Vietnam was a long painful war that tested man's inhumanity towards man -and himself, but the war was relatively young at the time of Hair, and it was not until 1973 until president Nixon pulled the last troops out of Southeast Asia.⁹

The correlation between Watergate and Chicago is not as direct as Vietnam is to Hair, but it is just as significant. From the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s that was full
of protest in hope for a kinder society, the 1970s spiraled down to a time of innocence lost. Chicago is a work that was produced by great artists: Bob Fosse, John Kander and Fred Ebb, who seemed to recognize the betrayals of government and the media against a society growing increasingly disillusioned by the acts they commit.

In the Fall, 1989 edition of the literary review, Journal of American Culture, there is an article titled. “The Dream Shattered: America’s Seventies Musicals”. In it, Barbara Means Fraser writes:

> With the revelation of Watergate, Koreagate, and Abscam, Americans were losing faith in the ethical and moral stature of their public officials...

> Problems had existed in previous generations but in the seventies the basic institutions that had stabilized our country in times of trouble were the very culprits of the disillusionment.  

If people cannot trust the organizations created to protect them and govern their lives, the moral fiber of a country is disintegrated. People become aloof, suspicious and paranoid. If a president has his men try to fix his election, he has no faith in his ability to win fairly. It is cowardly and scandalous. The women of Chicago act cowardly as well by committing murder rather than confronting their problems of fading careers and infidelity head on. They are reacting to the corruption of their time (the 1920s). A good scandal, such as a murder, is a way to revive their fading vaudeville careers. The same loss of moral conduct that was seen in President Nixon’s actions is similar to the lack of moral conduct by the women in Chicago. The audience responds to their debauchery
because they have seen the same weakness of spirit in those who are supposed to be the strongest.

Although *Chicago* and *Hair* both enjoyed successful Broadway runs, two plays today are matching (if not superceding) these original triumphs. *Rent* is often compared to *Hair*. In his February 14, 1996 *New York Times* review of its off-Broadway production, critic Ben Brantley wrote:

The excitement around *Rent* more directly recalls the impact made by a darkhorse: *Hair*. Like that meandering, genial portrait of draft dodging hippies, this production gives a pulsing, unexpectedly catchy voice to one generation’s confusion, anger, and anarchic pleasure seeking vitality. The setting has shifted east from Washington Square to St. Mark’s Place: the drug of choice is now heroin not LSD and the specter that gives its characters’ lives a feverish, mordant edge isn’t the Vietnam War but HIV.  

Similarly, the revival of *Chicago* is a critical and financial success. In fact, it has been so well received at it has led some critics to erroneously dub the original a failure. In a November 15, 1996 review, Greg Evans of *Variety* wrote, “The musical, considered too dark when it failed in 1975, today seems right in keeping with hard-learned cynicism about the American justice system”. Mr. Evans is certainly right about the increased relevance of the show in a time of famous celebrity crimes. He may have glanced at one or two reviews from the original production that were negative. (The play originally received mixed reviews as opposed to overwhelmingly favorable reviews for the
revival.) However, the show enjoyed a quite successful original run. (There will be more specific information on that in Chapter Five.) Perhaps one reason *Chicago* is more well received today is that its bite is far more relevant in light of the highly public homicide cases that the media has raced to entertain the public with. Its relation to power and greed may have been more abstract in the seventies.

**Review of Literature**

Although there are volumes of information written about Vietnam and Watergate from a social and historical perspective, and there is some information on its influence on theater, there are no direct ties between these events and their impact on the development of contemporary musical theater. The numerous original New York reviews of both *Hair* and *Chicago* do not allude to the political and social climate too much (which is especially surprising in *Hair*'s instance), but these will be tied together in the chapters that follow. In addition to the book for *Chicago* and the lyric and history lists and articles for *Hair* (and the soundtracks and scores for both shows), the *Penguin Dictionary of Contemporary American History: 1945-Present* (Third Edition) will be important to providing historical background necessary to understanding the events leading to and during Vietnam and Watergate.

Richard Sacharine’s *From Class to Caste in American Drama: Political and Social Themes Since the 1930s* provides a strong background on Vietnam and straight plays that it influenced, but makes no mention of *Hair*. It is, however, good context to bring together the concept of event inspiring art.

Michael Schusdon’s *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget,*
and Reconstruct the Past provides thorough information and perspective on popular opinion of Watergate and how it made celebrities out of scoundrels, but it makes no connections to art. It does question the state of America’s moral fiber in light of Watergate.

Richard Kislan’s Hoofing On Broadway: A History of Show Dancing will be used to illustrate the importance of Chicago as a dance musical.

Robert Brutein’s The Theater of Revolt and The Third Theater, will also be cited to give a more well rounded perspective on twentieth century modern drama and the ways in which it is influenced by contemporary culture.

From the history of rock music to the traditions of musical theater, much secondary information is provided to support the idea of musical theater as social commentary in exposing Hair as a result of Vietnam and Chicago as a result of graft and corruption of the early seventies.

In the chapters that proceed, each historical event will be discussed, followed by the history of how the musical it influenced was born. Then the shows will be dissected to expose them as products of their social and historical environment. Chapter two deals with how the Vietnam War began and the collaboration to create Hair. Chapter three delves into the structure of Hair and how its music and issues speak to its time. Chapter four covers the later years of Vietnam in the 1970s and Watergate. The question of disillusionment and the collaboration on Chicago begins. The fifth chapter investigates the elements of Chicago: music, dance, and book and how it makes its statement of unashamed debauchery of the American persona through its caricatures.
The final chapter concludes with a synthesis of how *Rent* (a play similar to *Hair*) and the revival of *Chicago* are both faring well currently and what that says about the dichotomous American psyche as society struggles to define itself at the turn of the century.
NOTES


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CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNING OF VIETNAM TO THE BIRTH OF HAIR

The war in Vietnam began officially in August of 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a rash go-ahead given to President Lyndon B. Johnson by congress to “take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force to assist any member or protocol state of Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedoms”.¹ The question as to why American troops were sent to Vietnam in the first place arises.

After World War II, Ho Chi Minh formed the Vietminh in a effort to resist French rule. The French eventually “agreed to a limited autonomy for Vietnam by recognizing it as a free state with the French Union”.² On May 7, 1954 the French were defeated by the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) created by the Geneva accord of 1954 divided Vietnam into two countries: North Vietnam and South Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel.³

When it was discovered that the communist Chinese were supplying the Vietminh (in North Vietnam) with arms, the American feelings toward independence for Vietnam changed, and the United States began to support the French in Indochina.⁴ But in 1955, when Ngo Dinh Diem overthrew Bao Dai (the very emperor who had appointed him
premier in South Vietnam), the United States recognized his government. When
election for reunification was refused by South Vietnam (who did not want to become
part of the communist state), guerilla warfare was started by Minh’s Vietcong.

Because of these events and actions, there was a great deal of opposition and
political tension leading leading to an inevitable war between North and South Vietnam.
But the question remains. Why did the United States get involved?

The answer lies in the strong anti-communist fervor and propaganda which
juxtaposed the idea of a once non-communist nation becoming communist. The United
States was in favor of Vietnam’s independence from French control until it became
apparent that (under Ho Chi Minh) this independence would result in the birth of
another communist nation. The “red scare” (fear of communist control of the world)
convinced the United States that they had the right, even the obligation to interfere with
any other nation that would become a threat to their capitalist, democratic way of life.
With Fidel Castro’s communist Cuba so close to United States borders and the counter
productive Bay of Pigs incident which failed to cause a major anti-communist uprising
within Cuban borders, the concern for communism’s power was well founded.

Consider the McCarthyism era. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy “recklessly
charged government subversion”, accusing many who shaped foreign policy of being
communist or communist spies.

On February 6, 1950, the Republican National Committee proclaimed
that the major domestic issue of that year’s congressional elections would
be “Liberty against Socialism”. Three days later, in Wheeling W.V.A.,
McCarthy launched the era that was to bear his name.
However, even before McCarthyism existed, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was given permanent status on January 3, 1945. Its purpose was to hunt down and punish any person thought to be a member of the or affiliated with the communist party. There were seven committee members who focused their attention on “liberals active in labor, government, and the arts”.

Beginning in late October, attention was turned to Hollywood as actors, writers, directors, and producers were forced to testify any knowledge of or names of communists in the Hollywood community. Ronald Reagan, a staunch conservative, was a “friendly witness” while, while Bertolt Brecht, a revolutionary, satirical and Marxist writer was an “unfriendly witness”, who invoked the First Amendment. Many careers were destroyed by these absurd witch hunts.

It is crucial to comprehend the foundation of the anti-communist fear and how propaganda influences the American public. For many years, a menacing fear of communism existed.

Not everyone was afraid of communism. Some people openly embraced the principles behind it. From early in the Vietnam War, protest was public (though it grew far more intensely as the war progressed and continued to prove senselessly bloody and futile). Other battles were occurring on the home front as well. Civil Rights issues for equality were coming to a head. The Civil Rights Bill of 1964 banned discrimination in voting, jobs, and brought an end to segregation of public accommodations. Drastic changes were happening in society affecting all aspects of art including film, painting, music, literature and theater.
In From Class to Caste in American Drama: Political and Social Themes Since the 1930s, Richard Sacharine argues:

When the war did come home, and the opposition to it reached dramatic intensity, that drama for the most part was not played out in auditoriums. Even as America’s first images of Vietnam appeared on television, our protests against it were frequently a form of public theater, staged to draw the widest and most instantaneous media coverage possible... The six o’clock news became the staging area of both theater of war and the theater of anti-war. 

According to Sacharine, aside from many anti-communist films, there was not much theater reacting to the war early on. “Sixties theater realized that audiences did not require a naturalistically detailed picture, but only the beginning of an arc to infer a complete story”. This means that an idea, concept, or image is enough to satisfy an audience, who may have previously wanted a complete, drawn out story. This is especially evident in Hair. A complete story is told without much plot. Images and songs tell its tale. In The Third Theatre, Robert Brustein wrote:

Hair is pieced together out of newspaper and magazine sections, being a series of topical allusions to contemporary politics and culture, designed less to convey information than to play imaginatively upon what is already known.

Some of the earliest anti-war plays are We Bombed New Haven (1968), The King
Play, Kill Viet Cong, and El Teatro Campesino's Vietnam Campesino. David Rabe's Sticks and Bones (1971) was a part of his Vietnam trilogy produced at Joseph Papp's Public Theater (just four years after Hair's 1967 initial off-Broadway run at the same place). It eventually went to Broadway, winning the Tony award for Best Play in 1972.  

Mr. Sacharine makes no mention of Hair and its importance in his book. Perhaps he believes it is not a significant show, but that is merely speculation.

Julian Mates, author of America's Musical Stage: 200 Years of Musical Theater, wrote:

Though Hair was not the first to present rock music on the stage (Bye Bye Birdie in 1960 made a bow in that direction), it was the first to show something of the young's attitudes frightening so many adults: flower children, long hair, drugs, dirt and a determination to be anti-establishment. But they were basically good kids, so the middle aged, middle class audience found the work acceptable and congratulated themselves on their modern ways.

Though many elements of the show were shocking at the time of its original production, audiences could digest its message, even if they were older and inclined to be more conservative. But before breaking down the play and its impact, a brief examination of how Hair came to be follows.

The Birth of Hair

Two struggling actors, James Rado and Gerome Ragini created Hair. Rado said:
We were aware of the traditional Broadway format but we wanted to create something new, something different, something that translated to the stage the wonderful excitement we felt in the streets. 19

They wanted Hair to be a Broadway play, but it was turned down by every producer they approached. That same year (1967), Joseph Papp was building The New York Shakespeare Public Theater. He offered to present Hair as the theater’s first production for a six week run. He also suggested that a score be written, and so the collaboration with Galt MacDermot took place. 20

It opened on October 17, 1967 and ran six weeks. In that time, Michael Butler had seen the show and joined Papp in the search for another venue for it. Butler later wrote in his journal:

Did I get a surprise: what I saw was the strongest anti-war statement ever written. I realized at that moment that this show could express to my political constituents in Illinois my new found attitude about the war in Vietnam.... All of us felt that the time of revolution was at hand in America. This was a real threat greatly feared by the Establishment, who wanted a continuation of the status quo. We of the Movement also greatly feared the mood of the country. We contemplated the real possibility of the rise of fascism or some equally repressive form of government. We truly believed that we had to do something about this polarization. We were certain that flower power could prevail. Love would win over all and we were messengers in unique positions to do something positive. 21

Rado and Ragini sort of got what they wanted. They were now located on

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Broadway, but they were in a disco club called Cheetah (and it was still considered an off-Broadway show). In fact, the show had to run early in the evening without a break between acts so the club could open for the disco crowd.  

After Papp parted with the show (it had closed because of financial turmoil), Butler, now acting as sole producer collaborated with experimental director Tom O’Horgan, and *Hair*’s authors were busily revising the script (cutting most of the book). Butler was interested in casting people who were authentic. When putting “tribes” (casts) together, they appealed to flower children on the streets. Butler wanted people who were “comfortable in the lifestyle of the hippies, not just playing the role”.  

The play rehearsed, uncertain of finding a theater until Butler was able to get into the Biltmore Theater on 47th street, truly on Broadway. There it had its Broadway opening on April 29, 1968. As the war effort in Vietnam became increasingly unpopular with the middle class, there was an audience for a play with a strong anti-war message. A Broadway musical was a way to convey this theme to a high brow, older (and probably far more conservative than the flower children it saw on stage) audience who might not be as inclined to join the protest in the streets.  

As a potential piece of commercial theater, the increase in public disdain for the war probably influenced the move of *Hair* from off-Broadway to Broadway. With an increasingly strong anti-war sentiment among the middle and upper-middle class, there was potential for profit to be made by a show making this statement for peace.
NOTES

1 Hochmann 570.

2 Hochmann 569.

3 Richard Sacharine, *From Class To Caste In American Drama: Political Themes Since the 1930s* (New York: Greenwood Press) 103.

4 Hochmann 568.

5 Hochmann 568.

6 Hochmann 569.

7 Hochmann 45.

8 Hochmann 314-316.

9 Hochmann 313.

10 Hochmann 249.

11 Hochmann 250.

12 Brustein *Theatre of Revolt* 231, Hochmann 250.

13 Hochmann 87.

14 Sacharine 103-104

15 Sacharine 117.


17 Sacharine 129.


19 Tracy Harris. “Hair History,” 22 December 1997, www.musicals.net, Online,
America Online. 7 March 1998.

20 Harris "Hair History".


22 Harris "Hair History".

23 Butler "Streetpeople".

24 Harris "Hair History".
CHAPTER 3

HAIR

In The Broadway Musical, Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg wrote:

During the sixties decade of culture shock, vintage story based on book musicals, so dominant in the forties, fifties, and early sixties began to be replaced by musicals that emphasized style over story. The smash hit Hair exemplified this trend.¹

Hair is a rock musical with little book. Hair is also one of the first plays to have started the trend of rock musicals. There have not been a lot and the onslaught that followed Hair largely failed. One exception to this is Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Jesus Christ Superstar which is entirely sung and ultimately marketed as a rock opera.²

Set in a park in Greenwich Village in 1968, Hair follows young Claude and the tribe of flower children he hangs out with as they protest conformity and the Vietnam War, while celebrating free love, drugs, equality and life. In the prologue, Berger and Sheila cut off a piece of Claude’s hair and toss it into the fire, symbolic of his melting into the tribe, becoming one of them.

The opening number, “Aquarius”, sets the tone of the hippy lifestyle. It expresses
the desire for pacifism blurred by the use of drugs to expand the characters’ minds. The songs “Donna,” “Hashnish,” and “Sodomy” are expressions of pleasures that these young tribal members seek out from sex and drugs. Much of the shock value in Hair comes from the character’s head on confrontations with the ills of society that oppress them. A very large movement of the sixties was for civil rights, equality for minorities and women. “Colored Spade” most graphically illustrates and confronts vicious racial stereotypes. A black actor recites numerous racial slurs that he has endured his whole life, such as “nigger, jungle bunny,” and “pickanny.” By using the words that have been used to abuse him his entire life, much of their negative power is stripped away.

Nora Alter, author of Vietnam Protest Theater argues that this song is “a feeble but well intentioned attempt to tackle racism”. What Ms. Alter does not seem to recognize is that in its time, this was a very shocking song (and arguably still is), especially to its mostly Caucasian, middle class audience. It makes people uncomfortable to hear such harsh language, especially being sung by an actor of color. It creates necessary tension and forces people to evaluate the labels that they assign each other.

Claude’s first song “Manchester England” depicts a man who is full of hope and faith. Early in the play, the audience sees that he is torn between his liberalism and his obligations. This conflict within himself becomes apparent when three sets of parents (played by tribe members) ask, “What the hell you got 1968 that makes you so damn special?”. As Claude describes his physical attributes, he is saying that the younger generation is just like the older. The wide gap in their ideas of a good life really are not as insurmountable as the older generation believes. [“I got headaches and toothaches/
And bad times, too, like you" 7] Claude is an accessible character to an older audience member. He recognizes the simple universality of the human body and spirit. At this time, Claude is served with his draft notice.

After passing his physical, Claude burns his draft card, but much to the tribe's dismay, it is his library card. When Claude starts to burn his real draft paper, he changes his mind, informing the audience of his dilemma in "Where Do I Go?". 8

Thematically, this is the most important song in the show. Claude represents a generation of youth that wants to survive and enjoy life the same way older generations did when they were that age. There is a war in Vietnam that will destroy those ambitions and passions, yet there is a sense of duty to fight for one's country. Though the war was largely unpopular early on, it was still a time when people believed in their country. America, the land of opportunity and privilege comes with the values and obligations that Claude was raised with. The first act of Hair ends in turmoil and strife, mostly that which lies in the mind and soul of Claude, but transcends an audience struggling with the same issues. The nude scene is at the end of act one and is a strong revelation of the characters' vulnerability. When the "police" come out and attack the characters and "arrest" the audience, a common ground is reached. Both young and old are vulnerable to attack. The naked youth on stage, however, are that much more in peril with no clothes to cover or protect themselves. Even if most of the people who see Broadway shows are middle aged and middle class, they are also parents who may have also been facing a child being called off to fight.

It is true that the loose semblance of plot is not as important as the messages and subtext of the songs. For example, Berger and Sheila get into a fight over a satin shirt and
Sheila sings “Easy To Be Hard,” admitting she does not understand Berger’s immaturity (especially since she is in love with him). This part of the plot, the whole side story of her crush on Berger, is unimportant. What matters is the profound universality of the lyrics, which ask why some people will vehemently fight for the greater good of a community but ignore an individual friend, whom they are supposed to care more about.

In a way, “Easy To Be Hard” asks the government why America is at war with Vietnam. The United States allegedly cared about communism’s threat to and oppression of others’ way of life, but what about the great loss of life on both sides of the war? The innocent villagers in Vietnam, the American soldiers being sent to destroy communism. Those boys sent to Vietnam were somebody’s son, brother, friend, father, lover and or spouse. They were needed and valued by someone at home.

In the second act, it becomes apparent that the tribe is losing Claude to the war effort. The tribe quotes Shakespeare in, “What a Piece of Work Is a Man?”. The tribe gathers, yelling anti-war slogans and calling for Claude who does not answer. He appears, only visible to the audience in an army uniform. At the show’s end, Claude is lying on stage, and Berger forms a cross on his body. Claude is dead, but the tribe is alive and though they are the lost youth of America, they will eventually have the opportunity to grow older, keep on living. There is hope for them.

How Hair Fared On Broadway

*Hair* was very successful in its original Broadway run. Its Tony Award Nominations included Best Show and Best Score. It did, however, lose to *1776*, a show that goes beyond typical sentimental patriotic spirit in its story of the signing of the Declaration of

What only is important, however, is that the authors have really captured the Spirit of '76. The characterizations are most unusually full for a musical, and even though the outcome of the story is never in an very serious doubt, *1776* is consistently exciting and entertaining...is literate, urbane and, on occasion, very amusing. For the music, it would have been easy for Mr. Edwards to have produced a pastiche of Revolutionary tunes, but this he has...avoided. There is admittedly a flavor here, but the music is absolutely modern in its sound. ¹¹

Although *1776* is a more patriotic and traditional show than *Hair*, critics were quick to point out its strong value in being honest about the temperament of the founding fathers. Richard Watts of the *New York Post* states, “...and it makes no attempt to romanticize the founding fathers”. ¹² Even losing out to a show more patriotic in sentiment, *Hair* was still enormously successful, running 1742 performances, closing on July 1, 1972. ¹³

For the most part, critical reaction to *Hair* was favorable. Most critics were impressed with its innovations. Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* wrote:

Now the authors of the dowdy book- and brilliant lyrics- have done a very brave thing. They have, in effect, done away with it all together. *Hair* is now a musical with a theme not with a story....Yet with the sweet and subtle lyrics of Gerome Ragini and James Rado the show is the first Broadway musical in some time to have the authentic voice of today rather than the day before yesterday. ¹⁴
John O' Conner of the *Wall Street Journal* concurs: "The production is strewn with innovations of all the happier results of off-off Broadway experimentation".\textsuperscript{15}

Most critics were neither shocked nor offended by the nude scene. "The nudes appear dimly lighted only to remind us that we have seen men and women naked before."\textsuperscript{16} In fact, most critics favored the overwhelming sweetness and optimism expressed in *Hair*. Walter Kerr of the *New York Post* wrote:

> It may not please the young people of *Hair* to be told that the most winning quality of the show is its air of innocence. The so-called "American Tribal Love-Rock Musical", ....is strewn with four letter words and goes in for a few tentative forays into nudity, but, although they try to be pretty bold and outrageous, their rescuing virtue is their inescapable youthful naivete...it has a surprising if perhaps unintentional charm. its high spirits are contagious, and its young zestfulness makes it difficult to resist. \textsuperscript{17}

Beyond Broadway, *Hair* met with significant controversy. The 1970 production of *Hair* in Boston was halted when District Attorney Garret Byrne tried to stop the show for the flag burning and content he deemed "lewd and lascivious".\textsuperscript{18} The case went to the State Supreme Court who determined its content to "constitute an obscure form of protest protected under the first amendment", but put two conditions on it. "1. To have each member of the cast clothed at all times and 2. To eliminate all simulation of sexual intercourse or deviation".\textsuperscript{19}

But deviation, straying from the straight and narrow, is the essence of *Hair* and the
cast and producers refused to succumb to the demands that would dehydrate the spirit of
the show.

In a powerful letter to the Boston cast of *Hair*, Theodore Bikel, then the president of
the Actor's Equity Association wrote:

The council of Actor's Equity Association representing all 17,000
performers in the field of theater throughout the United States and Canada
wishes to express to you its profound shock and dismay over the
oppressive and capricious action by local and state authorities in closing
down the Boston production of *Hair*. Censorship to us is an abomination.
Closing a play for its content, for its ideas, for its setting.... -all this is
directly contrary to freedom of expression, freedom of the arts to flourish.
We say, beware: when men do as they have done in Boston than book
burning cannot be far behind. 30

It is interesting to note that the violence of war is more acceptable to some than
sexuality, the celebration of being human. In *The Theater of Revolt*, Robert Brustein
writes about the irony of western criticism to the surrealist poet and dramatist, Antonin
Artaud, who called for a theater of cruelty.

Nevertheless, his proposals have been widely misunderstood especially in
Anglo-Saxon countries where Artaud has remained a suspect and
unwelcome, if not largely unknown, figure. To cultures which prefer their
sadism and masochism disguised (for example, in wars, prizefights,
gangster movies, and television), the openly sado masochistic thrust of
Artaud's thought has seemed pathological and perverse. 21
Brutal, bloody wars do not seem to get the public in an uproar as profoundly as a little
nudity, drugs, and sexuality.

The United States Supreme Court finally allowed the Boston production of *Hair* to
open a month later. ²² Even in the midst of an escalated and increasingly unpopular war,
the lovingly rebellious message of *Hair* was permitted to be sent to Boston.

In *An Outline History of American Drama*, Walter Meserve writes of the shift in
musicals, starting in the mid-1960s. “A more liberal drama and theater reflecting
momentary public thinking may be one result, but that only follows the fashion of
earlier times when one day’s news was on stage the next.”²³

Hair is a result of the social and historical climate of its time. In contrast, Lehman
Engel, author of *The American Musical Theater* argues, “and it’s utter poppycock [sic]
to entertain any idea whatsoever that *Hair*... or any others will exert pressures on our
futures as once did *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”.²⁴ To a certain extent, he is right: however.
*Hair* was written as a depiction influenced by society. Did *Hair* influence a speedy
conclusion to the Vietnam War? Obviously not. It will also be evident in the proceeding
chapters that *Chicago* certainly did not deflate the glamour out of infamous crimes.
(One only has to look at recent trials and scandals to see this.) What *Hair* did do (as
*Chicago* would seven years later) was reflect the spirit of society’s condition. Even in
the midst of a tragic and atrocious war, there is a resounding echo of hope and respect
for the aesthetic quality of life.

A final interesting note about *Hair* is the attempt at revival in 1977 which closed
after only forty-three performances.²⁵ This proves that *Hair* was much more effective in
the 1960s during the war than in the peacetime of the late 1970s. Rebellious sentiment diminished because there was not the kind of demand for it that there was during Vietnam. The revival’s failure is also strongly indicative of a society whose attitude toward the warm spirit of Hair will be tarnished by the continuance of an immoral war and a scandal that will rock the nations trust in the loyalty of a President and its own ambitions.
NOTES


3 Rado, Ragini.

4 Rado, Ragini.


6 Rado, Ragini.

7 Rado, Ragini.

8 Rado, Ragini.

9 Rado, Ragini.

10 Tracy Harris, "Hair: Plot and Musical Numbers," 1 August 1996 toots@leland.stanford.edu 7 March 1998.


13 Harris “Hair:History”.

14 Clive Barnes “Theater: Hair- It’s Fresh and Frank”.


16 Walter Kerr. “Hair Not in Fear But in Delight” rev. of Hair by Rado, Ragini, and

17 Richard Watts “Two On the Aisle” rev. of *Hair* by Rado, Ragini, and Mac Dermot.

*New York Post* 30 April 1968.

18 Harris “Hair: History”.

19 Harris “Hair: History”.

20 Harris “Hair: History”.

21 Brustein *Theatre of Revolt* 369.

22 Harris “Hair: History”.


25 Harris “Hair: History”.

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CHAPTER 4

THE DISINTEGRATION OF PUBLIC FAITH: THE END OF VIETNAM THROUGH WATERGATE

As the fighting in Vietnam continued to escalate, so did America's protest of the war. From May 10-20, 1969, "Hamburger Hill" proved to be one of the "bloodiest attacks until it was captured". ¹ The war's unpopularity caused the Democrats to lose control of the White House and led to Richard Nixon's election to the presidency in 1968. ²

Nixon deceptively began to decrease the war effort. The number of troops serving was pulled back from 536,100 to 475,200 by 1969. He proposed the continuous pull out of American troops as the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) strengthened and became more autonomous. But by the same token, more bloody battles ensued such as the My Lai Massacre (killing numerous unarmed civilians) and the Cambodian incursion (in which Cambodia was invaded to destroy Communist resource bases). It became obvious that this was an extension rather than a curtailing of the war. When students at Kent State protested its continuation, four demonstrators were killed by National Guardsmen. ³ This is important because the frustration over the war was showing on all sides. Violence overseas led to violence at home. Students exercising
their First Amendment right of free speech were silenced violently. Chaos in Southeast Asia was causing destruction at home as well.

By 1972's end, there were 24,200 Americans left in Vietnam, none of which were combat troops. The previous year, the Pentagon Papers were published, “completing the nation’s disenchantment with a war that has so far only brought it shame, dissension and dishonor”. 4

The Pentagon Papers were officially called “The History of the U.S. Decision-Making Process on Viet Nam Policy”. 5 Daniel Ellsberg, an employee of the Rand Corporation and contributing scholar to the documents, gave the highly negative reports to Neil Sheehan of The New York Times. Attorney General John N. Mitchell tried to halt the Times publication by threatening prosecution. Not only did the Times publish the story on June 15, 1971, but they gleefully included Mitchell's threats. The U.S. did sue them (and the Washington Post), but both papers prevailed. 6

The infamous “plumbers” as they came to be known, broke into Dr. Lewis Fielding’s (Ellsberg’s analyst) office in Beverly Hills in attempt to find information to discredit him. 7 They were unsuccessful. With the apparent continuance of the Vietnam War and its poor reception in the United States, the White House became concerned with the 1972 elections and Nixon’s chances for reelection.

What followed was a complex, corrupt process by which many elected officials in office were arrested. On June 17, 1972, Frank Wills, an evening security guard in the Watergate complex, noticed two doors taped to prevent them from locking. He reported to the police who arrested five men and later two more (Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy). All of these men were connected with CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the
These men were looking to get or create negative information on the Democratic party through theft and bugging the rooms. They were looking for the "dirt" on Senator Edmund S. Muskie. He was considered the biggest threat to Nixon’s chances for reelection. The Watergate break-in and subsequent attempt to cover it up led to the eventual resignation of Nixon (as he was about to be impeached) for involvement in the scandal and efforts to hide it.

"I shall resign the Presidency effective tomorrow at noon," said Nixon on August 8, 1974 in a television address. At noon the next day, Gerald Ford was sworn into office. One month later, he handed Nixon an unconditional pardon for all crimes he partook of while in office. "What had the former President learned from Watergate? On May 19, 1977 he [Nixon] told TV’s David Frost, ‘When the President does it, that means it’s not illegal’".

Not only had the President of the United States conducted himself in a severely unethical manner, he had no penance to pay for it. What followed was the loss of America’s faith in the government it voted for to serve them.

To add insult to injury, many of the convicted felons of Watergate went on to become authors and media celebrities. In his 1992 book, Watergate In American Memory, Michael Schusdon wrote:

Media coverage of notorious Watergate figures, focusing on persons rather than issues, creates celebrities whose meaning is assimilated to general cultural archetypes rather than to specific historical events...A more strongly institutionalized, more enduring carrier of memory, the history textbook shares with media coverage of celebrities an inclination
to minimize the drama of Watergate and particularly to neglect its political and partisan character...there is some question about how well “celebrity” as a cultural form of memory serves us.  

G.Gordon Liddy, one of the head conspirators and criminals of Watergate went on to become an actor in several television movies and guest star on several popular series. He appeared on a cable news show in 1991 with journalist Jack Anderson whom he, “had once proposed assassinating”.

Jeb Stuart Magruder was convicted in 1973 for “conspiracy, obstruction of justice and wiretapping the Democratic National Committee Head Quarters”. But he fared well from the scandal, too, writing his memoir “An American Life” which received “sympathetic reviews”.


Perhaps the biggest contribution to America’s shift in attitude is the commercialization of the news. At this time, news became entertainment. According to Schusdon:

Both factual and fictional renderings of Watergate have received widespread public attention in part because Watergate coincided with, and no doubt played a part in stimulating, a “newsification” [sic] of popular entertainment. This is particularly notable on television. Although television news dates to the 1950s only with the Vietnam War did it begin to take on symbolic centrality for both Washington elites and the general
public; the evening news show became the symbolic center for the
national agenda and the national consciousness. At that point,
broadcasters realized news could be entertainment... News took on a
commercial vitality. 19

The news of the day became an integral part of show business. Though acts
committed to make the news are often unglamourous, tragic, criminal, or hostile, they
are sensationalized. It would seem that director/choreographer Bob Fosse saw the
media’s ability to make celebrity of the most immoral people. This is the spirit and
groundwork for portraying these themes in Chicago.

The next chapter will prove the heartlessness of Chicago to be a reflection of a
heartless society. To those who think that art, the media and entertainment influence
violence instead of violence influencing it, Robert Brustein, defending Artaud and his
theater of cruelty as an instinctual act of necessary release for man, accurately argues:

The purgative function of Artaud’s theatre may become the most
controversial feature if his theory, for there are many who hold that,
instead of dissipating repressed feelings, a theatre of cruelty would release
further violence into the body politic. This opinion is based on the
assumed relationship between lurid comic books or television shows and
juvenile delinquency. Few critics, however, have considered the idea that
violence in the mass media may be a reflection rather than a cause of
violence in daily life; and since the mass media invariably moralize
cruelty while exploiting its sensationalism, such forms block up a total
release in impulses. America is on the few countries in history to have no socially approved outlets for the wilder instincts.  

Where witnessing numerous violence in entertainment and media may desensitize a viewer, it does not cause one to act violently. Brustein is saying that Artaud’s theory expresses concern for a society that does not have an outlet for the anger intrinsic to human nature. He does not advocate a violent society, but he suggests that what people see in popular culture and art is influenced by society. It is not the groundwork for society’s actions.
NOTES

1 Hochmann 571.

2 Hochmann 571.

3 Hochmann 572.

4 Hochmann 572.

5 Hochmann 416.

6 Hochmann 416.

7 Hochmann 417.

8 Hochmann 581.

9 Hochmann 149.

10 Hochmann 586.

11 Hochmann 586.

12 Hochmann 586.


14 Schusdon 129.

15 Schusdon 129.

16 Schusdon 129.

17 Schusdon 129.

18 Schusdon 132.

19 Schusdon 133-134.

20 Brustein The Theater of Revolt 370.
CHAPTER 5

CHICAGO

The graft and corruption that plagued the government in the 1970s is perfectly reflected in the 1975 musical, Chicago. Based on the 1926 play of the same title by Maureen Dallas Watkins (and a 1927 silent film), Chicago was made into a movie called Roxie Hart, in 1942, starring Ginger Rogers. The play is based on an actual murder case in which a woman shot her extra-marital lover in the back because he was going to leave her.¹

Watkins, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, covered the case, and there were a dozen other female murder cases at the time, but this one fascinated her. Beulah Annar, the murderess, claimed to be pregnant while awaiting her trial. She was eventually found not guilty, and Watkins was quick to recognize the jury’s ignorance in being “beauty proof”.² A beautiful, charismatic woman could not possibly be criminal in their eyes.

Gwen Verdon, a Broadway legend and former wife of director/choreographer Bob Fosse, had been captivated by this story and wanted to do something with it ever since she had seen Roxie Hart. The rights were not for sale until Watkins’ death in 1969. With producer Richard Fryer, she and Fosse purchased the rights, but did not begin
collaboration until 1973. Fosse approached the lyricist/composer team, Kander and Ebb, and the process began. Though the pre-production was delayed due to Fosse’s massive coronary, requiring open heart surgery, Chicago opened on June 3, 1975.

Fosse was a choreographer whose intense vision and creativity led to his contribution to the book of Chicago with Fred Ebb. In Hoofing On Broadway, Richard Kislan wrote:

If Jerome Robbins chose to maneuver his writers into creating ideal conditions for the organic development of dance material, then Bob Fosse chooses to manipulate or impose, tamper with, or otherwise reconstruct the contribution of writers in order to make the material serviceable to his staging and choreography.

Chicago is subtitled A Musical Vaudeville because the story is presented as a series of vaudeville acts representing the three ring circus of the court system and news media. Jack Kroll of Newsweek in his 1975 review titled “My Kind of Town” wrote:

...which turns its characters into carnival-circus-vaudeville clowns and dolls and Fosse...stages his story as a series of vaudeville turns...His triangulation of 20s Chicago, Brecht and Broadway results not in high class nostalgia, but in a sneakily contemporary feeling. Behind the garish Weimar-Jazz age decor we are looking at ourselves.

The power of the vaudeville style is immense. Again, Kislan compares Fosse to Jerome Robbins.

If Robbins background directed his talent and craft toward expressive movement, then Fosse’s early exposure to the “do or die” entertainment...
values of the self-contained acts of vaudeville and burlesque led him
toward a career in creating show-stopping numbers for audience approval.

*Chicago* plays like a series of fantasies, pictures and dreams. In his description of
Artaud's concept of things that the theater should embody, Brustein wrote:

The primary function of Artaud's theater, then, is exorcism of fantasies.
Similar to the Great Mysteries- the Orphic and Eleusinian rites- it is based
on sacrifice and revolves around crime: but in exteriorizing the
spectator's desire for crime, it acts as a catharsis, and drains his violence.

The audience is thoroughly entertained by the social commentary of the glamorizing of
murder. *Chicago* does not entice the audience to want to commit murder; it reflects the
thickness of people's skins, their loss of sensitivity to the violent culture in which people
live.

Interestingly enough, one of the critics, Martin Gottfried of the *New York Post*,
points out what he considers to be a flaw. "The ingenuity of stylization keeps the
characters unreal and remote, more like puppets than people and impossible to care
about." In an odd way, he is right. The audience does not really care about anyone, be
it lawyer, murderess, or victims. That is the point of the show. Whoever is the most
entertaining wins. Roxie and Velma (another murderess) win because they go to great
lengths to entertain the courts and media. Their lawyer, Billy Flynn, wins and gets rich
doing it. Hunyak, the one woman who cannot heighten her story because the only
English she can speak is, "not guilty", is the first woman in forty-seven years to be
convicted of murder. Consequently, she hangs herself, and the audience does not care.
She has not been able to entertain them as Roxie and Velma have.
In a perverse way the audience does care about the two leading ladies because they take their lawyer. Flynn’s advice and "Give ’em the old razzle dazzle". He reasons that people do not really care about the truth. They care about what they are seeing. “Give em’ an act with lots of flash in it, and their reaction will be passionate.” 11

Similarly, Watergate, in its infamy, fascinated people. A convicted criminal like G.Gordon Liddy, who carries his culpability with tenacity, is rewarded with acting jobs and media attention, just as Roxie and Velma team up to revive their once fading Vaudeville careers.

The question arises: What does society care for the victims of crimes? The answer is, "Not much”. Amos, the betrayed husband of Roxie, willing to take the blame for the murder of Fred, sings “Mister Cellophane”, lamenting that he is invisible because he is plain and decent. 12

Amos is a decent, faithful law-abiding husband. Roxie finds him boring and stupid. ["He ain't no sheik/ That's no great physique/ Lord knows, he ain't got the smarts" 13] He may be a devoted husband, but he cannot give her the thrill she gets from being a vaudeville star. If Roxie walks all over him, it is his fault for being a simple, good soul. He is dismissed as a hapless, weak person, unworthy of sympathy because of his lack of aggression.

Manipulation is another important theme of Chicago. The audience is manipulated as well as the characters. Amos is victim to Flynn’s manipulation as he testifies. Rather than the truth of Roxie’s infidelity as a result of a pregnancy which he could not possibly be the father of (a further victimization of Amos), Flynn tangles words around to conclude that Amos demanded a divorce when he learned of her pregnancy. 14
At the end of the play, Roxie and Velma thank the audience for being such suckers.

VELMA: You know, a lot of people have lost faith in America.

ROXIE: And for what America stands for.

VELMA: But here we are, the living examples of what a wonderful country this is

ROXIE: So we'd just like to thank you and God Bless you.

(They bow, throwing roses to the audience, waving and smiling as...)  

The strong satire in these lines indicates the ideal, what should be. The intensity of their crimes in light of its satirical element shows that the play recognizes how things are as opposed to how they should be. No, murder is not acceptable. Manipulation is not good. Naivete is not admirable. However, these things happen all the time. How people respond to them is the point of the show. The play is wicked and fun. The audience exits entertained. their sense of mistrust and cynicism fulfilled.

Chicago On Broadway

In its original Broadway run, Chicago met with mixed critical reviews, but it was still a successful production in terms of box office (which is, of course, crucial to commercial theater). It ran 898 performances and was nominated for several Tony Awards. It lost out, however, in all categories to A Chorus Line. Now many would argue that A Chorus Line is a "feel good" show, but that is erroneous. Barbara Fraser writes, "A Chorus Line admits that American musical theater is more 'show business'. Dehumanized actors and dancers are sold like products". Roxie and Velma are two performers, trying to market themselves as well. Perhaps the art of musical theater is
instrumental in its recognizance of commercial society's use of people as tools to turn a profit, rather than as human beings. America in many ways is currently more cynical (there will be more on that in the chapter that follows), but Chicago's success does suggest that the satirical attitude certainly did exist in the seventies.

Chicago works its message so strongly through dance. In Hoofing on Broadway, Richard Kislan writes:

Where early twentieth century stage entertainments dramatized effort for applause, our best contemporary choreography conceals effort for valid artistic goals, and for that effort it rewards its makers and its doers with the status, fame, and riches consistent with show dancing's omnipresence on the American scene.¹⁸

In particular, Bob Fosse's choreography has a unique style and look that is distinct. His work is sexual, risky, and intriguing, yet he appeals to a conservative commercial audience. Kislan argues:

Fosse dancing achieves a distinctive look within the sleek, brassy, razzle-dazzle of the Fosse musical. Though outwardly akin to a combination of modern jazz dance and tap that is capable of assimilating elements of ballet, burlesque foundation of the gyrating body. Pelvic grinds, undulating shoulders, backward leans, hip isolations...economy of movement describe the essence of that idiom....Everything is earthbound, physical, percussive, and sexy. Few choreographers on the commercial
dance scene celebrate the physical sexuality of the male and female
dancers as much as Bob Fosse.¹⁹

The fast paced movements and their bold sexuality are the essence of Fosse’s style. They are also the essence of Chicago’s theme. People must be entertained, intrigued and amused. Short attention spans will not tolerate boredom. Every number must be a showstopper. In an increasingly open sexual and cynical society, Chicago is a perfect choice for revival as will be seen in the next chapter.
NOTES


2 Grubb 194.

3 Grubb 194.

4 Grubb 196.

5 Kislan 102.


7 Kislan 103.

8 Brustein Theatre of Revolt 370.


11 Kander, Ebb, and Fosse 76-77.

12 Kander, Ebb, and Fosse 66.

13 Kander, Ebb, and Fosse 14.

14 Kander, Ebb, and Fosse 65.

15 Kander, Ebb, and Fosse 91.


17 Fraser 36
18 Kislan xviii.

19 Kislan 105-106.
CHAPTER 6

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Since the events and attitudes of society are reflected in art, the question arises: What do today’s popular musicals say about the state of American culture? *Rent* is an enormously successful musical that is often compared to *Hair*, and the revival of *Chicago* has been extremely well received, collecting almost all strong acclaim.

*Rent As A Modern Day Hair*

In her February 14, 1996 review of *Rent* off-Broadway, Linda Winer of *New York Newsday* wrote:

> *Rent*, which opened downtown last night, is the first original break through rock musical since *Hair* cracked open the form nearby at the Public Theater in 1967. Although the story is a loose East Village update of *La Bohème*, the show humanizes arts-poverty and AIDS almost as exuberantly and immediately as the tribal love-rock legend did decades ago with anti-materialist rebellion in Vietnam. ¹

Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* also compares *Rent* to *Hair*, writing:

> Both works are generational anthems, not so much of protest, finally but
of youthful exuberance, even (or especially) when the youth in question is
imperiled. 2

Both plays portray communities of teenagers and young adults in a state of conflict,
protest, love and search. Where Hair's hippies are protesting the war in Vietnam,
Rent's bohemians are combating with HIV, a disease which will wipe out their entire
tent community. Both shows have drag queens, drug use, and profane language. But
both are very positive in the midst of youthful confusion and tragedy.

Hair ends with "Let the Sun Shine In," expressing hope for a better tomorrow. Rent
ends with "No Day But Today," expressing the need to take each day as it comes (with
both challenges and triumphs) and appreciate them for what they are worth.

I can't control my destiny

I trust my soul

My only goal is just to be 3

Rent is a modern day adaptation of Puccini's La Boheme. It is a tragic, yet hopeful
tale of a youthful community in east Greenwich Village facing homelessness, drug
addiction, and AIDS while trying to raise their voice against conformity, the silencing of
creativity, and destruction of the homeless population. The couple of central focus is
Roger and Mimi, lovers who embody the struggles with disease, narcotics, and their
desire for love. Mimi is a nineteen-year-old bar dancer, addicted to heroine. Roger is a
struggling musician who used to be addicted to drugs, but he has lost touch with the
world since discovering he has AIDS. He has lost all creative impulse and desire to live
until Mimi comes into his life.

Mark is Roger's roommate and best friend. He is a struggling film maker. He acts as
narrator and observer, very involved and yet strangely detached from all the turmoil around him. His ex-girlfriend, Maureen, left him for another woman (Jo Ann) and is a performance artist, protesting the forcing out of the homeless tent community by the group’s former friend, Benny. They are disheartened that Benny has “sold out”, married a wealthy girl, and gone into her father’s business which wants to build a high tech studio where the homeless are living. Collins, another friend who has AIDS, is mugged and rescued by Angel, a drag queen with a heart of gold, who teaches the group about what it is to be a good, loving person. The couples go through much turmoil and the turning point for all characters is when Angel dies of AIDS. Roger, having regretfully parted from Mimi finds his inspiration and writes his song. Maureen and Jo Ann get back together. Mark decides to turn down an offer from a tabloid show to buy his footage of the riot he took when Maureen held her protest. Mimi, who has disappeared, is found, very ill, and just about to die when Roger sings the song she inspired him to write. She comes to, saying that she saw Angel he told her to “turn around, girlfriend”. This is when the cast sings “No Day But Today,” in appreciation of life’s uncertain twists and turns.

In Clive Barnes’ review of Rent on Broadway, he also compares it to Hair, giving the latter credit for editing a lot of book material before moving to Broadway. However, he does complain that both shows endings are “muddled,” going as far as to say the Rent’s heroine Mimi’s survival of a near-death experience is a weakness in the show. The main reason that Rent did not go through writing revisions before moving to Broadway was the untimely death of the lyricist/composer/playwright Jonathon Larson just before
its off-Broadway opening. No matter what else, both plays, in the wake of very
depressing events, are positive and full of youthful vibrancy, energy, and hope.

However, it cannot be concluded that society has reactivated its positive karma and
the attitude of the 1960s. This is especially evident in the very successful current revival
of Chicago. In many respects, society appears to be as cynical as ever.

### The Revival of Chicago

Walter Bobbie, the director of the revival of Chicago, told Playbill Magazine's Mervyn Rothstein:

> Its original cynicism seemed less cynical, more part of our recent social
> and judicial history, more real. It suddenly had a real poignancy. It no
> longer seemed like a piece of fiction, like a story from which we distance
> ourselves. In a way, the show is no longer a satire- it’s a documentary.
> The cynical edge in Chicago is that in this story crime not only pays, it
> leads to great success.  

Clive Barnes of the New York Post obviously agrees with Bobbie's concept, writing,

> “But simpler now- presumably toned down and even refined by Bobbie- it all works
> more smoothly, and the show, particularly Kander’s score, comes off far better”.  

Many infamous crimes in the media are glamorized today. The O.J. Simpson murder trial (in which he was acquitted) is a prime example of the media circus and the celebrity it creates. Kato Kaelin, Simpson's house boy, got a radio and television career out of it. Simpson, himself, wrote a book as did almost every lawyer involved in the
case. There were actually tours of the house where the murders took place. A brutal crime was over-shadowed in its aftermath by media sensationalism.

Amy Fisher shot the wife of Joey Buttafucco, a man she had an affair with. She is serving time in jail, but she has written a book, and three major networks made movies about her story. People seem to become celebrities through criminal acts, and society is only somewhat recognizant of the absurdity of this. Most pertinently, there is much question about the truthfulness and moral character of the current President of the United States, Bill Clinton. The allegations of shady dealings and sexual misconduct are so cluttered that it becomes impossible for the public to discern where the truth lies.

In its revival, Chicago is no less cynical today, but people may be even more receptive to its themes in light of current events. Society’s attitude appears to vacillate between hope and utter disdain for the society in which we live.

**Final Remarks**

The current success of Rent, a show similar in theme and aura to Hair and the revival of Chicago, imply a society that is approaching the end of the millennium with mixed emotions. Many people are indeed cynical, bitter, and jaded. There is a great deal of frustration expressed in both shows. However, people are also optimistic, despite the problems that society faces. The Broadway musical offers different outlooks on the human experience as does life itself. Its art is a direct reflection of the we live in: complex and full of change. How people adjust to those elements is reflected in their reception of the plays.

Today’s political and social climate reflect a society ready to embrace the future with
a scrutinizing eye. Ironically, it is a deep search which will continue to overlook and sometimes refuse to see. Art will continue to catch many different glimpses of the world and force people to stop, look, and think about what they see. Musical theater is a unique venue to accomplish this as it is entertaining, has a lot of commercial appeal, and the ability to create a lasting impression.
NOTES

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