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A History and Analysis of the Works of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty

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A HISTORY AND ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS
OF LYNN AHRENS AND STEPHEN FLAHERTY

By

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Monmouth College
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Theatre

Department of Theatre
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Abstract

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by Matthew Paul Fisher

In the history of musical theatre there have been several celebrated composer-lyricist teams. For over thirty years in the modern era the talents of librettist-lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty have been heard on stage, in movies, and on television, both in collaboration with others and together. When they formed their professional partnership in 1983 they made a team that would give modern musical theatre its most unique pairing. Their work is not easy to identify. Their source materials vary greatly from show to show and the musical style is never the same. With their level of output, talents, and accolades it is curious that no one has written anything definitive and solely about them and their careers. They seem to be a footnote or passing fancy in most texts on musical theatre. Information about them is usually in the form of transcribed interviews and quotes for other stories or a short biography as a lead-in to an often too brief discussion of one of their shows. Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty have been one of the most compelling and vital librettist-composer teams writing for musical theatre in the latter part of the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first. It is the purpose of this thesis to give them and their work proper attention, and to demonstrate their validity and importance to the genre for the past three decades and into the future.

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Dedicated to Felicia, Noah, and Lila: I just have to love who I love.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

In the history of musical theatre there have been several celebrated composer-lyricist teams, such as Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, and Kander and Ebb. For over thirty years, the talents of librettist-lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty have been heard on stage, in movies, and on television, both in collaboration with others and together. When they formed their professional partnership in 1983, they made a team that would give modern musical theatre its most unique pairing. They are well-respected among musical theatre professionals and fans alike, interviewed many times over their careers, and have been nominated for and won several awards for their writing. With their level of output, talents, and accolades it is curious that no one has written anything definitive and solely about them and their careers. They seem to be a footnote or passing fancy in most texts on musical theatre. Information about them is usually in the form of transcribed interviews and quotes for other stories or a short biography as a lead-in to an often too brief discussion of one of their shows. Yet, Ahrens and Flaherty have written some of the most compelling and vital musical theatre of the latter part of the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first. Their work is always unique and original, culled from various sources, with words and music that perfectly fit the style of each piece. Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty are one of the most important duos writing for the musical theatre today.

One may argue this statement due to the general unfamiliarity with their work. An Ahrens and Flaherty musical is not easy to identify. Their source materials vary greatly from show to show, and the musical style is never the same. Even Stephen Sondheim has distinctions in his writing, both musically and lyrically, that help define his

shows. Without knowing their catalogue well one would have difficulty recognizing an Ahrens and Flaherty musical. If Rodgers and Hammerstein, Andrew Lloyd Webber, or Sondheim is mentioned, at least those among the theatrical community would likely be able to give a litany of their respective works. With Ahrens and Flaherty, show titles may have to be listed in a discussion about them for people to recognize their work, or a record of their award wins and nominations may need to accompany talk of their achievements. This does not in any way diminish what they have accomplished. It is simply support for the argument that adequate respect and attention have not been given to their place in the pantheon of great musical theatre writing teams.

Today the music and lyrics of most musicals are often written by one individual, such as Sondheim, Stephen Schwartz, or William Finn. In the last several years, any composer-lyricist pairs who have had a major success with one show have failed to repeat that same level of success with a second, such as Mark Hollman and Greg Kotis (*Urinetown*) or Lawrence O’Keefe and Nell Benjamin (*Legally Blonde*). Other recently successful composers and lyricists change collaborative partners from show to show, such as Lloyd Webber, Jeanine Tesori, Frank Wildhorn, or Robert Lopez. As Michael Gilboe states in the introduction to his interview of Ahrens and Flaherty for the podcast “Broadway Bullet” in October 2007, “Ahrens and Flaherty are possibly the last . . . of the great duos that are working on Broadway consistently” (Ahrens, “Interview”). While they have done other work outside of their partnership, they always return to work together to make creative, innovative, and relevant musical theatre. Their output and consistency make Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty a vital part of the current musical theatre world and are expected to be so long into the future.

CHAPTER II – AHRENS AND FLAHERTY BIOGRAPHY

Lynn Ahrens did not begin her career in the theatre. Her first job after graduating from the University of Syracuse was at the advertising agency that was responsible for creating *Schoolhouse Rock!*, the series of animated educational shorts that appeared on ABC in the late 1970s. According to Ahrens, her involvement in working on that series came out of playing her guitar on lunch breaks at the agency and George Newell, one of the show's producers, approaching her to ask if she would be interested in trying to write one of the songs for the show (Scuiletti). From there she became part of that creative team, writing and performing several songs for the series. She went on to be a freelance writer: she was responsible for the jingles for products such as Bounty paper towels and Klondike ice cream bars (Ahrens, "Downstage Center"). She also wrote for other children's programming throughout the late 1970s.

Stephen Flaherty, twelve years Ahrens' junior, worked at composing from an early age. He grew up in suburban Pittsburgh where he was able to have some early musicals staged in high school. From there he attended College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati. It was during this time that Flaherty met famed composer, conductor, and musical director Lehman Engel. Flaherty recalled that Engel had come to do a master class with the actors of the musical theatre program and asked if there was any student work available to be seen (Ahrens, "Downstage Center"). Coincidentally, Flaherty had been working on staging his first piece at that time so he was able to present some songs. Engel was so impressed with the songs that he asked Flaherty to leave school to attend his BMI Musical Theatre Workshop in New York. Flaherty made the decision to complete his degree but made plans to move to New York to attend the workshop right

after graduation. Ironically, the week before Flaherty was to leave for New York in August 1982 Engel passed away, so Flaherty never got to study with him. Flaherty still attended the workshop, applying as both composer and lyricist, and it was there he met Lynn Ahrens ("Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty," *The Art* 3-4).

Ahrens applied to the BMI workshop just as a lyricist, feeling that her composition skills were limited as she really only knew five chords on guitar and felt that would not stand up to writing a full musical score (Ahrens, "Downstage Center"). They both entered the first-year workshop in the fall of 1982 and met in the first month. They did not begin working together right away. In that first year they developed mutual admiration for each other's work, Ahrens writing lyrics with several different composers and Flaherty writing both music and lyrics on his own. The impetus for their partnership came from Flaherty. Ahrens recalled their beginning as Flaherty running by her just prior to the final class assignment and stopping to ask if she would like to try writing the assignment together ("Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty," *The Art* 4). Ahrens agreed and they have written together ever since.

The first attempt at a full-length musical for the pair in their new partnership was an idea prompted by Ahrens' husband, an adaptation of the 1967 Peter Cook/Dudley Moore movie *Bedazzled*. The show never came to fruition as they were unable to obtain the rights to the movie to adapt it ("Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty," *The Art* 5). Despite not having the rights they continued working on the show and were able to present some songs at workshops, some at which they received valuable feedback and critiques from panels that included such musical theatre luminaries as Stephen Sondheim and John Kander ("Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty," *The Art* 6). The whole process

of working on *Bedazzled* helped improve their writing and collaborative skills, and encouraged them to continue their partnership.

In addition to the feedback they received from established professionals, presenting their pieces led them to the ASCAP workshop which gave them two of the most important and long-lasting relationships in their collective careers. It was there they met Ira Weitzman and, subsequently through him, André Bishop. At the time both worked for Playwrights Horizons; Weitzman was the creator and Director of the Musical Theatre Program under Bishop who was Artistic Director. Weitzman's desire was to give new, young talent a safe haven in which they could work and develop, supporting them in their failures as well as their successes; Bishop allowed him to do just that ("A Chat;" Weitzman, "The Art"). It was kismet for the trio to meet. Both Flaherty and Weitzman have recalled multiple times how that first meeting went: Weitzman approached the pair at the end of the workshop, introduced himself, asked if they had any other pieces, and invited the pair to come work with him at Playwrights Horizons. Flaherty views this as every artist's dream come true: a benevolent supporter views one's work and simply walks up asking for more (Ahrens, "Downstage Center").

Weitzman got a grant for his new team and paired them with another new writer, George C. Wolfe, to be their librettist (Singer 53). Off the disappointment of not obtaining the rights for *Bedazzled*, Ahrens and Flaherty decided they wanted to write a musical from an original idea so they would not have to go through that process again. The new show was to be called *Antler*, a story taken from a newspaper clipping Ahrens found about an elderly South Dakota man who gave away his land to keep his town alive. Ahrens says they worked on *Antler* for about eight months but "decided it was an idea in

search of a real story” and it just was not going to work as a musical (“Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty,” *The Art* 9). The whole idea was scrapped, and Wolfe went on to have success as a playwright. The value Ahrens and Flaherty took from the experience was working with a third collaborator, which proved very useful later in their careers.

They next worked on a new adaptation of *The Emperor’s New Clothes* for the New York-based children’s theatre company TheatreWorks USA. The company is known for giving young artists just starting out actual working experience in their respective theatrical disciplines. This was a commissioned work for the pair, so they were fairly certain it would actually get produced. It was also Ahrens’ first attempt at writing the book for a show. She has recalled in multiple interviews that the experience of writing for children taught them how to read an audience’s level of interest in a piece, and children’s reactions are basically the same as adult reactions, just intensified and more vocal. The hour-long show was produced at Town Hall in New York for audiences of over one-thousand children (Ahrens, “Downstage Center”).

After these early learning experiences the pair returned to searching for their own material to adapt. Ahrens has always found source materials among old book bins and movie shelves; several of their shows have been the product of this scouring. It was in this way she found the novel *The Man Who Broke the Bank of Monte Carlo* by Michael Butterworth. This book would become Ahrens and Flaherty’s first musical for Playwrights Horizons, *Lucky Stiff*. In Ahrens’ adaptation of Butterworth’s novel, Harry Witherspoon, a timid English shoe salesman, is given the chance of a lifetime when he learns he is the lone heir to the wealth of a late American uncle he has never met. To

gain the sizeable inheritance Harry must take his dead uncle's corpse on one final trip to Monte Carlo where the deceased has arranged all the details for a fabulous vacation.

Lucky Stiff only ran fifteen performances at Playwrights Horizons, but perhaps its greatest importance was it put Ahrens and Flaherty on the greater musical theatre map. It did enough to win a Richard Rodgers Production Award in 1988. Weitzman and Bishop were quick to tell Ahrens and Flaherty they wanted to help the latter pair develop their next project, which would again come from Ahrens' combing book shelves, and would prove to be one of their greatest successes.

Ahrens discovered *My Love, My Love* by Rosa Guy, a Caribbean retelling of *The Little Mermaid*, about a week after *Lucky Stiff* closed. They immediately began work on a show adapted from this novel; within a year it was in production. Set against a backdrop of "two different worlds never meant to meet" where "temperamental gods rule," *Once On This Island* is the story of a young orphaned peasant girl with a desire for love and a more worldly life than the one she has (Ahrens, *Once* 3). Ahrens and Flaherty expanded the meaning of the novel to include statements about racial and cultural divisions between the mulatto ruling class and the dark-skinned peasants of Haiti. There are also subtle comments about the differences in religious beliefs, a Christian monotheistic belief of the wealthy versus the polytheistic beliefs of the peasants (K. Jones, "Playbill").

They worked on the show for about nine months, again without having secured the rights to do so. Ahrens recalled they "had virtually written the whole show by the time we actually got to meet Rosa Guy" (K. Jones, "Playbill"). Guy agreed to give them the rights provided they present her four songs. With that presentation, Ahrens and

Flaherty were officially allowed to continue their work. After some rewrites the show formally premiered at Playwrights Horizons in the spring of 1990.

A feature of many Ahrens and Flaherty musicals is a storytelling framework. Early in its development, *Once On This Island* became their first show to adopt this element. According to Ahrens, their director-choreographer Graciela Daniele (who would go on to work with them several times) suggested at the first rehearsal that the show begin with a storm and the young girl who eventually becomes Little Ti Moune in the presentation of the story be moved downstage center to have the adults calm the child by telling her the story (K. Jones, “Playbill”). Ahrens believes this action instantly gave more purpose to the show, the reason we as a society pass tales on from one generation to the next.

Once On This Island ran at Playwrights Horizons for twenty-four performances in May 1990. The brief off-Broadway run at Playwrights was brought on by the Shubert Organization, Capital Cities/ABC, Inc., et. al., bringing the show to Broadway. By October of that year, *Once On This Island* opened at the Booth Theatre and enjoyed a fourteen-month run. In a year that did not see many promising new musicals open in New York, *Once On This Island* was a glimmer of hope for the form. It was honored with eight Tony Award nominations, including Original Book for Ahrens, Original Score for Flaherty and Ahrens, and Best Musical (“Lynn Ahrens,” IBDB). The show was shut out from any wins but it greatly helped to establish Ahrens and Flaherty’s collective career as a legitimate musical theatre composition team. It also remains the one musical in their canon that Ahrens feels does not need any extra work: “I’ve never thought that for a minute. I think it about every other show, but not that one” (K. Jones, “Playbill”).

In 1992 André Bishop and Ira Weitzman left Playwrights Horizons to take on the same jobs with the much larger Lincoln Center Theatre. At that time Ahrens and Flaherty had been working on a piece based on the 1982 Peter O'Toole/Marc Linn-Baker movie *My Favorite Year* with librettist Joseph Dougherty. It was commissioned as part of a workshop for SUNY-Purchase called *New Musicals* (Singer 74). The workshop did not survive past its first season but *My Favorite Year* was adopted by Weitzman and Bishop at Lincoln Center. The movie and musical tell the story of a young writer's first job on the staff of a *Your Show of Shows*-type of variety television program in the 1950s. As with *Once On This Island*, *My Favorite Year* casts its central character, Benjy Stone, in the role of active narrator telling his own story, exploring themes of hero worship, growing up, and accepting the responsibilities of adulthood.

My Favorite Year was not as big a success as everyone involved had hoped. It opened on the Vivian Beaumont stage at Lincoln Center on December 10, 1992 and did not fare well. Due to poor reception, it only managed a run of thirty-six performances with forty-five previews ("Lynn Ahrens," IBDB). In hindsight Weitzman believes the show "was a victim of bigness. Big theater, big Broadway musical expectations, big pressure to succeed" (Singer 75). Ahrens somewhat echoes that reflection in that she and Flaherty "were young writers and it was a big, big show . . . and we just weren't as polished in terms of knowing what's needed and when you're in a big production [that is] barreling ahead toward opening night and you're restricted . . . it's very difficult even in the best of circumstances" (Ahrens, "Interview"). She also said with Dougherty living in Los Angeles and them living in New York, it was a little problematic writing long distance. Despite the poor reviews and quick closing, *My Favorite Year* was not a

complete failure. While Ahrens and Flaherty were shut out of any award talk, it did garner Tony Award nominations for Lainie Kazan, reprising her role from the original film as Benjy's mother, and Tim Curry playing Swann; and wins for Andrea Martin as Alice Miller, a senior writer on the show, from the Tony Awards, Drama Desk, and Theatre World.

For the next few years there was not much new music or theatre coming out of the collective Ahrens and Flaherty camp. In 1994, Ahrens got the opportunity to write lyrics for a new version of *A Christmas Carol* with composer Alan Menken; she also co-wrote the book. Originally produced by Radio City Entertainment, the show ran during ten holiday seasons at the Theatre at Madison Square Garden in New York. It was also adapted into a television movie in 2004.

While Ahrens was busy working on *A Christmas Carol*, Flaherty went to London to get *Once On This Island* produced. It premiered at the Birmingham Rep in 1994, and then transferred to the Royalty Theatre in the West End (Shenton). This production was honored with an Olivier Award for Best Musical in 1995. It was also during this period of work outside their partnership that Flaherty contributed original incidental music to Neil Simon's 1997 play *Proposals*.

The next output from Ahrens and Flaherty as a team was not for the theatre but an animated feature film. In 1997, Twentieth Century Fox released *Anastasia* based on the historical Romanov family of Russian royalty whose members were all executed during the Russian Revolution. This story postulates the family's youngest daughter escapes the fate of her family and through a series of events is able to return to Russia and reclaim her place on the throne. *Anastasia* was produced by former Disney artists Don Bluth and

Gary Goldman, patterned in the Disney vein. With that formula planned Ahrens and Flaherty were hired to write the songs for the film. In addition Flaherty contributed to the film's score with David Newman. Despite some lukewarm opinions of their music by prominent sources – the New York Times called them “generic pop songs . . . that don't quite measure up to Celine Dion's Disney hits;” while Roger Ebert for the Chicago Sun Times said “Only the songs disappoint” – the pair were honored with Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations for their work on the film (Holden; Ebert). In 1999, Flaherty joined Bluth and Goldman in revisiting this story for a straight-to-video sequel, *Bartok the Magnificent*.

Just because Ahrens and Flaherty did not present much new work over these few years does not mean they were not working. In fact, they were in development on what would eventually become their greatest success.

In the early 1990s, producer Garth Drabinsky's Livent, Inc. became a huge corporate presence on Broadway. It was responsible for bringing *Kiss of the Spider Woman* to Broadway as well as the massive revival of *Show Boat*, both shows directed by Harold Prince. Drabinsky, a Canadian, managed to obtain the rights to the quintessentially American novel *Ragtime* from author E.L. Doctorow on the condition that Doctorow retain all approval rights over the creative team; he had been less than pleased with the movie version of his novel and wanted assurance that any other adaptation would stay true to his story (Isaacson). Drabinsky took the idea to playwright Terrence McNally (who also wrote the libretto for *Kiss of the Spider Woman*) as a potential writer of the book. McNally wrote an eighty-page treatment of the novel of which Doctorow approved.

Having secured his librettist, Drabinsky next had to find his composer and lyricist. Given his relationship with Hal Prince, Drabinsky asked him for an opinion on how to select the right people for the job. Prince suggested asking writers to audition for the job, which typically means one goes directly to writers and ask them to write a couple of songs on spec. Drabinsky took Prince's suggestion and expanded on it. He researched the work of several writers, sent them all a small stipend and a copy of McNally's treatment, and asked them to send in their takes on the material, essentially turning the process into a giant competition (Isaacson). Ahrens and Flaherty were among the group of writers asked to submit samples. They were very excited to get the opportunity to submit songs for this show, especially in this competition format, as at the time they had been looking at projects with American themes, and given most of their previous works were smaller cast shows in off-Broadway spaces they felt as though no one would just offer them a show like *Ragtime* which was clearly going to be a very large show. The pair never knew who their competition was; to this day they claim they still do not know nor do they want to know. They quickly wrote four songs and went all out with the recording, making sure all vocal parts were covered ("Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty," *The Art* 16). When it came time to make his choice Drabinsky said Ahrens and Flaherty were so far ahead of everyone else in terms of ability that it was an easy choice to make. McNally said that he was given all of the demos blindly; he did not know whose tape belonged to whom. He was impressed with how one particular recording chose to tackle some of the harder moments in the story, not the quick, light and easy moments. When it came time to give his input, he said the only music that sounded like what he heard in his mind for the show was that from, what he soon came to

learn, Ahrens and Flaherty. Drabinsky and Doctorow both said the same thing, and Ahrens and Flaherty were subsequently hired (Isaacson). Proof of the impressiveness of their work lies in the fact that three of the four songs they wrote for their initial audition to get the job made it to the final draft of the show and almost entirely as originally written (“Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty,” *The Art* 16).

Their audition submission in response to McNally’s treatment was given to Drabinsky in October 1994. Over the next two years, the trio of writers worked swiftly to mold *Ragtime* into a complete show, always staying true to Doctorow’s original novel. Graciela Daniele was brought on as choreographer (although for this production she was officially credited for the “musical staging”), and Frank Galati was hired to direct. Many moments and songs were written, discarded, and rewritten over those months, either in private presentation to Drabinsky and his Livent team or from various public workshops. Even after its world premiere in Toronto and subsequent American premiere in Los Angeles, some final changes were made before it finally opened on Broadway in January 1998 (Ahrens, Bell, and McNally 11-12).

Ragtime is a story set at the beginning of the twentieth century in and around New York City at a time when American life was going through a great deal of change. It focuses on three families from very disparate walks of American life: an upper-class WASP family living in New Rochelle, an African-American musician who wants to make a good life for his young family, and a widower Jewish immigrant who brings his young daughter to the United States to live what he thinks will be the American Dream. Each of the three families is deeply affected by all the changes going on in the country and they all become interconnected by various events throughout the show. Once again,

the libretto of *Ragtime* was crafted to incorporate storytelling into its framework. Several characters throughout the show, either in dialogue or lyric, speak directly to the audience of themselves, revealing inner thoughts and feelings.

Ragtime is a grand, sprawling musical with a lavish score to match. The show enjoyed a two-year run on Broadway, playing 834 performances (“Lynn Ahrens,” IBDB). *Ragtime* garnered several nominations as it went into the 1998 awards season. The Drama Desk gave the show fourteen nominations with wins to Ahrens, Flaherty, and McNally for their individual contributions, William David Brohn for his orchestrations, and the show won for Outstanding New Musical. The Tony Awards were equally generous with thirteen nominations, again with wins for Ahrens and Flaherty for their score, McNally for his book, and Brohn for his orchestrations (“Lynn Ahrens,” IBDB). The show was shut out of Best Musical and its other creative and technical awards as it was in competition with the other big corporate musical of the season, *The Lion King*.

In 1997, Livent, Inc. acquired the rights to the canon of Theodore Geisel, more commonly known as Dr. Seuss (Pogrebin). By 1999, Livent was filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the United States, and its co-founders Garth Drabinsky and Myron Gottlieb were sued for fraud. The company was sold to SFX Entertainment (today known as Clear Channel Entertainment) that same year (Pogrebin). Amid all the financial turmoil, *Seussical: The Musical* was being developed. Drabinsky had brought in Monty Python alumnus Eric Idle to write the book (Pogrebin). Fresh off finalizing *Ragtime*, Flaherty said he wanted to do a comedy and when the opportunity to work on *Seussical* came about he thought it would be a great way to “create this wild musical world that wasn’t really rooted in any particular time or place” (Ahrens, “Downstage

Center"). He was excited to finally write in some musical styles that he could not with previous shows. Ahrens admits that Flaherty had to convince her to do this show, if only for her respect for Dr. Seuss' material (Ahrens, "Downstage Center"). The trio of writers began discussing ideas on how to make the collection of disjointed stories come together. Idle thought the show should be utterly chaotic with unexpected things happening all over the stage and the Cat in the Hat should be a central emcee character (Pogrebin). They decided that the musical would follow the adventures of Horton the Elephant and the original stories *Horton Hears a Who!* and *Horton Hatches the Egg* would become the framework for the musical. Frank Galati was again brought in to direct the show. Early readings of *Seussical* (with Idle playing the Cat in the Hat) were positive, but Idle claimed that soon after Livent's removal from the project Ahrens and Flaherty came to him saying they wanted to write the show themselves; he also left the production, although still received a credit as co-conceiver (Pogrebin).

Seussical was originally intended to be a simple show. The successful workshop production in Toronto in August 1999 featured Andrea Martin as the Cat and had the actors on a bare stage in plain clothes with simple props to represent its world (Pogrebin). It became the proverbial hottest ticket in town; it was very difficult to get a ticket. The buzz over *Seussical* was tremendous. With that, the lingering influence of Drabinsky and Livent, plus SFX bringing in Fran and Barry Weissler (in addition to the already established Universal Studios) as producing partners, the show grew very large and momentum carried it to a place it was never meant to go. Big name designers were brought in to create extravagant sets and costumes. Galati lost his path. By the time the out-of-town tryout opened in Boston any anticipation the show had generated fizzled out

and critics were not kind. Galati, among others, was fired and replaced by Rob Marshall, who was not given written credit. There have been several theories floated among industry insiders but no one has been able to pinpoint the direct cause of *Seussical*'s demise, least of all its composers. Ahrens said, "It was painful because I couldn't understand what was happening. I couldn't figure out the venom;" while Flaherty summed it up by saying "I've never experienced that in my life, the slow dismantling of a show. This thing you're trying to make gel – all of a sudden, parts are being removed bit by bit into the run" (Pogrebin).

By the time *Seussical* reached Broadway it was evident all the joy had gone out of the production. The show opened November 30, 2000 at the Richard Rodgers Theatre. The next morning Ben Brantley sounded like he was trying to be kinder than New York Times theatre critics usually are when a show failed for them. He acknowledged Ahrens and Flaherty's compositional gifts, and praised a couple of the performances, most notably by the "ever-likeable" Kevin Chamberlain for his portrayal of Horton the Elephant "that will no doubt bring him a Tony nomination and he has the virtue here of appearing to believe in what he's saying and singing" (Brantley, "The Cat"). Perhaps his kindest words sum up the feelings of everyone on the production: "Somewhere in *Seussical* are the vestiges of a charming, unpretentious show, with a blithe, hummable score . . . [B]y listening attentively . . . you may find you can hear a happy little show that might have been beneath all the layers of fat in this production" (Brantley, "The Cat").

In an effort to keep the floundering show afloat a string of celebrity performers were brought in as replacements: Rosie O'Donnell and Cathy Rigby successively filled in for the Cat in the Hat, and Aaron Carter was eventually brought in as JoJo. While some

suggested that O'Donnell's spontaneous irreverence was a spark the show needed, even the lure of celebrity could not help the stop the hemorrhaging (Pogrebin).

In a feat of clairvoyance, Brantley identified a couple of positive items for the future of *Seussical*. First, Chamberlain was in fact the lone Tony Award nomination for the show. He also picked up a nomination from the Drama Desk, as did Flaherty for his score ("Stephen Flaherty," IBDB). Brantley's second, albeit unintended, prediction was that theatre insiders did recognize the value of the show. With some revisions from Ahrens and Flaherty that brought the show back closer to their original intention of it being a far less-produced piece and more about the story-telling, two national tours were launched which were critically received far greater than any version previously seen (Ahrens, "Interview"). It also broadened the show's general exposure. On their website, Music Theatre International, who manages the amateur rights to *Seussical*, as well as the entire Ahrens and Flaherty catalogue, says the show was the most produced by high schools in 2004, its first year of availability, according to a survey taken by the National Thespian Society; and with three versions available it is consistently in the top three most licensed properties in their holdings ("*Seussical*"). Many interviewers have asked Ahrens and Flaherty about the negatives that came with the experience of the original production of *Seussical*. They do not deny the hardships they went through, but they always manage to steer the discussion to the life the show has taken since, occasionally hinting at a sense of vindication. As Ahrens put it, "It was the child that didn't do well in high school and grew up to have a good career anyway" (Ahrens, "Interview").

By all accounts, *Ragtime* was epic. From the unorthodox way in which Garth Drabinsky went about hiring his composers to the size of the cast and design elements to

the fallout from the fraud scandal to the story itself, nothing about *Ragtime* was small. After it opened in 1998 and it was such a positive experience for them, Ahrens and Flaherty agreed with Terrence McNally that they all needed to work together again. McNally brought them an idea for a new musical based on a small 1994 film that starred Albert Finney, *A Man of No Importance*. They quickly fell for the simplicity and humbleness of the story. The film takes place in Dublin in 1964 and centers on a middle-aged, sexually closeted bus conductor. Coincidentally, Flaherty had wanted to write an Irish show and had never written anything for a gay character, so *A Man of No Importance* seemed like a logical choice for their next project (Ahrens, “The Beauty”).

Their work for this show went much the same as it did for *Ragtime*: McNally would write a scene, and then Ahrens and Flaherty found the musical feel from that writing. Ahrens talked about how she responds to “the words on the page,” and that in working with McNally on both shows she would instantly hear “how to make [a scene] sing” just upon reading his text (Ahrens, “The Beauty”). Flaherty recalled that he first found the overall tone for the piece when writing a solo for the lead character, Alfie Byrne, which takes place in a private moment alone (Ahrens, “The Beauty”). While there are necessary upbeat and comic songs in the score, *A Man of No Importance* is a story with several characters that have secrets and dualities to their lives, so the music reflects their private and guarded natures. The quiet and isolated tone of the show and its relatively small chamber-sized cast made it a perfect fit for the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center that allowed Ahrens and Flaherty to reunite with Ira Weitzman and André Bishop. As the show was being developed, director Joe Mantello (who had never previously directed a musical) was brought on board and allowed to be a part of the

process. He did not become an imposition on the creative team or force his ideas on them, but he did make suggestions that aided them in perfecting their show. Ahrens and Flaherty recalled one specific instance wherein Mantello said he thought there should be a confessional scene in the show since these characters are so deeply rooted in their Catholic faith and it is a major driving force in their lives. This was not a scene in the original film. After multiple attempts at writing the song, trying to determine the emotion it should have, they came up with a song that was all at once humorous, poignant, and character-driven (“Chapter 5” 52).

A Man of No Importance opened at the Newhouse on October 10, 2002, once again to mixed reviews. No one was totally supportive of or contrary to the show. Generally, the reviews praised the creative team for its consistent talents, and a few actors for their performances, but believed the show missed the sentimentality it attempted to evoke. The show could not weather the mixed reviews and closed just after Christmas having played 124 performances. Despite the variance in opinion, come the 2003 awards season *A Man of No Importance* proved it was anything but unimportant. The Drama Desk honored it with seven nominations, including nods to Ahrens, Flaherty, McNally, and Mantello, as well as the show for Outstanding Musical; and the Outer Critics Circle gave the show three nominations, most notably winning for Outstanding Off-Broadway Musical. It was also awarded the 2003 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding New York Theatre: Broadway and Off-Broadway (“Lynn Ahrens,” Lortel Archives).

In 1986 Ahrens’ penchant for reading, especially when looking for possible new ideas for musicals, led her to a novel by Sherley Ann Williams titled *Dessa Rose*. She instantly loved the fictionalized account of two women who actually lived in the

antebellum South – one, a young black escaped slave who led an uprising; the other, a young white plantation owner’s wife abandoned by her husband who soon helps to free runaway slaves – and the author’s interest in what would have happened had these two women met. Around 1991, as she and Flaherty were looking for material for their next project, Ahrens recalled the novel and brought it out for him as a potential source. Flaherty was very taken with the story but was incredibly intimidated by its subject matter and density. This was early in their careers as writers and Flaherty says he was not emotionally ready to tackle a story of this magnitude (Ahrens, “Downstage Center”). He thanked Ahrens for introducing him to the novel but saw no way of musicalizing it.

Over the next decade Ahrens would repeatedly bring up the idea of *Dessa Rose* to Flaherty, insisting something was there. Flaherty refused every time saying he just could not hear it. Eventually Ahrens took it upon herself to just start writing. She loved the novel and was desperate for Flaherty to hear in it what she did, so she broke form from their typical process and wrote about fifty pages of text; as she put it, “something closer to opera with the words first . . . a little more free-form. Less standard musical theater” (Ahrens, “The Beauty”). By the summer of 2001, the pair decided they needed a vacation from the business and each other, so they took that summer off. Just before they parted ways, Ahrens presented her pages for *Dessa Rose* to Flaherty as a gift saying she would not bring it up again as a possibility for a musical if he still did not see it after reading her vision (Ahrens, “Interview”). In a culmination of influences – Ahrens’ ideas, rereading the novel, having worked on *Ragtime*, and just maturing as a writer – Flaherty was finally able to hear the characters and what *Dessa Rose* as a musical could be. Flaherty said the music came to him swiftly after that; for the next six weeks he set

Ahrens' words to music. In the great tradition of teams like Comden and Green, Ahrens and Flaherty have almost always worked together in the same room to develop their shows; it is a rare occasion in their collaborating that they have worked apart. Since they had never operated in this way before, Ahrens feared for many different outcomes, from not liking what Flaherty wrote to discovering that it really was never a good idea from the beginning. When they reconvened, Flaherty presented Ahrens with almost an hour of new music for *Dessa Rose* (Ahrens, "Interview"). From there they worked through several drafts, emailing their respective work back and forth to each other. In what Ira Weitzman referred to as "a coming of age for us and for them" and "coming full circle with the family," *Dessa Rose* would be workshopped and eventually produced at Lincoln Center with André Bishop and him (Weitzman, "The Art"). To complete the family circle, Graciela Daniele again directed and choreographed the show.

As a musical, *Dessa Rose* is told in flashback. Once again, Ahrens wrote a libretto that incorporated a storytelling framework. The actors who play Dessa Rose, the escaped slave, and Ruth, the Southern belle, move in and out of telling their individual versions of their stories. Within the stories they are young, as fits their appearances; while narrating they adopt raspier voices and hunches that indicate they are eighty years old and relaying their stories in old oral tradition.

Dessa Rose opened at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center on March 21, 2005 and played a little over two months. Most of the reviews agreed the major flaw in the show is it has so much going on that the audience could not come to care about its characters fast enough. They criticized the narrative element given to the principal women; reviewers found Dessa and Ruth going in and out of their storytelling and ages a

distracting device. As it was Ahrens who originally had the idea to use the novel as source material and felt she knew how to make Williams' characters speak and sing, it is ironic that her libretto was so criticized. Charles Isherwood, writing for the New York Times, said, "Ms. Ahrens, more experienced (and more gifted) as a lyricist than a book writer, is plainly not up to the tough task of shaping the material into feasible theatrical form . . . [She] makes the common mistake of attempting to squeeze the entire contents of the novel onto the stage" (Isherwood, "Worlds Apart"). Brooke Pierce, reviewing for TheatreMania.com, said Ahrens "does not really clue us in as to what this show is about until late in the proceedings." Another reviewer said the libretto "suffers from a relative lack of action, and a too-leisurely pace that imbues the proceedings with little energy;" in another bit of irony, Flaherty once said "there's so many action scenes in it [that] if it were a film there would be a lot of chases and on the road scenes" (Ahrens, "Interview"). Flaherty was given slightly more praise for his score. Isherwood said it was "alluring" with "appealing melodies" (Isherwood, "Worlds Apart"). Pierce said "[Flaherty] has written some thrilling music for *Dessa Rose*, yet this is not his most memorable score, and he seems to have allowed orchestrators . . . do a lot of the heavy lifting." Pierce also introduces a third bit of irony about the show: in her review she mentions that "Many of the songs bleed into one another with no room for applause." Ahrens responds by proudly admitting "That was a choice . . . There are really uncomfortable moments in [the show] and you don't want to ask for applause at those moments" (Ahrens, "Interview"). It may not be Flaherty's most memorable score or the duo's most memorable work but it did not go without some approval. It was nominated for Outstanding Off-Broadway Musical by the Outer Critics Circle ("Lynn Ahrens," Lortel Archives). The general

consensus of *Dessa Rose* seems to be it is a story that is worthwhile and important if too big and busy for a musical theatre adaptation. Its tale goes deeper than the obvious one, that of the evils inherent in slavery. It delves into the unlikely friendship of two women from seemingly disparate environments. Perhaps Pierce's final statement in her review best sums up *Dessa Rose*: "If fans of *Spamalot* are willing to forgive the flaws in that show because it is so much fun, then maybe aficionados of the serious musical will forgive the imperfections of *Dessa Rose* because it offers thought-provoking drama and an unusual story told by one of the musical theatre's most talented writing teams."

Later that year, Broadway saw the short-lived *Chita Rivera: A Dancer's Life*, a musical revue of the star's career. The libretto was written by Terrence McNally, and most of the songs included were from past shows Rivera was in; however, Ahrens and Flaherty were asked to contribute two original expository songs for the show.

Flaherty went to Chicago for the world premiere of another show, one which did not involve Ahrens. Frank Galati, in addition to being their directorial collaborator on previous shows, was a professor of performance studies at Northwestern University. Galati's career had also included success in adaptation, and he had a notion of turning the writings of Gertrude Stein into a musical. He recruited Flaherty to write the score for the piece. Their work consisted of Galati recording his own reading of Stein's writings, and then giving them to Flaherty to set to music. Early workshops saw the show with the title *A Long Gay Book*, but it came to be named *Loving Repeating*. The "chamber-scale musical," as it was billed, was produced by Chicago's About Face Theatre and the Museum of Contemporary Art, which had also worked on the pre-Broadway

development of the 2004 Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning play *I Am My Own Wife* (K. Jones, “Loving Repeating”).

There was no need for a formal lyricist or book writer for *Loving Repeating*. Virtually every word spoken or sung in the musical was written by Stein; she was actually given credit as the lyricist. Galati was credited as Adapter and Director. Musically, Flaherty took this opportunity to get quite creative. Instead of writing music specific to the period in which Stein lived and wrote, his score is full of vaudevillian-style sketches that include jazz, pop, and opera (K. Jones, “Loving Repeating”). While *Loving Repeating* never made it to New York, it did receive the 2005 Joseph Jefferson Award (Chicago’s highest theatre honor) for Best New Musical, once again showing the universal appeal of Ahrens and Flaherty’s work, whether collaborating together or with others (“Stephen Flaherty,” Lortel Archives).

Before Ahrens and Flaherty began writing together, Ahrens wrote with several different composers, one of whom was Margaret Pine (Ahrens, “Interview”). Pine introduced Ahrens to a novel by Francine Prose titled *The Glorious Ones* as a potential source for a musical. The women optioned the rights to the book and began working. Set in the world of *commedia del’arte*, the novel is a fictionalized account of a real-life troupe of Italian street performers, written in a non-linear fashion with each character telling his or her perspective on a particular moment in their collective experience. Ahrens and Pine were never able to figure out how to adapt the book for the stage so they put it aside (Ahrens, “Interview”).

A decade later, long after Ahrens and Flaherty formed their partnership and were looking for new projects, Ahrens remembered she still had the rights to *The Glorious*

Ones and knew they were about to expire. Ahrens re-optioned the book and contacted Pine for permission to attempt the adaptation with Flaherty, to which Pine consented. The struggles continued for Ahrens with Flaherty. They developed and workshopped the show, again with aid from Lincoln Center, but it never felt like they were getting the results they wanted. They met with Prose to discuss their hardships with her novel. She gave them more insight to her characters and their world (Ahrens, "Downstage Center"). From Prose's input Ahrens and Flaherty were finally able to shape the novel into a form that would work on stage. They were soon contacted by Ted Pappas, the Producing Artistic Director at the Pittsburgh Public Theater, to work on their latest show there. They brought in Graciela Daniele to direct and choreograph. Finally, after years of labor, *The Glorious Ones* had its world premiere at the Pittsburgh Public Theater on April 27, 2007. Flaherty insisted this was a stand-alone production, not just an out of town tryout for New York (Rawson).

The Pittsburg press was generous with its praise for the world premiere of *The Glorious Ones*, and not just because Flaherty was a native son. The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review said, "*The Glorious Ones* is likely to add to the collaborator's reputation. Much thought and creativity . . . has gone into this production, and that investment pays off with nuanced performances, a narrative that flows as smoothly and swiftly as a stream, a breezy score and a handful of songs capable of standing on their own" (Carter). The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette comments "[G]lory and sparkle are certainly enhanced when the home team wins, as they do at the Public [Theater] with this sweetly comic parable of the mixed melancholy and joy of creation" (Rawson). Variety also reviewed the Pittsburgh show, albeit with less enthusiasm than the local papers: "The strength of this piece is that

it tries hard . . . to reach beyond such limiting confines [of period *lazzi* . . . Flaherty's score is] chock full of lovely melodies that dance in the brain" (C. Jones).

Marking the sixth time Ahrens and Flaherty would work with Ira Weitzman and André Bishop, *The Glorious Ones* made it to New York later that fall, opening at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center on November 5, 2007. Many of the cast from Pittsburgh came with the production; the notable addition was Marc Kudisch assuming the lead role of Flaminio Scala. Reviews for the New York production were similar to that in *Variety* for the Pittsburgh show. The *New York Times* called it "a sweet but strange hybrid, both joyfully naughty and totally innocuous" (Isherwood, "Those Smutty"). On *TheatreMania.com*, Brian Scott Lipton suggested "While this gentle and loving valentine to actors doesn't rank among [Ahrens and Flaherty's] more substantial achievements, it's nonetheless a generally pleasing and occasionally effervescent diversion." The show earned a few award nominations: the Outer Critics Circle gave a nod to the show for Best New Off-Broadway Musical. The Drama Desk also honored the show for Best Musical and both Ahrens and Flaherty received nominations for their respective work ("Lynn Ahrens," Lortel Archives).

As previously noted, as of 2002 Ahrens felt that every one of her shows, with the exception of *Once On This Island*, could use some extra work. To that end, there are several examples of revisions or possible revisions Ahrens and Flaherty have done to their existing canon. A successful Off-Broadway revival of *Seussical* was seen at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in New York in the summer of 2007 which Flaherty said "felt very much in the spirit of the original workshop" (Ahrens, "Interview"). The production was nominated for a 2008 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Revival ("Lynn Ahrens,"

Lortel Archives). On a larger stage, *Ragtime* was revived on Broadway during the 2009-2010 season from a transfer that was originally produced at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. This production pared down some of the grandeur that the original was given. The cast was not quite as large and the sets were not as literal as Garth Drabinsky had envisioned it. The show only ran sixty-five performances with twenty-eight previews, but it caught the attention of the awards committees and was honored with several Tony Award and Drama Desk nominations, including Best Revival of a Musical for both awards (“Lynn Ahrens,” IBDB). As of 2007, the team was working on revisions for *My Favorite Year* (Ahrens, “Interview”).

In addition to reworking some of their shows, other important work has been done involving the team. After Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, a group of New York actors went to the city and ran a production of *Once On This Island* with local teenagers. A documentary film titled *After the Storm* was made of the entire production process. *After the Storm* is not so much about the show itself, but about the hopes and emotions of the kids involved in it and what they were living through. Flaherty contributed incidental music to the film. Also, much in the same way those early workshops and Ira Weitzman helped them, Ahrens and Flaherty now co-chair the Dramatists Guild Jonathan Larson Fellows Program which helps new playwrights and musical theatre artists (“Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty,” *The Art* 8). They are also both involved with ASCAP panels (Ahrens, “Talkin’ Broadway”).

Ahrens and Flaherty always have new work in development. In addition to various concert pieces and contributions to films and benefits, they are collaborating on two major theatrical works. The first is a teaming with director-choreographer Susan

Stroman on a new musical about the real-life relationship between French artist Edgar Degas and a young ballerina who posed for him. Titled *Little Dancer*, the part fact, part fiction musical will get its world premiere at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Eisenhower Theatre in October 2014 (Gans).

The second show is already in production. Ahrens and Flaherty have been working with librettist Thomas Meehan on a musical adaptation of the first *Rocky* film. Meehan was first approached by Sylvester Stallone, the property's owner and original star, in 2003 (Healey). Ahrens and Flaherty were eventually brought on to write the music. After years of development, *Rocky the Musical* saw industry readings in New York City in 2011, and had its world premiere in Hamburg, Germany in November 2012 with Stage Entertainment, a European production company, as the lead producer for the show. In April 2013, Playbill.com announced *Rocky* will arrive on Broadway in February 2014 (Hetrick).

Much like the title character of *Rocky*, Ahrens and Flaherty continue to be underdogs in the greater musical theatre world despite the successes they have had. Their reviews are not always the greatest, yet they manage to stay true to their own collective vision. Their long-standing partnership has produced some of the most unique, memorable, and lasting music and musical theatre. Despite what anyone has said about a particular show or production, the one consensus stated repeatedly is that Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty are unequivocally one of the best musical theatre writing teams working today, and there is no indication they will not be for decades to come.

CHAPTER III - CANON ANALYSIS

As evidenced in the previous chapter, the pieces that make up Ahrens and Flaherty's body of work are about as dissimilar as can be. There is very little that can connect each of their musicals together thematically. Flaherty's vast musical knowledge is well-represented throughout his career as his compositions for the musical theatre are diverse in style yet match perfectly with the show for which they are written; a song from *Once On This Island* would be very out of place in *A Man of No Importance*. Ahrens' lyrics more often than not help inform and enhance her characters. While several songs from their shows can be (and have been) performed as stand-alone pieces, they are all integrated into the fabric of their respective show's stories. Ahrens and Flaherty do not purposely set out to write the next big pop song; they write songs for the musical theatre for specific moments within a show. They can write to assignment when hired for a project, as with *Ragtime* or *Rocky*, and they can write to their own creative vision. With all that said, there are a few key elements that do in fact inform most of Ahrens and Flaherty's work, but without knowing them one might not recognize a show as theirs. By analyzing a sampling of their canon one can see these subtle commonalities while still acknowledging their variety and uniqueness.

There is almost always a narrative element to an Ahrens and Flaherty show. This is not to say there is always an omniscient narrator standing permanently on stage with the sole purpose of telling the story. Characters within the musical will often break the proverbial fourth wall to direct address the audience to either introduce themselves or tell a part of the story, or the storytelling is incorporated into the show itself. Oftentimes the librettist took direct quotes from the show's source material. For the book of *Once On*

This Island Ahrens transformed lines of text from the novel *My Love, My Love* into lines for her characters. The opening lines of the novel and the musical are nearly identical:

There is an island where rivers run deep. Where the sea sparkling in the sun earns it the name Jewel of the Antilles. (Ahrens, *Once* 1; Guy 9)

As the respective storytellers adopt their god characters within the tale they are telling to the scared young girl (before she, too, becomes a part of the story), they each introduce themselves in character yet still as storytellers:

MAMA:

Ah, such temperamental gods rule our island.

ASAKA:

Asaka, Mother of the Earth.

AGWE:

Agwe, God of Water.

ERZULIE:

Erzulie, beautiful Goddess of Love.

PAPA GE:

And Papa Ge, sly Demon of Death. (Ahrens, *Once* 1-2)

Throughout the entire libretto of *Once On This Island* roles are called both Storyteller and whichever character an actor is portraying within the story (Asaka, Daniel, Tonton, Guard, etc.). This device helped Ahrens and Flaherty keep their cast size down as each Storyteller (aside from the actor who becomes the adult Ti Moune) takes on multiple characters at various points in the story.

Interestingly, the same thing occurred as Terrence McNally wrote the book for *Ragtime*, making it an even greater coincidence that he and Garth Drabinsky chose Ahrens and Flaherty's demo tape when deciding on the composers to write the music for the show. McNally used much of E.L. Doctorow's original text, taking narration and giving it to characters, again as in the opening line of the musical:

THE LITTLE BOY:

In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York, and it seemed for some years thereafter that all the family's days would be warm and fair. (Ahrens, *Ragtime* I-1)

McNally also used the text as narrative lines for a character to describe himself or herself in the third person:

EMMA GOLDMAN:

And although the newspapers called the shooting the Crime of the Century, Goldman knew it was only 1906 . . . (Ahrens, *Ragtime* I-6)

McNally repeated the technique of characters speaking about themselves by name in the libretto for *A Man of No Importance*. In the song "Going Up," the vocal sections are interspersed with each of the Players introducing himself or herself as though proudly reading his or her own bio in a playbill:

CARNEY:

Mr. Carney, a familiar and beloved member of the St. Imelda's Players, is best known for his performances as Denny O'Connell, the irate father, in *A Night on the Town*, and Long John Silver in his own

adaptation of *Treasure Island*, for which he also provided additional staging.

MRS. GRACE:

Margaret Grace returns to St. Imelda's after a brief absence brought on by her husband's condition. Maggie is perhaps best remembered for her Katisha in *The Mikado* and her portrayal of St. Joan. Her watercolors may be seen in the lobby. They are for purchase.

MISS CROWE:

Oona Crowe was Miss Prism in last season's performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* but her favorite role remains the title one in our centennial production of *Peter Pan*.

ERNIE:

Ernest Lally will be remembered by St. Imelda's audiences for his sterling portrayal of Mustard Seed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

(Ahrens, *A Man* 24-26)

Librettist Joseph Dougherty begins *My Favorite Year* with Benjy Stone alone on stage introducing himself and setting up the story about to be seen:

BENJY:

My name is Benjy Stone and I want to tell you about 1954 which was my favorite year. Not my best year, not the year I had the most success, but my favorite year. (Ahrens, *My Favorite Year* 1-1)

Benjy remains an omniscient narrator, moving in and out of the principal action, adding bits of personal perspective to his story of his first comedy writing job:

BENJY:

God, once, just once, I wanted to sneak in and diddle the clocks so we'd go on the air five minutes early; so America would see the show before the show. But back then they were a lot more careful about violence on television (1-1).

I didn't just *want* to write that sketch. I was destined to write it. You gotta understand, this wasn't just any movie star (1-2).

I can still see it. All of them standing there, looking at the door. Waiting for a hero . . . The door was closed and it stayed closed. Alan Swann never opened it. He never came through that door (2-6).

The narrative approach is not limited to spoken lines. Ahrens' lyrics often incorporate the narrative element throughout their shows as well. The title song of *A Man of No Importance* has several characters introducing, or at least identifying, themselves in the third person:

LILY:

A woman is sliding two eggs on a plate,

Calling her brother:

"Now Alfie,

You're late!"

.....

CARNEY:

And the butcher next door waves goodbye

.....

ROBBIE:

Enter Robbie Fay.

Driver of the bus.

Just another day

For the two of us.

.....

ADELE RICE:

A blue-coated girl

No one's noticed before

Enters the bus,

Takes a seat by the door . . . (Ahrens, *A Man* 9-10, 15)

In adapting the various Dr. Seuss stories for *Seussical*, Ahrens liberally used lines from the source books. Once they “found the Horton stories which are . . . the most dramatic and the highest profile stories of everything [Dr. Seuss] wrote,” Ahrens was able to piece together her book and lyrics for the musical (Ahrens “Downstage Center”). Much of Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who!* and the tale of Gertrude McFuzz – originally in *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* – are verbatim in *Seussical* as are portions of other Dr. Seuss stories such as *Horton Hatches the Egg*. Still other Dr. Seuss stories are important to *Seussical* and influence its songs and titles: *McElligot’s Pool* becomes “It’s Possible” as Jojo goes into one of his “thinks.” *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* translates to a song simply called “How Lucky You Are” in which several characters, over multiple reprises, lament their misfortunes yet somehow remain optimistic about their futures. Even *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is briefly featured, although it was

cut from later revisions of the show. The third person narrative is again used as several characters actually partake in narrating their own stories while remaining active participants in them:

HORTON:

One the fifteenth of May
In the Jungle of Nool
In the heat of the day,
In the cool of the pool,
He was splashing
Enjoying the jungle's great joys
When Horton the Elephant
Heard a small noise. (Ahrens, *Seussical* 8)

GERTRUDE:

There once was a girl bird named Gertrude McFuzz
And she had the smallest plain tail ever was.
One droopy-droop feather, that's all that she had.
And oh! That one feather made Gertrude so sad. (Ahrens, *Seussical*
34)

Much of an Ahrens and Flaherty musical is sung. While not through-composed as Andrew Lloyd Webber or Boublil and Schönberg write, Ahrens' lyrics must do more to further plot and inform character than other musicals of the past. She writes words for her characters that are fitting for them and their environments. *Once On This Island* is very rooted in the spirituality of the peasants, therefore full of prayers. *Ti Moune* is a

young woman fully devoted to her faith, yet yearns for much more than the peasant's life she has been given. Her first solo "Waiting for Life" is a naïve child's prayer to the island gods to fulfill her wishes of excitement, beauty, and love in her worldly life:

TI MOUNE:

My stranger!

One day you'll arrive

Your car will stop

And in I'll hop

And off we'll drive . . . we'll drive!

Oh, gods

Oh, gods

Please, be there

Don't you remember

Your little Ti Moune from the tree

Wake up!

Look down!

Hear my prayer

Don't single me out

And then forget me . . . (Ahrens, *Once* 12)

From this song the audience learns of Ti Moune's feelings and desires. Her character and what she wants are established. When Daniel's car crashes near her village, Ti Moune decides the gods' purpose for saving her life when she was young are to love, care, and watch over Daniel. In response to Ti Moune's prayer, the gods exhibit their respective

personalities, which are all associated with their individual domains, as they concoct a challenge among themselves using Ti Moune as a pawn:

ASAKA:

Knock some sense in her head.

AGWE:

Splash her with a wave.

PAPA GE:

Scare her half to death.

.....

ERZULIE:

Give her what she wants.

Love has many powers

If the love is true

(To Asaka) It can cross the earth

(To Agwe) And withstand the storm

(To Papa Ge) It can conquer even you!

I will give her strength

When the time is right

ASAKA:

I will guide her way

PAPA GE:

I will make her choose! (Ahrens, *Once* 14-15)

In *My Favorite Year* Benjy sings “Larger Than Life” in which he explains his hero worship of Swann and sums up every motivation for his choices in life:

BENJY:

Daring, loyal

Kind but courageous

A hero as big as a Buick

With a cape, a sword and a bevy of maidens.

.....

Life wasn't Alan Swann or Robin Hood

Life was your father going out

For cigarettes

And deciding he was going out for good . . . (Ahrens, *My Favorite Year* 1-2)

Swann also presents his character flaws in song. The first act ends with Swann singing “If The World Were Like the Movies” in which he imagines a perfect world for Benjy wherein people can simply edit out all of the hurtful and negative moments in their lives, but then the song twists as he laments his estranged relationship with his daughter:

SWANN:

Think, if marriages were movies

How our lives would be improved

.....

Cut to smiling man and wife

With a baby and a life

And the child would have
A father who was always there,
Never absent, never cruel,
Not a drunk. Not a fool!

.....

If the world were like the movies
I'd know how to play the part.
I'd be there when I was needed
And I'd never break her heart. (Ahrens, *My Favorite Year* 1-9)

This is followed at the beginning of Act II with a drunken Swann singing “Exits” that not only goes deeper into his failed family life, but reveals how his career fell apart:

SWANN:

I've walked out on Harry Cohn
Told Goldwyn, “Hold the phone!”
Quit Louie B.
Used my name and fame and clout
And I kept walking out
Till my career walked out
And wife and child walked out
On me . . . (Ahrens, *My Favorite Year* 2-1)

Ahrens' lyrics will not only be revealing to the audience but also give characters a private moment of self-revelation. Towards the end of *Ragtime*, Mother finally admits the divide that has been growing between Father and her that the audience has observed

from the beginning of the show. As she becomes more confident in her own voice and strengths as a woman and a human being she realizes she will never again sit under Father's thumb and go "Back to Before:"

MOTHER:

There was a time
When you were the person in motion.
I was your wife.
It never occurred to want more
You were my sky,
My moon and my stars and my ocean.
We can never go back to before. (Ahrens, *Ragtime* II-33)

A Man of No Importance places Alfie in a scene in which he is staring at himself in the mirror fighting an internal struggle one can deduce he has with himself every night. He fears his homosexual feelings and knows his life is slipping away from him as he hides from the real world, either within his theatre group or alone in his room at home. While he sings "Man in the Mirror," Alfie invokes the spirit of his hero Oscar Wilde for support, advice, and pity. The audience gathers this is the first time he has even come close to verbalizing his true nature to himself or anyone:

ALFIE:

Man in the mirror
Staring back,
You're afraid of your own reflection.
All that you want

And dream . . . and lack
And there's no one but you to blame.
Afraid of the world
Afraid of myself
And the love that dare not speak
Its name . . .

OSCAR WILDE:

And that name is . . .

ALFIE:

Robbie. (Ahrens, *A Man* 56-57)

Stephen Flaherty's music is so varied from show to show that just upon listening to a cast recording one will probably not hear much similarity in musical style. Their songs fit the themes of the show for which they were written. One could argue this is true of all composers but it has often been recognized that there is not one distinct "Flaherty sound." He and Ahrens are very conscious of their choice to never repeat themselves (Ahrens, "Interview"). He is learned in so many forms of music that when he writes in any of them it is seamless.

Dance is an important feature of the spirituality of the peasants in *Once On This Island*, so the score is full of percussive Caribbean dance rhythms and emphasis from the orchestra's horn section. *My Favorite Year* is homage to classic television production, a time when orchestral music was used in grand fashion for overtures and underscoring, so the musical's score had to reflect the emotions the music of the time invoked. It is a full

orchestra with emphasis on the strings and brass that are commonly used in fanfare and big presentation.

The score for *Ragtime* is obviously defined by its title. The rags Flaherty wrote use as much syncopated piano and banjo as anything Scott Joplin himself wrote. The brass section is prominent in most songs that have something to do with an entertainment of the time: “The Crime of the Century,” Evelyn Nesbitt’s testimonial at her husband’s murder trial, is a big number taken right out of the vaudeville world in which she lived and features bold trumpets; as does “Buffalo Nickel Photoplay, Inc.,” Tateh’s telling of how he transformed himself into the successful movie director Baron Ashkenazy; while the comedy in “What a Game,” Father’s outing with the Little Boy to a baseball game, is emphasized with staccato trombones. Anything pertaining to the WASP family, especially with Mother, is represented with more legato strings.

With *A Man of No Importance* being set in Ireland, one assumes the score of a musical to be replete with flutes and traditional Irish folk melodies, which it is. However, the show is also greatly affected by the Catholic Church as well as other things that were happening musically in pop culture at that time, not the least of which was the middle of Beatlemania, so Flaherty’s score reflects those influences as well through the use of subtle liturgical and pop music flavors.

The one curiosity in terms of musical style in the Ahrens and Flaherty catalogue is *Seussical*, but it is easily explained. Since the Dr. Seuss world is fantasy and nondescript it afforded Flaherty the opportunity to really do whatever he wanted. Flaherty talked about how he grew up on R&B music and had always wanted to use that style in a musical (Ahrens, “Interview”). When *Seussical* came along he finally found a place

where it could work. All of the songs in the Jungle of Nool are rooted in early R&B and even lean into gospel during Horton's trial. It is interesting to see how in this case the music influenced character even more so than the lyrics: the Sour Kangaroo is blatantly an Aretha Franklin-type complete with deferential nods to Franklin's songs "Respect" and "Think" inserted in two of her solos, while the Wickersham Brothers could be any harmonizing soul group from the 1960s. Furthermore, where R&B defines the Jungle of Nool and its inhabitants, strings and wind chimes indicate the soft-hearted dreamy life of Horton; and quirky, almost calliope-like woodwinds such as clarinets and flutes identify the world of the Whos. So each main setting and group of characters again has its own defining style of music and instrumentation, much the same as occurred in the score for *Ragtime*.

It should be noted that much of the feel of the scores comes from the work of orchestrators. Flaherty puts great trust in his orchestrators to aid in creating just the right sound for a show. In discussing his relationship with an orchestrator Flaherty said, "The orchestrator and I are Siamese twins" (Ahrens, "Interview"). He has developed tremendous working relationships with his orchestrators, most notably Michael Starobin, and William David Brohn and Christopher Jahnke, as is evidenced by the fact that he has worked with them on several occasions. Flaherty also talked about how he and the orchestrator must speak the same artistic as well as personal language to achieve their goals of finding the right sound for a particular moment. Ahrens added that her only contribution to the orchestrations comes when she hears something that simply does not feel correct for a character at a particular moment, and then Flaherty and the orchestrator are able to make an appropriate adjustment. Their summation of the orchestration topic

boils down to Flaherty finding the balance in music between the passion and the science, where Ahrens admits she “only knows the passion” (Ahrens, “Interview”). To that end, they have been very reliant on their orchestrators to come up with just the right instrumentation to help define their characters and evoke the correct emotional response from an audience for any given moment in a show.

Most musicals from the so-called Golden Age of musical theatre began with a grand overture followed by an entr’acte after the intermission. Snippets of several songs from the show are arranged into a medley as a kind of preparation for an act to begin. As the form progressed overtures became less mandatory. The musicals of the Ahrens and Flaherty catalogue generally fall under the latter type. Their scores typically do not include overtures or entr’actes much longer than a minute if they include one at all, and instead of ending, they simply blend into the opening song or scene.

What their shows do almost invariably include is a large company number at the beginning of every piece. The narrative element is usually woven into the fabric of the song, the overall atmosphere of the musical is established, and most of the major characters are introduced within it. *Once On This Island* begins with the sounds of the raging storm, and then goes into the adults telling the story of Ti Moune to the little girl. The story immediately becomes the song “We Dance,” which is a wild rhythmic celebration of life and prayer to the peasants’ gods. The three worlds in which the characters live are established: the peasant village, the wealthy hotel in the city of the upper class, and the realm of the gods. In addition, the first taste of the love story between Ti Moune and Daniel is shown as the actors portraying them separate

themselves from the group to join each other but are stopped as they are from “two different worlds never meant to meet” (Ahrens, *Once* 3).

As previously noted, *My Favorite Year* begins with Benjy Stone alone on stage introducing his story. As he narrates his memories the world of the television studio erupts behind him. “Twenty Million People” involves almost the entire company as it depicts the anticipation of the live broadcast that is about to begin. Amidst the chaos, Benjy introduces King Kaiser; the writing staff; and K.C. Downing, King’s assistant and Benjy’s love interest. Even Benjy’s mother makes an appearance in the opening as she calls him to discuss their dinner plans for the following evening but then rushes off the phone as the show is about to begin. The song helps establish Benjy’s world, his excitement for reaching his dream job, and his ability to romanticize everything.

The first thing heard in *Ragtime* is the title theme on a solo piano as the Little Boy sets the stage. From there all of the principal characters introduce themselves and then meld back into the familiar existence of their respective worlds. The main theme of *Ragtime* is about the blending of a new American melting pot but before that can be formed the individual ingredients must be seen in their own places before conflict brings them together. In the original staging, the three groups do all they can to avoid each other, yet as the music swirls and swells they end up intermingled in a foreshadowing of that new integrated family.

The opening number of *Seussical* simply sets up the fun nature of the show. Characters are again introduced, albeit not nominally but by a physical attribute. The Cat in the Hat lets the audience know he will appear throughout the show in various roles. The orchestrations are full of electric guitar and drum kit along with assorted silly noises

such as horns, breaking glass, and whistles. “Oh, The Things You Can Think” encourages the audience to not hold back with its “thinks” as there are no limits to one’s imagination, and in the world of Seuss anything can happen. It also serves as an important plot device as Horton and JoJo are full of “thinks.”

After the brief prologue scene that opens *A Man of No Importance* that establishes the play will actually be done as a flashback, the company sets the stage to represent an average day in Alfie’s life, defining him as the title character. This opening song is not as upbeat or active as the others previously mentioned, however the entire company is still involved and holds the same functions as every other Ahrens and Flaherty opening. The mood of the song is pleasant but slightly melancholy for the most part, fitting as it is essentially all about Alfie, musically describing his ordinary, unassuming life. The mood changes slightly as the other principle characters enter. For instance, as Robbie arrives the music briefly gets quicker and a little more raucous as that is his personality. By contrast, when Adele gets on the bus the music gets softer and even sadder than the number began, foreshadowing the secrets she carries about her past and present that are revealed later in the show. Once again, they used the convention of finding a sound that will follow a character throughout the show and introducing it at the outset.

The final shared feature of Ahrens and Flaherty musicals occurs in their climaxes. The protagonist of each show, who is typically an underdog of sorts, wants something more from his or her life and does not achieve it until forced into it by outside influence. The supporting characters or circumstances in which the protagonist finds himself or herself affect the choices he or she makes. The final result may not be the exact outcome

for which the protagonist was searching but it is the result which is ultimately best for his or her life.

In *Once On This Island*, Ti Moune does not hide her desire to have more than a peasant's life. She gets excited by the sounds of cars driving by on the shores near her village. She knows there is a larger world outside of her surroundings, and believes her destiny and love are there waiting for her. She prays to her gods to get there. As she cares for the injured Daniel, she makes a foolish bargain with the god of death; she will sacrifice her own life to save Daniel's. The climax occurs as Papa Ge hands Ti Moune a knife, offering to give back her life if she will kill Daniel as he sleeps for betraying her love by marrying another woman. For a moment it appears she will do it, but she drops the knife and continues expressing her love for Daniel. Notwithstanding her devotion, she is cast out of the hotel for her threat and shunned by him in preparation for his wedding to Andrea. She dies from her heartbreak, but the island gods show her compassion and transform her into a giant tree so she can watch over Daniel for the rest of his life, thus answering her prayers.

Benjy Stone is obviously the "my" in *My Favorite Year* and his desire, although not clearly known to him at the onset of the show, is to make his absent father want and love him. Of course Benjy's real father is never seen but he has made up a whole story for himself that his matinee hero, Alan Swann, would be an excellent replacement based solely on Swann's movie roles. Meanwhile his mother has moved on from the abandonment and remarried. Benjy has built up Swann so high in his fantasies that the idea of calling Rookie "stepfather" repulses him. It is his fantasy world versus his reality. Even as Benjy discovers that his idol is no better a father than his own, he attempts to

help Swann heal the estrangement Swann has with his own daughter, not knowing that Swann believes there is no hope for it and is ultimately too afraid of living a real life himself to try. As Swann leaves the studio in the middle of the live broadcast after they argue about Swann's place as a real father, Benjy is forced to admit his own life's realities: his father is gone and not coming back, a movie actor is merely playing a part in a film and that image may not be the actor's true nature, and his mother is happy in her new life and perhaps his stepfather is not such a bad person. The denouement is literally laid out for the audience as Swann does return to the broadcast, with expected dramatic flair, and is finally reunited with his daughter.

Ragtime is a little more difficult to pinpoint a sole protagonist as there is a central character in each of the three groups of people. Using the dramatic structure theory that says the protagonist must be present in the final scene, one can argue the protagonist is Mother as all the dramatic action that takes place throughout the show ultimately involves her, directly or indirectly. The climax of *Ragtime* occurs while the WASP family is in Atlantic City and Father learns he has been called to New York to either be a negotiator or hostage in the situation involving Coalhouse and his followers in their occupation of the Morgan Library. Mother is enjoying the end of a storm with the Little Boy and the baby when Father enters with his news. She is unencumbered by her rigid upper-class life and the expectations put upon her as dutiful wife and mother. Father snaps at Mother for always holding the baby and insists he will be a part of finishing the madness that Coalhouse has wrought and then their lives can return to normal. Mother plainly informs him their lives will never be what they once were. As he departs, Father kisses Mother telling her he loves her; all she can respond is "Be safe." Father has

known they have been growing apart but he naïvely believes it has been caused by the trouble with Coalhouse and that once it is eliminated from their lives they will be fine. Mother has her declamatory song “Back to Before” in which she expounds on her statement to Father, that she can never again be the submissive housewife with no real life of her own. In the epilogue it is revealed the Father has been killed, leaving Mother free to marry Tateh and thus forming their new integrated American family.

Seussical's climax comes during Horton's insanity trial. The Sour Kangaroo and all of the animals from the Jungle of Nool are present to testify against Horton and his claims of the existence of the Whos on the speck of dust. Just as it feels like the trial is getting out of hand and Horton will not be able to defend himself, he lets out an enormous trumpet to demand he be heard. Horton has not really stood up for himself in a strong way at any point before this. He has merely let life go on around him while he steadfastly tries to protect the Whos and Mayzie's egg. His statement is heard but the judge commits him anyway. Horton must then make one final plea to the Whos to prove their existence when the judge decrees the dust speck should be boiled away. Of course the resolution comes when JoJo hollers up his “YOPP!” and saves everyone. Horton finally realizes he is not as alone in the universe as he has thought, now with the companionship of his friends JoJo and Gertrude, the baby elephant bird that hatches from the egg, and the Sour Kangaroo who completely changes her tune and offers to help him protect the Whos.

Alfie is clearly the Man of *A Man of No Importance*, desperate to be accepted for who he is, especially by himself. He escapes into the world of his amateur theatre troupe; when he cannot be there he hides alone in his bedroom. He is not truly happy because he

fears his society and faith will not accept him if he admits the truth of his sexuality. Lily and Robbie both try to help Alfie live his life better in the manner they each think is best. The show climaxes when Alfie sees everyone in his life in love with someone – Lily and Carney, Adele with the father of her unborn baby, Baldy with his late wife, Robbie with Mrs. Patrick – and finally realizes he cannot live in hiding anymore. After walking in on Robbie and Mrs. Patrick in the middle of their affair, Alfie returns home to make himself up in full Oscar Wilde regalia and go out to fulfill the Wilde adage, “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it” (Ahrens, *A Man* 91). Alfie has been duped by Breton Beret, who beats up and mugs Alfie as a result, and Alfie is subsequently found out by Lily and Carney. Alfie’s ultimate reward is he no longer has to hide and his friends are still his friends.

Every other show in the Ahrens and Flaherty catalogue currently available have the same elements of narrative, musical and lyrical style and form, and climax resolved by the protagonist under external influence. With such a strong book writer as Thomas Meehan it will be interesting to see and hear the final product of *Rocky the Musical*, if it will also contain these same elements; since the show is still in development as of this writing and little has been released to the public, it is not possible to state anything definitively or even speculate. What is certain is for over thirty years Ahrens and Flaherty have developed routines and patterns that have kept them successful and relevant. Their originality and uniqueness always shine through.

CHAPTER IV – CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Without deeper analysis such as this, one may not see the subtleties of their style since their choices have been so diverse. With all of the evidence presented here regarding their creativity, disparity, and popularity, it is a wonder that their reception has been so widely, and unfairly, mixed critically. Throughout their careers, Ahrens and Flaherty have faced an excessive amount of varied reviews of their work. However, no matter what the reviewer's opinion of a particular show or production may have been, there was always consistency in the greater opinion that Ahrens and Flaherty have tremendous talents and are great songwriters, which again demonstrates their importance to the genre. Early in their partnership, Frank Rich described them as a team that "should be cherished both for their promise and for their willingness to embrace old-style musical-comedy silliness and romance without apologies" and as "a talented writing team whose future is more in need of guidance than luck" (Rich, "Lucky Stiff"). He went further in his review for *Once On This Island* by calling the production "[a] 90-minute Caribbean fairy tale told in rousing song and dance . . . a joyous marriage of the slick and the folkloric," concluding by saying the show leaves its "audience feel[ing] the otherworldly thrill of discovering the fabric of its own lives in an enchanted tapestry from a distant shore" (Rich, "*Once On This Island*"). Ben Brantley called them an "immensely gifted creative team" (Brantley, "Not Just"). He also said Ahrens was "an often elegant lyricist" and credited Flaherty with "ingenuity in the way [he] plays with traditional musical forms" (Brantley, "Ragtime"). Granted, these quotes are taken out of context from aforementioned mixed reviews; however, Rich and Brantley are known to be two of the harsher critics of Broadway theatre in the past few decades, and if even they

can publicly praise Ahrens and Flaherty's talents – all of these reviews having been published in the New York Times – then there is definitely something to be said for their place among musical theatre's great composition teams.

Unfortunately, these quotes are about as far in agreement as these critics and this author will go. Too often excellent productions will close earlier than expected due to poor reviews, and Ahrens and Flaherty have been victim of this more than their share of times in their careers. By sampling a few harsh critiques of their shows, an argument can be made to oppose the critics' opinions to make audience members wish they had focused on their own enjoyment more than listening to what critics had to say.

Frank Rich's New York Times review for *My Favorite Year* was less than stellar. While he praised the talents of Ahrens, Flaherty, and Dougherty as writers, and the supporting cast (specifically Martin and Kazan), he called the show "a missed opportunity" (Rich, "A Rosy View"). Rich felt the initial established plot of Benjy taking care of Swann to ensure the latter makes good for their television broadcast gets lost by the second act when the focus shifts to Swann's relationship with his estranged daughter and Benjy's relationship with the producer's assistant. This is not a valid enough reason to say the show has "an identity crisis," as Rich does. If the plot focused just on Benjy chasing the drunken Swann around New York City and Swann having his redemption moment in time to sober up and perform, it would be a completely different show. The fictional "King Kaiser Comedy Cavalcade" within the show is all about shtick, but the characters outside of that need to be seen as human. That is the whole point of *My Favorite Year*; its two leading men come to terms with maturing and acting as men, not just irreverent entertainers. Without the story lines involving the daughter and the

assistant, the whole musical may as well be a performance of the “King Kaiser Comedy Cavalcade;” audiences could have found old Sid Caesar and Carl Reiner recordings to satisfy that.

Despite the commercial success of *Ragtime*, it was not totally free from disapproval. Many criticized the show for being overproduced. Drabinsky was known for having a dictatorial style of producing and making everything absolutely pristine and precision perfect. Because of this, in his review for the New York Times, Ben Brantley offered a back-handed compliment of the production, calling it “a carefully constructed pastiche of period charm and contemporary mechanical efficiency [that] is less a celebration of theater per se than of theatrical technology and its smooth manipulation” (Brantley, “Ragtime”). He also said the show was “bafflingly static,” that it had “the earnestness of a civics lesson,” and that it lacked a “distinctive human personality” (Brantley, “Ragtime”). It is true there were many slick technological elements and theatre tricks incorporated into the original production, such as two ships literally passing during the song “Journey On,” or the caboose of a train pulling away with the Little Girl as Tateh chases after it; and it may be fair to say it all may have been a bit much. However, to say the show had no humanity because of the machinery could not be further from the truth. Humanity and emotion are at the core of *Ragtime*, and they are felt repeatedly throughout the score: “Journey On” is a lush trio between Mother, Father, and Tateh in which they each sing of love for their families and desire for better lives. Almost all of Tateh’s solos are for or about his daughter. Mother ultimately declares her independence with the firm belter “Back to Before.” Mother’s Younger Brother erupts with energy and anticipation when he accidentally wanders into Emma Goldman’s Union

Square rally and he finds his purpose. Coalhouse and Sarah top themselves with each subsequent song they have. The rising, swirling “New Music” that completes Coalhouse’s courtship of Sarah leads into “Wheels of a Dream” wherein the couple sings of a promising new life for their family. This is followed later by sheer agony as Coalhouse learns Sarah has been killed, and his rage gives him a focused need for vengeance, typified in “Coalhouse Demands,” until Booker T. Washington finally makes him see reason (“Make Them Hear You”). In short, there is nothing but humanity and personality in *Ragtime*, and to even suggest otherwise is to belittle everything Ahrens and Flaherty did in musicalizing Doctorow’s novel.

If Brantley was to be believed that in writing *A Man of No Importance* Ahrens and Flaherty “took the production’s title too much to heart [and it] never really delivers on its premise that ordinary souls harbor extraordinary feelings,” then it is no wonder the show closed after only two and a half months (Brantley, “Not Just”). It is as though he was looking for Alfie to throw himself a Pride Parade when the character finally decides to be honest with himself about who he is. These Dubliners are a reserved community. They are not going to expose themselves in public with great spectacle. Their solos are soft, private, and contemplative. This is why the St. Imelda’s Players get so excited about performing; they get their occasional tiny taste of exhibitionism they do not otherwise have in their lives while still remaining safe because they are playing a part. At the same time, Alfie allows himself the ability to continue hiding as the company’s director; he is not seen by the public at all. Charles Isherwood, reviewing for *Variety*, while not glowing, got it much better when he said, “Most musicals don’t aim for the virtue of modesty, so there’s something touching about the restrained ambitions of *A Man*

of No Importance . . . Its gentle-hearted charms may well please musical theatre lovers wanting a break from the bigger, brassier musical comedies flogging their glitzier attractions on Broadway” (Isherwood, “A Man”). There is certainly nothing wrong with big, brassy musicals, but *A Man of No Importance* is a comparatively quiet show with a beautiful score and reflective lyrics that makes a thinking audience care what happens to its characters and pulls for them to get whatever it is they seek.

One final thing that should not be overlooked when debating the value of Ahrens and Flaherty’s volume of varied reviews is the authors of their source materials. On more than one occasion, Ahrens and Flaherty have had to present songs to the original authors whose works they were trying to adapt, speaking specifically about *Once On This Island* (Rosa Guy), *Ragtime* (E.L. Doctorow), and *The Glorious Ones* (Francine Prose). In each case, they gave their music to the authors for approval or assistance, all in the interest of staying true to the author’s original intentions for their respective stories; and in each case, the original author did approve of what was heard. Granted, a novelist probably does not visualize his or her book dramatized on stage as it is being written. The point is one would assume the original author of a novel would be the harshest critic of someone attempting to adapt his or her work. With the praise given them by Guy, Doctorow, and Prose as they worked on each story, who is to say Frank Rich, Ben Brantley, or any “professional critic” should be believed when it comes to Ahrens and Flaherty’s work?

Obviously, no theatre artist is exempt from critics. There will always be those whose jobs are to analyze, and praise or condemn productions. There will also always be those patrons who unfortunately listen to these people and make their theatre-going choices based on the so-called professional’s opinions. Ahrens and Flaherty are

definitely no strangers to the effects the critics can bring. Hopefully, in this era where social media and public opinion tend to be at least equally as important as the professionals, Ahrens and Flaherty will see even greater success than they already have. Their immense creativity and daring are what keep them as the preeminent musical theatre composition team of the modern day, and should keep them as such well into the future. If their strong fan base is any indicator, there is no reason to think they will stop producing their same brand of original, imaginative, and relevant musical theatre for several years to come.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty are nothing if not prolific and unique. Their thirty-year collaboration has produced an extensive body of work whose settings are vastly varied. Without a step-by-step and show-by-show detailing of their vast canon, one may not recognize their proclivities and talents as great musical theatre composers, yet they continue to produce some of the most intriguing and potent musical theatre seen on and off-Broadway, and in regional theatre around the country and globally. They have not always been commercially viable, but that is irrelevant to them. Their main focus is the work. It takes an idea that seems totally new for them to get excited about writing it. They are more concerned with the journey and pleasure of writing than the profit a show may earn. Flaherty once quoted Joseph Campbell's mantra "Follow Your Bliss" when it comes to his writing (Ahrens, "Interview"). That may be what has kept them going so strong for so many years. They believe if they are excited about writing a show, somewhere there is also an audience that will be equally excited to see it. Their intelligent writing styles in such varied settings are what keep their fan base loyal, industry professionals and casual viewers alike. Their dedication to their work and to each other has proven them to be one of the most important musical theatre composition teams working in the professional theatre today. Thankfully, with new shows scheduled for production and other ideas presumably in the works, there is every indication that Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty will be putting out relevant, innovative musicals for a long time to come.

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Curriculum Vitae

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- Summary**
- Demonstrated achiever with exceptional knowledge of musical theatre history and trends, general theatre history, direction, and design.
 - Strong performance background with experience at all levels.
 - Skilled at learning new concepts quickly, working well under pressure, and communicating ideas clearly and effectively.
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Education	Masters Degree in Theatre	2013
	<i>University of Nevada Las Vegas</i>	
	Concentration in Musical Theatre	
	Coursework in Workforce Education	2012-2013
	<i>University of Nevada Las Vegas</i>	
	Requirements for Business and Industry Teaching License in Clark County, NV	
	Coursework in Educational Theatre	2008-2009
	<i>The City College of New York, New York, NY</i>	
	Included fieldwork teaching theatre lessons and assisting with student productions	
	B.A. Degree in Speech Communication and Theatre Arts	1996
	<i>Monmouth College, Monmouth, IL</i>	
	Concentration in Theatre and Radio Broadcasting	

Relevant Career History

- Total Reward Supervisor, Caesars Entertainment, Planet Hollywood** 2012-present
- Direct Supervisor to a team of six Representatives, supplying coaching, praise, training, and feedback.
 - Ensure every Representative meets and exceeds departmental and company service standards.
 - Handle and resolve all escalated guest issues within company restrictions.
 - Work with Senior Management to determine the best practices for the Total Rewards department.
 - Make manual adjustments of Total Rewards accounts and redeem high tier level offers.
 - Complete daily recording of tracked information, audits, and logs.
- Character Host, World of Disney New York City** 2004-2006
- Performed an interactive show for young children.
 - Character greeter during meet-and-greet sessions.
- Actor/Educator, The National Theatre for Children** 1999-2001
- Performed and educated large groups of students in various schools in different parts of the country.
 - Liaison for communication and confirmation with school contact, setting up and performing educational theatre show, driving and scheduling lodging, troubleshooting, responsible for weekly budget, interpersonal communication with tour partner, and regular communication with home office.
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